

SAN FELICE MODERNISES THE PAST

When the University of Florence approached Agricola San Felice with an unusual project, the winery quickly agreed to participate. Today, says Michèle Shah, the company's work with varietals is paying off handsomely.



San Felice winery in Castelnuovo Berardenga.

San Felice, with its 140 ha of vineyards mostly (80%) dedicated to the local varietal Sangiovese, is considered one of Chianti Classico's historic estates. Its pledge to uphold the tradition of its terroir and to produce quality wines made from some of Tuscany's 'revived' and almost extinct varietals, as well as being a precursor of the Super Tuscan style, has won the winery world acclaim.

Located in the commune of Castelnuovo Berardenga, a few kilometres from Siena, in the heart of Chianti Classico, San Felice offers an authentic glimpse of Tuscan's idyllic rural landscape. San Felice's estate forms part of a hamlet surrounded by olive trees and vineyards, and since 1992 hosts a Relais & Châteaux Spa Hotel and Restaurant housed in restored farmhouse buildings.

A long history

Like many of the larger and more dominant Chianti Classico estates, San Felice's past is entwined in the feudal history of nobility, landowners and the never-ending battles between Siena, Florence and Arezzo. From 714 on, this local area formed part of the property of the ancient Church of San Felice in Avane, which was an object of dispute between Siena and the bishops of Arezzo. From the nineteenth century, San Felice passed into the hands of

the Marchesi del Taja, who in 1924 became one of the founding members of the Consorzio del Chianti Classico.

More recently, in 1968, as industrialisation hit rural Italy, San Felice went through a period of crisis – as did many agricultural estates – due to the general depopulation of the rural countryside. In the early 1970s the property was sold to a large financial company, soon after passing into the hands of its present owners, Allianz RAS, one of Italy's main insurance companies. It was at this time that Enzo Morganti joined the estate as director, a position he held until 1994, where he was responsible for fashioning San Felice's current and profitable direction.

Under the leadership of Morganti, San Felice was committed to the production of quality Sangiovese, producing by 1978, high-quality bottlings of 'Il Grigio' and 'Poggio Rosso', both classic examples of Chianti Classico Reserva wines. Like many farm managers of his time, Morganti was involved both in the viticultural side as well as the winemaking of the estate. "He was a hands-on man with a long term vision and a deep respect for his terrain and its local produce," explains Leonardo Bellacini, who worked alongside Morganti and later followed in his footsteps starting his apprenticeship as a young winemaker at San Felice in 1984, taking over in 1989 as CEO and winemaker of San Felice.

Playing with the past

Interestingly, in the mid 1980s when most of Tuscany and much of Italy was turning its attention to planting new vineyards with 'international' vari-

etals, principally Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Chardonnay – which subsequently gave birth to the renown 'Super Tuscan' wines – San Felice went the other way. It responded positively to a proposal made by the University of Florence to embark on an experimental project to revive some of the dying clones of Tuscany's indigenous varietals with the aim of safeguarding the erosion of Tuscany's viticultural heritage.

Bellacini, who was a winery assistant at the time, says he was sceptical when the Centro Nazionale di Recherche (CNR) approached San Felice, through Professor Pierluigi Pisani of the University of Florence "to enquire if the estate would be interested in setting up a project to 'safeguard' a number of local Tuscan varietals, which were in danger of becoming extinct." The 1984 viticultural project was part of a wider CNR effort to preserve biodiversity in many areas of agriculture, farming and husbandry.

Morganti jumped at the opportunity and in 1986, together with Pisani and Roberto Bandinelli, Pisani's deputy, set to plant an experimental vineyard. Called 'Vitarium', it had 226 different indigenous grape varieties, of which 61 varieties – almost exclusively red – were subsequently selected to be taken a step further.

"It was fascinating and exciting and a real hands-on experience to revive and safeguard these almost extinct local varietals," says Bandinelli. "More than this we actually created new genetic entities, by cross pollinating Sangiovese with varieties such as Abrusco and Abrostine, to form new varieties that today constitute part of Tuscany's viticultural patrimony."



In 1989 the first harvest showed that a promising 30 varieties were taken forward to the following stage of microvinification. Over the years the grapes were kept under close observation and those which looked particularly promising were selected and vinified separately. Most were revealed to be just good 'second leads'.

"At that time things were done in a fairly rustic fashion," explains Bellacini "We vinified 20 to 30 litres of each varietal and there was no absolute precision. It was difficult to trace the exact evolution of the microvinifications, yet it was evident that there were a handful of varietals that produced some very interesting results, among the more promising varietals were Volpola in the whites and Abrusco, Abrostine and Pugnietello in the reds."

Based on these findings, the decision was taken by Morganti and his team to plant a few hectares of Pugnietello to confirm, on a more solid base, more consistent data from the research. Today the estate cultivates a total of 12 ha of Pugnietello.

The little fist

Pugnietello was first experimentally vinified in barrique in 1995, and showed purity of fruit, structure and acidity with potential to age and be vinified as a monovarietal. After further experimentation, it was first bottled in 2003 and initially released as a proper commercial venture in 2006, after 20 years of research.

