

Blissful Bolgheri



Rare Cinta Senese pigs are raised in Tuscany.



The Happily Ever After topiary delights guests.

The vineyards of Guado al Tasso.

AFTER TWO DAYS IN THE HEART OF Toscana, our wine group headed west through hill country into Bolgheri. This part of Tuscany borders the eastern shore of the Mediterranean known as the Tyrrhenian Sea, between Livorno and the island of Elba. Until relatively recent times, this area was largely low lying swamp and almost uninhabited. This changed beginning in 1948 when Tenuta San Guido was established by Mario Incisa della Rocchetta. The wine produced here was named Sassacaia, made from Cabernet Sauvignon and was used only for family consumption.

Beginning with the 1968 vintage, it was released commercially to much fanfare and many people consider it to be Italy's most famous wine and certainly one of the best. While I am a great fan of Sassacia and have purchased it in most years beginning in 1988, I have developed an equal or greater love of its neighboring property, Tenuta Dell'Ornellaia. Together with Piero Antinori's Solaia, Sassacaia, and Ornellaia are the most famous Super Tuscans, also known by many as the 'aia' wines. The estate, renamed Ornellaia e Masseto in 2012, produces a second wine called Le Serre Nuove and a blend named Le Volte (50 percent

Sangiovese and 50 percent Cabernet Sauvignon). Of great importance is the famous Merlot named Masseto, hence the name change, which is consistently Italy's most expensive wine and along with Bordeaux' Le Pin and Petrus, the world's most expensive Merlots. The vineyards comprise 99 hectares, divided into 50 parcels planted to four varietals: 38 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, 12 percent Cabernet Franc, 38 percent Merlot, and 7 percent Petit Verdot, with four hectares planted to three white varietals in total.

Although I knew I would be impressed by the wines, I was unprepared for the magical beauty of the property. The approach on Cypress Avenue is stunning with Ornellaia's gardens located just at the end. Our guests had fun checking out the "Happily Ever After" topiary by Ghada Amer. After touring some of the winemaking facilities which were lined with noted art from previous year's celebrated artists, we gathered for a memorable wine tasting. We were served the 2012 Serre Nuove. It was fresh and clean, with notes of wild berry fruit and sweet violets, spice, and roasted espresso bean. The wine was smooth with a good balance of tannins at the end.

We finished the tasting with the flagship 2010

Ornellaia. It is from one of the greatest vintages and is superb, albeit it is very young. The nose is complex with mocha, plums, licorice, tobacco, dark chocolate, mint, and rosemary. It is rich and complex with great depth. The blend of this wine is 55 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, 29 percent Merlot, 10 percent Cabernet Franc, and 7 percent Petit Verdot.

After this very heady experience we went outside for lunch. We started with the very rare 2012 Ornellaia Sauvignon Blanc, and then sat down to enjoy a meal of pecorino cheese and Tuscan salami, eggplant pie with Bufala mozzarella and fresh cherry tomatoes, roast meat with aromatic herbs, and vegetables culminating with Semifreddo with fruits paired with 2010 Ornellaia. Given the perfect weather, gorgeous environment, and outstanding food and wine, it made for an unforgettable experience.

When one has to leave Ornellaia e Masseto, it is best to transition smoothly back to the real world. Luckily we had a perfect transition medium in the adjacent property of Piero Antinori, named Tenuta Guado al Tasso. His family traces its winemaking roots back 26 generations to 1385. This is one of six Tuscan estates owned by Piero,

and we gained access by driving a short distance on Ornellaia property and passing through a common locked gate, truly a transition without braving the real world first. We went on a driving tour of part of the vineyards which occupy almost 750 of the 2223 acre estate stretching from the hillsides to the Tyrrhenian Sea.

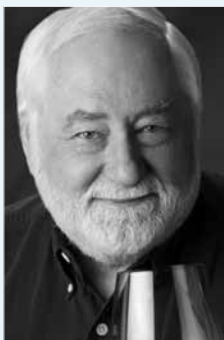
After walking through some of the vineyards we went to see the famous and rare Cinto Senese pigs raised on the estate. The pork products as well as all the wines and artesanal products from each of the Antinori estates are for sale only at the Osteria di Passignano, where we were heading for dinner that evening. The estates are only open to members of the wine profession so this is an easy access to these famous wines, e.g. Tignanello and Solaia as well as Guado al Tasso.

We arrived back at the winery by bus and went to the courtyard for our tasting. It was a beautiful day with perfect temperature, and we sat in the shade and looked at the manicured grounds. We were first served the Guado al Tasso Vermentino 2012. The wine was fresh and bright with a pale hue and good acidity in spite of the warm climate. The nose is rich and well-defined with attractive tropical fruit.

A delightful rosé was next – the Guado al Tasso Scalabrone Rosato 2012. The wine is comprised of 40 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, 30 percent Merlot, and 30 percent Syrah. The color is a brilliant peony rose with aromas of fruit, noticeably raspberry, as well as evidencing this in the finish in the mouth, a beautiful wine to be enjoyed in such a historical and beautiful setting.

Finally, we were treated to the grand vin – the flagship 2010 Guado al Tasso. What a wine! First produced in 1990 and has shown steady improvement over the two decades since, according to wine writers. Consisting of mainly Cabernet Sauvignon with a strong component of Merlot and somewhat less Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot, it is a very impressive wine. The Cabernet Sauvignon provides exceptional richness, anise, and black fruit aromas. The Merlot adds more black fruit aromas, sweetness of flavor and density of texture while the Cabernet Franc provides balance and the Petit Verdot adds a dollop of spice.

This was truly a magnificent way to end a very magical day spent with hosts who did a great job of imprinting life memories on the people who went in search of the holy grail of matching food and wine in world-class settings. The finale was dinner at Osteria di Passignano, a Guide Michelin restaurant where we wine and dined on fabulous food complimented by wines from various Antinori estates. À votre santé! U

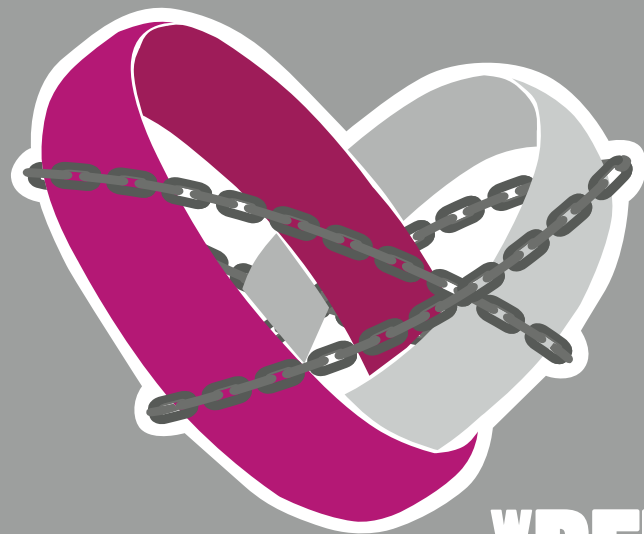


Barrington resident Jim Bryant is pursuing his passion and love of wine as an international wine consultant. This follows a 30-year career in senior financial and general management positions at two Fortune 100 companies. He is the owner of James R. Bryant L.L.C. Contact him at profwino@comcast.net.

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