



The view from Altesino Winery.

Over the Top in Tuscany

AFTER OUR VISIT TO CASTELLINA in Chianti and surrounding areas, we drove down to the town of San Giovanni d'Asso near Montalcino. Our hosts, the Varwigs, had stayed at the large villa owned by the Borghese family of Middle Ages fame, so this was a very pleasant place to spend most of a week as we visited local wineries and tried on this lifestyle.

When we arrived, bedrooms were assigned with optional maps to locate them. The 10 of us were easily absorbed by the very large villa. The grounds were immaculate, replete with hanging gardens, fruit trees, and beautiful fauna and flora of all sorts. Immediately, I spied a large swimming pool which we needed to adjust caloric balance each day.

The first evening, we walked out the door of our villa and crossed the street to a beautiful restaurant where we dined alfresco. We enjoyed all food and wines and company. Upon our return, we had an after-dinner drink while seated on the balcony looking at the star-studded sky and then called it a day.

There may be a prettier place to start one's day than on the balcony with choices of local fruits, yogurt, and pastries, but not many. It was so easy to relax there, it almost made you forget about doing anything else. We had four vehicles for the 10 of us, so each day couples had options to go en masse or to make discoveries on their own. We did so much it is difficult to pick out representative highlights.



The group visited Altesino for a wine tasting.

Clearly one of our favorites was the night we dined in at the villa with full staff. Each couple contributed some of their favorite finds, mostly white and rosé wines, before dinner. The dinner featured an excellent pasta, with a beef entrée followed by a salad and sweets. As good as the food was, everything paled when compared to the wines. Local wines were tasty (complimentary) but we were all waiting for the big event. After touring Monteverdine several days earlier, we went to a local wine shop and bought six bottles of Le Pergola Torte 2014 and during the dinner we drank five of them. Following so closely after our winery visit, to have copious amounts of one of the world's greatest wines in such an environment with friends was 'over the top'. In fact, we enjoyed the evening so much that we had a later dinner with our leftovers and it was very nice but unfortunately, we had no more Le Pergola Torte.



The guest quarters backyard view in San Giovanni d'Asso near Montalcino.

We had several memorable winery visits starting with Casanova di Neri. This is one of the top producers of Brunello di Montalcino. Situated on outstanding grounds affording panoramic views, we strolled the property, had a short tour, and then tasted several of the wines. We tasted four Brunelli, the normale and Tenuta Nuovo, both 2013. They were excellent, stereotypical Brunelli from a very good vintage. The extraordinary treat came in the form of two vintages of the Cerretalto vineyard wine. The vintages of 2008 and 2012 were poured. These are extremely rare and great wines giving even more attributes than the other two tasted. The 2012's nose detected graphite, dark red fruits, chocolate, and licorice. The mouthfeel of the 2012 was immense, thick, and elegant. The 2008 was more approachable and ready to drink.

One of my favorite wineries from nearby, Caparzo, is owned by the same family so we were able to tie in a visit. It was excellent and at our request featured only a tasting of several wines. At present be on the lookout for the 2013

normale and the 2013 Riserva. Both are excellent and great values.

We went to Altesino for a visit and were very impressed. Foregoing a tour due to time constraints, we had a great tasting. Rosso di Montalcino 2016, Brunello di Montalcino 2013, Brunello di Montalcino Montesoli 2013, Brunello di Montalcino Riserva 2012, and Alte D' Altesino 2015 were tasted. Most impressive was the Brunello di Montesoli 2013 with red cherry and white pepper on the palate and a nose of ripe berry, tobacco, and leather, but already elegant. The 2012 Riserva shows notes of dark cherry, dried herbs, and balsamic and berry aromas with refined tannins.


A final note involves a restaurant at the top of Montalcino across from the entrance to the castello. My wife and I found it on our own and we went back the next day with our whole group. All of the food and wines were excellent, and it proved to be a fitting end as we dined on the balcony to one of the greatest vacations imaginable. A Vôtre Santé! 



PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

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