

Wine Spectator

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April 22nd, 2016

Carving Out a Hillside in Chianti Classico

Pier Luigi Tolaini's dream of creating a wine estate in his native Italy is bearing fruit

High on a hillside in Castelnuovo Berardenga, with a picturesque view of the towers of Siena, Pier Luigi Tolaini is fulfilling his dream of making top-quality wine from his native Italy.

Now approaching 80, Tolaini left his home near Lucca at 19 years old, broke and with the promise to himself that he would one day return and show his family how to make good wine.

After building his fortune in the trucking industry in Canada, he purchased the Chianti Classico property in 1998. The current 119 acres of vineyards are planted to Cabernet Sauvignon, Sangiovese, Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot.

Density is high, 3,000 to 4,600 vines per acre, inspired by the best areas in France. Tolaini believes that more competition between grapes results in higher quality fruit. It's expensive to farm, and he designed his own tractors to fit down the narrow rows. Since 2013, the vineyards have been farmed organically.

CEO and director Diego Bonato and vineyard manager Davide Xodo divide the 24 blocks into three sections based on soil vigor and elevation for cultivation and harvest.

The winery utilizes gravity flow and now there is an optical sorting machine, which was useful in 2014, a cold, rainy and difficult year in Tuscany.

All the blocks are vinified separately in temperature-controlled stainless steel and the wines undergo a total of 30 to 35 days total maceration. The best parcels are fermented in wooden vats and do the malolactic conversion in barrel. There is also a small amount of fermentation in both barrique and 500-liter tonneaux.

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Depending on the grape variety, the wines age in barrique, tonneaux, 20- and 25-hectoliter casks and, in the case of some Sangiovese, the aforementioned wood fermenting vats.

Blends with French varieties were the order of the day at Tolaini, with the Chianti Classico a late-comer to the lineup. Al Passo is a blend of 85 percent Sangiovese and 15 percent Merlot; the Chianti Classico Montebello Vigneto No. 7 Gran Selezione, a single-vineyard cuvée, is Sangiovese; Valdisanti is a 75/20/5 percent blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Sangiovese and Cabernet Franc; Picconero relies on Merlot (65 percent) blended with Cabernet Sauvignon (30 percent) and Petit Verdot (5 percent).

The 2014s, blended three weeks ago, were in tank ready for bottling when I visited last week. The Al Passo shows fresh black cherry, black currant and spice flavors. Valdisanti is rich and dense, offering notes of black cherry, plum and chocolate coated in dusty tannins.

I was most impressed with the Chianti Classico Vigneto Montebello No. 7 Gran Selezione for its smoky leather, black cherry and currant flavors matched to a racy, elegant frame, and the powerful yet graceful Picconero, a mix of black currant, violet, spice and herbs.

The Tolaini team arranged some single-vineyard samples of 2015 for a look into what's coming down the pipeline in a few years. The Sangiovese lots were packed with ripe cherry fruit, with peppery accents and fine balance and density. One of the three Merlot samples was a head turner, bursting with gorgeous blackberry and plum fruit, spice and cumin, with ripe tannins and a terrific finish. A Cabernet Franc, fermented in barrel, displayed black currant, blackberry and spice notes on a rich, dense profile.

This is an estate to watch, with wines improving steadily over time as the vines mature.