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MADAIAH REVANA

Houston cardiologist's journey from distinguished doctor to award-winning winemaker

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An aerial photograph of a Tuscan landscape. In the foreground, there are terraced vineyards with rows of grapevines. To the right, a large, historic stone castle with multiple towers and battlements is visible. The middle ground is filled with lush green forests and rolling hills. In the background, more hills and a cloudy sky are visible.

While rooted in history, Tuscany's modern wines are evolving with grace on the wings of innovation, reports **Michèle Shah**

TUSCANY

A Quarter of a Century On

An aerial view of Castello di Brolio, historic property of the 32nd generation, Baron Francesco Ricasoli

Tuscany's wines have undergone a quiet revolution over the past 25 years — an evolution shaped by bold innovation, a return to tradition, and a deepening connection to place. This transformation has been driven not only by the evolving philosophies of the producers but also by changing global tastes, increased environmental awareness and a renewed emphasis on authenticity.

In the 1970s, a group of visionary winemakers sparked the 'Super Tuscan' revolution, defying traditional DOC regulations by blending native Sangiovese with international varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot — or even excluding Sangiovese altogether. Wines like Sassicaia, Tignanello and Ornellaia captivated global audiences with their concentration, power and polish, ushering Tuscany onto the world stage. By the late 1980s, the influence of these bold, powerful blends had already reshaped the landscape of Tuscan wine, with international varieties redefining the region's global image. Twenty-five years ago, the impact of Super Tuscans had seeped into traditional denominations such as Chianti Classico, leading many producers to incorporate a small allowed percentage of international grapes alongside the main protagonist, Sangiovese.

As global wine consumers began seeking wines that express origin and character — rather than simply power and prestige — Tuscan producers responded by returning to native grapes and more nuanced winemaking. This market shift encouraged a widespread reconsideration of what makes a wine truly great.

Today, however, Tuscany tells a different story. These once-foreign varieties have had time to adapt to the local terroir, developing a distinctive Tuscan identity. Merlot, in particular, has excelled, with pioneering examples such as Castello di Ama's L'Apparita and Castello di Brolio's Casalferro standing out. Meanwhile, along the coast, Tenuta

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L'Apparita from Ama and Casalferro from Brolio are Merlot wines while San Guido's Sassicaia is a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc

San Guido's Sassicaia — a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc — remains the iconic benchmark of Bolgheri, embodying the enduring success of Tuscany's international adventure.

Francesco Ricasoli, 32nd Barone of Castello di Brolio, believes strongly in Merlot's elegance in Chianti Classico, while noting that the region's wines overall have dramatically improved over the past 30 to 40 years. "Today, with more focused research, better agronomical practices and less intervention in the cellar, we make more elegant Chianti Classico wines that can age beautifully or be drunk young," says Ricasoli. "We use more Sangiovese, with small percentages of Colorino or Canaiolo — no more international blends in Chianti Classico."

Where once the winemaker was the star, today the agronomist often plays the leading role. Chianti Classico today shows greater polish and authenticity, often with a slightly austere but refined character. According



Count Francesco Marone Cinzano, owner of Col d'Orcia

to Ricasoli, the wines are still undervalued when compared with premium wines globally, offering excellent quality for price.

The Consorzio Vino Chianti Classico, headed by Carlotta Gori with Giovanni Manetti as president, has been pivotal in raising standards. As early as 2000, it launched the Chianti Classico 2000 Project — a 16-year research programme in collaboration with the Universities of Florence and Pisa. This work on clonal selections, vine training systems and soil management led to the registration of superior clones like CCL 2000 Sangiovese and Colorino. Castello di Brolio went a step further, developing its own Chianti Classico clones through massal selection, microvinifications and new vineyard practices, notably denser plantings (5,500 vines/ha versus 6,500) and shifting from Cordone Speronato to Guyot training. In a warming climate, canopy management and technologies like vineyard

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meteorological stations are critical. Many producers, including Ricasoli, also use caolino (kaolin clay) sprays — an organic method used to protect vines from sunburn, insects and heat stress.

A major milestone came in 2014 with the creation of the Gran Selezione category — the highest tier of Chianti Classico DOCG wines, crafted from estate-grown grapes with stricter ageing and quality requirements. According to Ricasoli, Gran Selezione helped reposition Chianti Classico at the top end of the fine wine world, encouraging new investment and a refocus on vineyard excellence.

Today, according to Manetti, there is a clear trend towards greater expression of terroir. The Consorzio is supporting producers through this evolution, as evidenced by the introduction of *Unità Geografiche Aggiuntive* (UGAs), or Additional Geographical Units, on labels for the top-tier Gran Selezione wines. This followed a division of the region into

11 smaller, more homogeneous areas, each with a stronger and more distinct identity. Added to this reform is the revision of the ampelographic base for Gran Selezione, which raises the minimum required percentage of Sangiovese from 80% to 90% and eliminates the use of international varieties altogether.