The varietal takes its name from the shape of its cluster, which looks like a small fist ('pugno' in Italian). Though a 'capricious' and expensive varietal to manage, requiring intensive work in the vineyard to tame its vigorous nature, the results gave great satisfaction. "We discovered it had all the good qualities that are missing in Sangiovese," says Bellacini. "More intense and stable colour and blessed with velvety smooth tannins showing remarkably complex aromas, making it ideal to blend to Sangiovese or as a monovarietal."

Once harvested and pressed, Pugnietello ferments for 20 to 25 days on the skins at 30°C and is then aged 18 to 20 months in French oak barriques, followed by eight months ageing in the bottle.

Currently San Felice exports Pugnietello to its main markets: USA, UK, Canada, Germany, Switzerland and Russia. According to San Felice's German importer, Michael Jetter of Rebhof Weinhandel GmbH, Italy is the leading country, together with France,



Alessandro Marchionne, General Manager of Agricola San Felice in Chianti.

Your Vitarium at San Felice, which you've called a 'genetic bank', has more than 220 varieties in it. Do you have any thoughts on why some of them died out?

Many of the old varieties were not interesting. Some disappeared because of disease. Sometimes they were abandoned by farmers simply because of the introduction of DOC legislation in 1963, restricting Chianti to four grapes. This was the case with Pugnietello, but also because it's very low-yielding. We harvest less than one kilo per vine, and in those days, they were looking for quantity. In 2002 we were able to have the Pugnietello re-registered by the local authorities as a grape variety to make wine and then readmit it in Chianti Classico. There are some other producers that have started to blend with it.

Have you found any other old varietals that are promising?

We are continuing to experiment with two other red grapes, Abrusco and Abrostine, and a white grape called Volpola, like 'fox'.

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for imported wines in Germany. "For us San Felice is our most important partner in Italy. Pugnietello gives us the chance to present something new with character and history to our clients," explains Jetter. "The wine sells for €30.00 (\$38.70) retail, so you can imagine that sales are not on the same level as San Felice's Chianti Classico. But we sold something like 2,000 bottles in Germany this year, having only started retail of Pugnietello wine last year."

Ian Hanna, President of John Hanna & Sons Ltd has been working with San Felice since the mid 1980s and has just placed a small order of 60 cases of Arkeos (a Brunello/Pugnietello blend) through Ontario's Government Monopoly market. According to Hanna, Pugnietello does not really compete at any level with Chianti Classico in

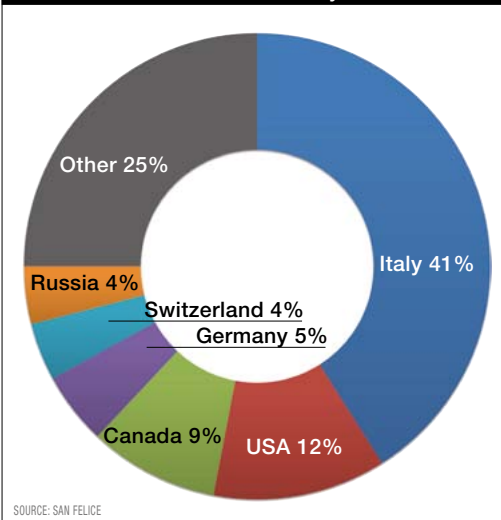
Ontario, as the price places it in competition with top-quality and famous IGTs. Hanna sees the introduction of Pugnietello at San Felice to be one of the most important and exciting developments in winegrowing since they started

their business in 1978, and is using what he calls a 'compelling' story to enhance the sales of San Felice's wines. "The Pugnietello project has allowed us to be involved (even if just on the periphery - as a marketing and sales organisation) in such a special project. This story is a marketing dream - the recovery and reclamation of a grape variety, most certainly destined for extinction, and then the amazing results in making a wine that soars to such incredible levels of quality," he says, adding

that for a generation or more, Tuscan winegrowers have experimented with the blending of their own unique grape, Sangiovese, with other varieties - to bring more colour, more structure, richer tannins and greater depth and complexity. Cabernet has really been one of the grapes that, in controlled quantities, has worked to

this end. "Now - imagine! - the discovery of a purely Tuscan variety that maintains the Sangiovese flavours and nature but which brings with it many of those desired qualities sought through blending. In our opinion, this is one

2011 sales breakdown by area



of the great stories that emerges from this amazing series of events – indeed, one of the great, historic stories in wine.”

Pugnitello has recently also made its debut in the UK, one of the world's most sophisticated wine markets. According to Tony Brown MW, product manager for Boutinot, Pugnitello is on the way to conquer specialist retailers and top restaurants with an in-depth range of Italian wines, in particular those with a strong market for Super Tuscans and Brunello wines. “The background and the wine style definitely need to be explained – both to understand the wine and to mark it out from the mass of other super premium Tuscan reds. The esoteric nature certainly intimidates some but is also a clear point of difference for those with a strong interest in Italian wines,” says Brown.

