



PHOTO: JIM BRYANT

The Road to Tuscany, Part II

KNOWING THAT IT WOULD BE HARD to measure up to the first day of our Tuscan wine adventure, I felt confident that the visit to Fontodi would meet the challenge. For sure I was correct. As we neared the small town of Panzano, we were all vigilant in scouting for the small, license-plate-sized sign announcing our destination. Entry was at such an acute angle we had to go past the small road and enter upon returning. I had long wished to visit Fontodi, but never had the chance. After drinking several vintages of its flagship wine, Flaccianello, I made this one of my highest priorities for this trip.

Owned by Giovanni Manetti, Fontodi was purchased in 1968 by his father who was passionate about wine. The estate is located in the Conca

d'Oro (Golden Bowl), so named because the shape resembles an amphitheater. The estate consists of 130 hectares of which 80 are vineyards, and more than 95 percent are planted with Sangiovese, with the remainder being small plantings of Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, and Pinot Noir. Although adhering to many principles of biodynamic farming, Fontodi is a certified organic estate. Giovanni's goal is to reinstate a Tuscan tradition of creating a closed-system Tuscan farm. At the farm he raises the famous breed of Chianina cows.

As Giovanni was attending the meeting of the Chianti Consortio, our guide was the chief financial officer of Fontodi. What was immediately apparent was that the legendary enthusiasm held by Giovanni for this famous

property had been passed down to his employees. We first walked down the hill so that we had an encompassing view of Fontodi's property. The Conca d'Oro was perfectly framed from our vantage point, including the small church dating from the Middle Ages, which is represented on the Flaccianello label by the cross.



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After basking in this unforgettable and unbelievable panorama, we visited the winery. Although I have become more or less inured to seeing winery production facilities, we were in for a treat. Recently, Giovanni decided to complete the full circle of closing the Tuscan farm by aging a small amount of his wine in amphorae made from locally sourced clay material by his tile company.



PHOTO: Y. JONES

The wine had not been released as of our visit, but will be eagerly anticipated by wine aficionados and may be made available only locally.

We adjourned to the tasting room where we were treated to the 2010 Flaccianello. This wine was rich and complex, and for those who had never experienced this wine before, took them to where Sangiovese had not taken them. This wine could technically be called Chianti, but it is not. The fruit from the original vintages came from a single vineyard, but since 1992, has been sourced from the very best fruit property-wide.

After ample time to appreciate the generous pour, we were treated to an older (2007) Chianti Classico Riserva which demonstrated that, in fact, Chianti Riserva, much less such a wine as Flaccianello, needs time to develop its secondary and tertiary flavors and aromas. Having been treated to one of Tuscany's and Italy's, and in fact the world's best wines, it was time to move on to another memorable event.

It was in 1996 on my first visit to Tuscany that I found Castello di Verrazzano. I arrived on a cold, drizzly November morning and had a great one-hour private tour led by the financial manager. After the tour, he opened a fresh bottle of each of the wines produced by Verrazzano. I offered to take him to lunch at the best restaurant nearby, but he said it was closed on Monday. After I agreed to go to the second best restaurant open on Monday, he said he was too busy. At that time, he announced

the approach of the owner, Luigi Cappellini. I extended the offer to him and he excused himself for 15 minutes. When he returned, he said we were going to the best restaurant which the chef agreed to open because he had lost a bet to Luigi. We drove to the restaurant at Castellina in Chianti and the two of us had a five-hour feast of food and wine one could only imagine.

As I was heading to Stockholm the next day, Luigi sent a letter of introduction to my hotel in Firenze that night, which led to special treatment at Sweden's top restaurant at the Grand Hotel. Ever since these events, I have longed to return to Verrazzano, but never did.

Our land-based operator told Luigi about our visit. When we arrived, we went on a tour of the castle. Verrazzano takes its name from Giovanni da Verrazzano, the great Italian explorer who in the 1500s sailed into New York Harbor, and for whom is named the Verrazzano Bridge in New York City.

After our tour of the castle and wine cellar,

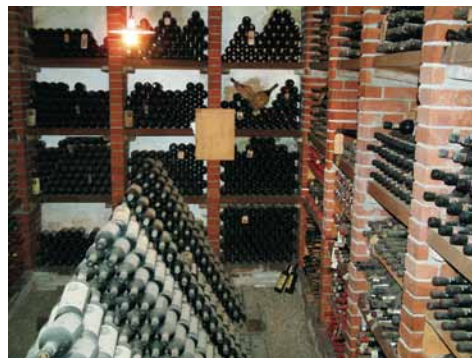


PHOTO: GREG PEARSON

we were seated for lunch, but Luigi was not there. Soon, his wife came to visit me to explain that Luigi was at the Chianti Consortio (the same meeting where Giovanni Manetti was that morning) but had left and was en route. She told me that he remembered my former visit more than any other visitor.

We had a fabulous lunch seated nearby the open ovens where our food was being prepared. We looked out the large open windows framing the enchanting countryside. Luigi arrived, and we had a genuine embrace and recollection of our former afternoon together.

Our lunch began with appetizers featuring prosciutto, three different salamis, crostino, and bruschetta, accompanied by Verrazzano Rosé. Next came a pasta with fresh tomato sauce and Chianti herbs along with the Chianti Classico

2013. The main course was roast pork tenderloin served with the Chianti Classico 2010 Reserva. This was accompanied by white beans with olive oil and fresh green salad. Farm pecorino cheese with balsamic vinegar followed Verrazzano's IGT Supertuscan Red. Although we thought the meal was finished except for biscotti and grappa, Luigi brought out two rare red wines, unknown to our guide and myself. These are apparently reserved for only family and friends.



PHOTO: GREG PEARSON

Although our group had a later appointment at another famous winery (one of my favorites) we made the decision to cancel it and stay where we were with this outstanding hospitality. When we left, I felt almost the same feeling I had when leaving Verrazzano the first time. For those of you who know me, you know I am outgoing and "wear my heart on my sleeve." It is wonderful when such a person meets someone else who is like that. I will remember Luigi and Verrazzano fondly, forever, and hope to return soon. À votre santé! 🍷

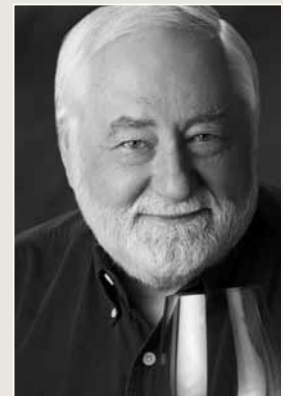


PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

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