Brunello di Montalcino stands as one of Tuscany's most iconic wines, shaped by its extraordinary terroir and stringent production rules. As Count Francesco Marone Cinzano, owner of Col d'Orcia, notes, "Tuscany is not only blessed with some of the most beautiful

landscapes in the world and an extraordinary collection of UNESCO-rated villages and towns — it can also claim its rightful place among the best agricultural terroirs of our planet. In this context, Montalcino shines even brighter."

Brunello's distinctiveness lies in its purity and precision: only Sangiovese may be used, it must be aged a minimum of five years, and it can only be bottled within the Montalcino commune. These strict criteria helped it become Italy's first wine to attain

DOCG status in 1980. According to Marone Cinzano, "All these rules ensure a very distinctive and recognizable wine style that nobody has been able to replicate elsewhere; and many have tried."

From the 1980s onwards, producers like Biondi-Santi and Col d'Orcia helped bring Brunello to international acclaim. Biondi-Santi pioneered bottling it as a single-varietal wine, while Col d'Orcia helped shape the modern identity with a firm commitment to organic and biodynamic practices. Today, Brunello's hallmark remains its elegance, liveliness and

ageing potential — qualities that continue to attract discerning wine lovers seeking finesse over sheer power.

At the same time, Bolgheri — the coastal strip that helped launch the Super Tuscan revolution — continues to thrive, evolving into a luxury icon in its own right. Land prices and the value of wines are soaring, fuelled by strong demand and increasing investment from prestigious producers. Here, Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Sauvignon have not only flourished but have fully adapted to the local terroir, developing a distinctly Tuscan imprint alongside their international origins.

An aerial view of Antinori's Badia a Passignano estate in one of the most ancient areas of the Chianti Classico region



Tuscany, of course, has two intertwined souls. As Stefano Capurso, General Manager of Dievole in Chianti Classico and other Tuscan estates in Bolgheri and Montalcino, under Alejandro Bulgheroni Family Vineyards, explains, there is a clear stylistic shift underway: wines from Bolgheri today are fresher, more vibrant and less dominated by heavy oak, appealing to a modern audience that values authenticity, individuality and a true sense of place.

Tuscany isn't just the land of great red wines — it is also home to some of Italy's most historic and dynamic white wines. San Gimignano's Vernaccia, famously praised by Dante, has seen a quiet but steady renaissance over the past 25 years. Today's Vernaccia wines are notably fresher and more vibrant than in the past, while still retaining their characteristic structure and saline finish. In the coastal areas like Bolgheri, Vermentino has also gained momentum, producing expressive, aromatic wines with bright acidity that reflect the maritime climate. Together, Vernaccia and Vermentino prove that Tuscany's white wines are no longer an afterthought, but an essential and increasingly exciting part of the region's identity.

Vino Nobile di Montepulciano, one of Tuscany's oldest appellations, has undergone



Renzo Cotarella CEO and chief winemaker of Marchesi Antinori

a subtle renaissance in the past 25 years. Once considered rustic or inconsistent, modern Nobile wines now showcase greater finesse, freshness and authenticity, thanks to improved vineyard practices, better Sangiovese (Prugnolo Gentile) selections and investment from both historic estates and new producers. These wines highlight the unique terroir of Montepulciano, with its sandier, temperate soils producing elegant, approachable Sangiovese capable of ageing. Sustainability has grown in importance, with many estates transitioning to organic farming. While still less renowned than Brunello or Bolgheri, Vino Nobile is steadily reclaiming its place among Tuscany's finest reds.

According to Luca de Ferrari, owner of Boscarelli winery, the trend in the 1990s towards powerful, concentrated wines, driven by a desire to emulate international benchmarks, often sacrificed the unique identity of the region. However, since the early 2000s, the focus has shifted back to elegance, balance and restrained oak use. Vino Nobile,

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initially slower to embrace this shift, now focuses on producing clean, characterful wines. Climate change, improved vineyard management and technical advancements have helped producers better express the land's true potential, returning to the site-driven approach of the 1960s and 1970s.

Over the past 25 years, Marchesi Antinori has solidified its role as one of Tuscany's leading wine families, expertly blending centuries-old tradition with cutting-edge innovation. Under the stewardship of Renzo Cotarella, CEO and Chief Winemaker of Antinori's portfolio — from Tignanello and Solaia in Chianti Classico, to Guado al Tasso in Bolgheri and Pian delle Vigne in Montalcino — showcases the extraordinary diversity of Tuscany's terroirs.

As Cotarella says, "It's not just a matter of international or native varieties: a great wine must have identity. It must speak of the land where it's born, respect the people who make it and honour the culture of the place."

It's a philosophy that perfectly captures the spirit of Tuscany's modern wines: rooted in history, yet evolving with grace. ♦

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