

DOWN CELLAR BY JIM BRYANT

# Ah, Toscana!

While I believe my heart belongs to Piemonte, I've come to believe my soul belongs to Toscana. As many of you know, I have been going to Piemonte to harvest for more than a decade, and even though I currently import wines from only this region, I realized I always found an excuse to visit Toscana on these trips.

The region is known as the most popular Italian destination for Americans, and it's easy to understand why. For those interested in art, Firenze is perhaps Earth's greatest mecca, and fine jewelry and leather goods are among the best.

My reasons for loving this area are more related to the natural beauty of the countryside and the small towns and incredible wines.

There are many varietals in this region, but the most famous by far is Sangiovese, the predominant grape in Chianti. How far this appellation has come! Until the 1980s, most Chianti was not taken very seriously, even in Italy. Most of the exported Chianti before this time was found in odd-shaped bottles and covered with straw (*fiaschi*), with the wine seeming secondary to the container. While many of us have memories of simple romantic dinners where these bottles were the centerpiece (and later used for candlelight ambience), the wine was decidedly plebian by today's standards.

As in many parts of the world, the emphasis was on high production from the vineyards, and it wasn't until the Italian government implemented strict quality controls leading to the *denominazione de origine controllata* (DOC) and *gerantida* (DOCG) certification that the emphasis turned to quality versus quantity in Toscana (as well as in the rest of Italy). In fact, many of the Italians in this region had left the farms—particularly the younger generation—because it was so difficult to make a living by growing grapes or making wine.

In addition to the vast improvement in the quality of Tuscan wines beginning in the 1970s, tourism also soared due to cheaper travel. Many people began to experience the beauty of this region's food and rapidly improving wine, and this increased demand for the wine fed the evolution of the quality improvement.

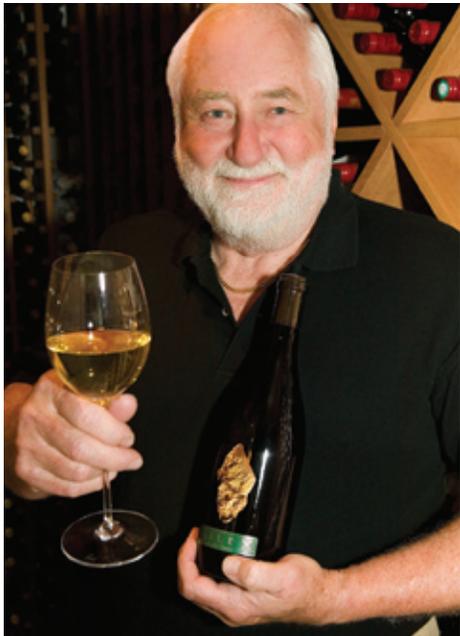
While there are different Chianti zones, in the United States most of this wine is from the Classico zone and is made mostly from Sangiovese with perhaps a bit of Canaiolo to mitigate the tannins. The wine ranges in quality from Chianti to Chianti Classico to Chianti Classico Riserva, the last not being made in severely weather-challenged years.

There are hundreds of producers of Chianti. Good vintages of these wines (e.g., 1997, 1999, 2001, and 2004, and particularly the Riservas) will keep well for at least a decade, and often longer. They are quite tannic in their youth (the Riservas, especially) and are not generally good choices for sipping but instead go best with food.

I have found Sangiovese to be one of the most wide-ranging, food-friendly wines available. There is nothing except Barbera comparable with any pasta with red sauce (think spaghetti and lasagne). My favorite producers include Felsina (Rancia), Monsanto (Il Poggio), Melini (Le Selvanella, the first single vineyard Chianti), Verrazano, Le Fonti (Vito Arturo), Querciavalle, Castello della Paneretta (Torre a Destra and Quattrocentenario), Ruffino (Gold Label), Collelungo (Roveto), Badia a Coltubugno (this winery has a very good cooking school and restaurant) and Frescobaldi (Montesodi). Many of these wineries welcome visitors with appointments.

En route from Firenze to my favorite town in Toscana (Montalcino), I often travel down Chianti Alle (so named for the many Germans who settled along it over the past 30 years) and stay overnight at Cassafrassi, near Castellina in Chianti. This is a superb refuge from the rest of the world. The food is delicious, the scenery superb, the accommodations excellent—and the property produces a great Chianti.

Montalcino is an idyllic Tuscan town and is the center of one of Italy's most famous wines, Brunello di Montalcino. There are now several hundred producers who make both international and more rustic (old-world) Brunellos. The grape is named Sangiovese Grosso and is somewhat similar to Sangiovese. Banfi, the largest producer, has finalized research to determine which of the



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many clones are most suitable for Brunello and has shared its findings with all producers.

These wines last for a long time and are generally enjoyable from 10 to 40 years, depending on the producer, vintage, and storage conditions. My favorite producers include Biondi Santi (the original), Tenuta il Poggione, Banfi (especially Poggio alla Mura), Valdicava, Antinori Pian della Vigne, Poggio Antico and the best of all, Cerbaiona, made by my friend Diego Molinari.

Additionally, some of Italy's greatest wines come from Bolgheri, the southwestern part of Toscana. The main grapes here are Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, although often they are mixed with Sangiovese. The most famous is Sassacaia, but Ornellaia, Tignanello, Olmaia, and my favorite, Solaia, are not to be missed. Expensive though they may be, these are among my favorite wines from anywhere in the world. Santé! U