Expansion

While San Felice has been recognised for its research into old varieties, the estate had by no means lost its ground in experimenting with international varieties. In fact it started experimenting with international varietal plantings before many other Tuscan estates. In 1968 it released a precursor to the Super Tuscan wines: Vigorello Toscana IGT, created entirely from red grapes, which was unusual at the time. In 1979, 10% of Cabernet Sauvignon was added to the previously 100% Sangiovese, and in 2006 the wine became an eloquent blend of Cabernet Sauvignon (45%), Merlot (45%), with a small addition of Petit Verdot (10%). Today, Vigorello is still today considered one of the founding fathers of the Super Tuscan style.

In 1982 San Felice purchased a 20-ha wine estate, Campogiovanni, situated on the southern slopes of Montalcino, and began producing Brunello to expand its production and cater for its export markets. Towards the mid-1990s, when markets were demanding a more fruit-forward modern style of wine, San Felice directed its attention to the Maremma area of Tuscany and bought the Perolla estate, where they planted 50 ha, partly to native grapes such as Vermentino, Cilieggiolo and Sangiovese, as well as to Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. Today, San Felice's collective wineries possess some 210 ha of vineyards and produce an average of 1.3m bottles entirely from estate-grown grapes, generating an €8m (\$10.4m) turnover. Its aim for 2012 is to reach a 1.5m-bottle production and increase turnover by another 10%. ■

ITALY'S WINE HERITAGE

In a world awash with Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay, autochthonous varieties provide welcome relief. Italy has much to offer, says Michèle Shah.

Globalisation and standardisation are inevitably conducive to stagnation in wine production. Italy's winning card is its diversity and its plethora of indigenous varieties. With almost 1,500 officially registered indigenous vines, of which 300 to 350 are in current use, Italy is in a position to offer the consumer something different and exciting. “Italy's indigenous varieties can be divided into four major groupings in terms of usage, while its regions with the richest collection of indigenous varieties: Tuscany, Piedmont, Veneto, Calabria, Campania and Sicily, don't always make use of their vast collection,” explains Attilio Scienza, Italy's highest authority on viticulture.

Northern Italy

The chain of granite Dolomites surrounding Trentino Alto Adige creates a perfect microclimate for the region's indigenous red varieties such as Lagrein and Schiava. “Indigenous vines are important,” says Hans Terzer, winemaker of cooperative St Michael Appian. “Not all Italian indigenous varieties have a strong enough profile to be vinified as a monovarietal. Often they need the rounder, fuller, fleshier and more structured international varietal to give the right balance to the wine.”

Livio Felluga's Friuli estate produces blends, such as Sharjs Chardonnay-Ribolla Gialla. “Indigenous varieties need to be treated with care. Many varieties were abandoned in the past because they were considered not interesting – the so-called ‘international varieties’ such as Merlot and Pinot Grigio today play a prominent part in our Friulian indigenous varieties.”

Veneto's Corvina, Corvinone, Rondinella, Molinara, Ozeleto and Garganega form the backbone of Valpolicella and Soave's indigenous wines. “We have always believed in indigenous wines,” says Paolo Speri of Amarone production house Speri. “Our native wines may not do so well in blind tastings, but indigenous varieties represent our cultural identity and this is what appeals to our consumers.”

Piedmont's wealth of indigenous grapes include some incisive varieties with individual character, such as Nebbiolo, Barbera, Dolcetto, Freisa, Nascetta and Pelaverga. “Growing indigenous grapes is costlier, and one needs to invest in clonal research for the best species,” says Claudio Alario of Alario estate. “The reward is that if you do a good job, indigenous varieties are unique in character and taste.”

Central and Southern Italy

Tuscany's Sangiovese ranks among some of the world's top wines, producing Brunello di Montalcino, Nobile di Montepulciano and Chianti Classico. Moving south to Umbria, Grechetto, Sangiovese, Canaiolo, Trebbiano and Sagrantino form part of its territorial wealth and identity. Sagrantino, a niche wine constituting a mere 5% of Umbria's total production, is by far the trendiest and most exciting driving force of Umbria. It's produced as a monovarietal Sagrantino DOCG along with the Montefalco Rosso DOC. “Sagrantino is 100% indigenous,” says Giampaolo Tabarrini, an emerging Sagrantino producer in Montefalco. “It has taken centuries for this variety to adapt to the local conditions.”

Descending further south towards the Abruzzi, Montepulciano d'Abruzzo produces a fruity wine with international appeal, intense colour, ripe fruit, structure and soft tannins.

Sicily, Puglia, Campania and the emerging regions of Calabria, Basilicata and Sardinia produce indigenous Negroamaro, Nero D'Avola and Primitivo with soft supple tannins. Structured southern reds include Aglianico, Cannonau and Carignano, while whites include Falanghina, Greco di Tufo, Fiano di Avellino, Vermentino, Vernaccia and Inzolia. “Aglianico, Fiano and Greco are the backbone of our historical heritage and remain our flagship wines,” explains Piero Mastroberardino, MD of Mastroberardino, Campania's historic estate. “To produce indigenous monovarietal wines takes courage, often the addition of international varieties helps in promoting these to new markets and encourage consumers.” ■