

Tuscan Tales

Through changes of ownership, Ornellaia remains a modern classic.

THE STORY OF Tenuta dell'Ornellaia, one of Italy's most prestigious wine estates, located in the seaside region of Bolgheri, offers more twists, turns, and titles than a page from Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron*. This history can be traced back to the 14th century, when two Florentine families, the Frescobaldi and the Antinori, first entered the wine trade, embarking upon independent careers that would eventually intersect in the vineyards of Bolgheri on the Tuscan coast.

The Antinori family entered the Florentine Guild of Vintners in 1385 and—like the Frescobaldi, who began making wine in Tuscany in 1308—preserved the traditions of Italian viticulture, while at the same time introducing new ideas. One of the most important of these has roots in the 1930 marriage of Clarice della Gherardesca—an aunt of the present-day Marchese Lodovico Antinori and heiress to the Tenuta San Guido estate in Bolgheri—to Marchese Mario Incisa della Rocchetta, a Bordeaux wine enthusiast. Marchese Mario, determined to make an Italian wine using French grapes, planted Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc in a vineyard on Tenuta San Guido that he called Sassicaia. Initially, the Incisa della Rocchetas consumed these wines themselves; but, as the wines aged, their growing complexity and beauty inspired the couple to release the 1968 vintage of Sassicaia, the first “Super Tuscan.”

His aunt and uncle's experiment prompted Lodovico, in 1982, to acquire a piece of land in the same region and plant the property, which he named Tenuta dell'Ornellaia, with Bordeaux varietals. Lodovico took the Mondavi family of Napa Valley as partners in his venture in 1999 and, in 2002, sold the estate to them. They, in turn, sold a 50 percent stake to the Frescobaldi family, who by this time had operated some of Italy's most renowned wine estates for nearly 700 years, and who acquired the entire property from Robert Mondavi Corp., then owned by Constellation brands, in 2005.

Tenuta dell'Ornellaia has shaped international perceptions of Italian winemaking since its introductory 1985 vintage. Its two estates—the original property and the Bel-laria vineyard northeast of the village of Bolgheri—imbue the wines with a layered flavor profile and deep structure, thanks to the mix of loose rock, clay, and limestone. “While Ornellaia is a relatively young estate,” notes winemaker Axel Heinz, “it's become in some way a classic, and it has a

reputation, a style.”

That style is distinctly Italian but with an international flair: Heinz is of French and German descent, while his predecessors were the late Hungarian winemaker Tibor Gál and Frenchman Thomas Duroux, now general manager of Château Palmer. “With a series of great vintages from 1997 to 2001, we have worked toward a particular definition of what a great Ornellaia wine is,” Heinz says. Yet the intense heat wave of the 2003 vintage, he admits, threatened to blur that definition: “When you have a rainy vintage, you know what you have to do,” he explains. “But this was not the case with 2003: Nobody had seen such conditions. The finished wine seemed

so exotic that we did not know how to evaluate it.”

Since bottling, the hot fruit of the 2003 Tenuta dell'Ornellaia Bolgheri Superiore Ornellaia (\$145, to be released this spring) has cooled. “We see that the wine has followed a very classical evolution,” says Heinz. “One could describe it as an exceptional vintage, but an atypical one.” Exceptionally dark in color, this intensely expressive Bordeaux-style blend exudes deliciously spiced blackberry, cherry, and coffee aromas, while on the palate full-bodied flavors of black cherry, coffee, cinnamon, and velvety tannins weave a convoluted plot of flavors that winds to a finish as storied as the estate itself. And in this sense, at least, the atypical 2003 Ornellaia typifies its place of origin.

—BRETT ANDERSON

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The 2003 Ornellaia, to be released this spring, is a uniquely powerful expression of this Italian original.