Sangiovese joins Cabernet and Chardonnay

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Italy now has an 'international' grape variety, says Jancis Robinson

If you spent your summer holiday in Tuscany or Umbria, chances are that you are already on intimate terms with the Sangiovese grape. It dominates central Italian red wines. Chianti is its most obvious incarnation but the wines of Montalcino, Montepulciano and Montefalco, to name but a few, would be nothing without Sangiovese.

Its nearly a quarter of a million acres make Sangiovese Italy's most planted vine variety and, thanks to new clones and reduced yields, some of the wine it now produces is spectacularly good. Perhaps it is not surprising therefore that it is spurring winemakers around the world to make their own versions - with increasing success.

California was the first New World wine-producing region to take Sangiovese seriously. The admirable family winery Shafer of Stag's Leap District was one of the first to make a convincing stab at it. **Shafer's Firebreak** blend of Sangiovese with some Cabernet Sauvignon (about 30 dollars) was first made in the early 1990s. Robert Pepi and then the Antinori enterprise Atlas Peak were pioneers of the grape but Swanson and Dalle Valle make more impressive examples, and there are now dozens of California Sangiovese producers.

Italian varietals such as this and Pinot Gris (carefully renamed Pinot Grigio) were supposed to take off like a rocket to chime with Californians' enthusiasm for Italian food. The phenomenon was even given a name, Cal-Ital. But this rocket remained earthbound. American wine drinkers can be difficult to distract from the holy (French) trinity of Merlot, Cabernet and Chardonnay.

Nevertheless, there are some fine, newer examples such as **Il Ponte 1999**, made by L'Uvaggio di Giacomo of St Helena in the Napa Valley from fruit grown nearby in Oakville blended with the produce of a cooler vineyard in Santa Ynez way south down the coast. The problem with Sangiovese in California is that it tends to reach staggering alcohol levels without necessarily ripening the tannins and flavour elements. This one succeeds in being well balanced and interesting (not least for its label featuring, naturally enough, a bridge, in this case the Golden Gate linking the Duomo of Florence with San Francisco). But with 14.6 per cent alcohol admitted to on the label it is certainly powerful enough. Positively smouldering, I'd say, and just about worth the price tag of 30 dollars a bottle for marrying Californian gloss with true Sangiovese character.

Luna is a relatively new outfit at the southern end of the Napa Valley designed to surf the Cal-Ital wave. Its basic Sangiovese 2000 is 'just' 15 to 18 dollars a bottle but, perhaps because the fruit ripened too fast, it lacks the bite of true Sangiovese. You have to rise to the 50-dollar level for **Luna Sangiovese Riserva 1999** for the real bite, sap and savour of this variety. Or, I add rather unsportingly, you could find the same sensation in a good Chianti Classico at a quarter of the price.

California's best-value Sangiovese is, as is so often the case, made by Fetzer of Mendocino. The slightly sweet but creditable organically grown **Bonterra Mendocino Sangiovese 1999** can be found at Oddbins' (recently soberly redecorated) branches for £9.99.

Sangiovese seems to have real potential in Washington state where acidities are naturally higher, as **Leonetti** has already proved.

Argentina has had considerably more vineyard planted with Sangiovese than California for decades, thanks to historic immigration from Italy. But its well over 3000 acres have so far failed to make anything to catch the imagination - perhaps because of that well irrigated country's intrinsic problem of excessive yields.

Sangiovese is a relative newcomer to Australian wine regions but is already showing promise thanks to **Coriole** in McLaren Vale and the **Pizzini** family in the much cooler, higher King Valley in the state of Victoria. While the Coriole version is incontrovertibly an Australian rendition of Sangiovese, I would love to see Pizzini's Sangiovese served blind to a group of Tuscan winemakers.

Step Road is a relatively new producer of the grape grown in the promising Langhorne Creek area just east of McLaren Vale. The problem here is that the grapes all too easily swell like balloons without have gained much flavour. Sangiovese vines therefore need a strict hand in the vineyard, but the result is really very convincing for the price. Again, this wine, aged in old oak barrels, is obviously New World with all the come-hither appeal that entails, but has a distinctly Italian bite that makes you want to sit down to a plate of pasta straight away.

The 2001 is £6.99 at Stratford's of Cookham, Berkshire (www.stratford.co.uk), Adnams of Southwold are still selling the bumptious 2000 at £7.50 but expect to move on to the 2001 at the end of October.

France has far more Sangiovese planted than any New World country but probably does not realise it. The generally rustic Corsican grape Niellucciо, or Niellucciu, is the very same.

In Romania a few hundred acres of Sangiovese lurk in the warm Dealul Mare area. I was impressed by a very inexpensive varietal version shown by British importers Halewood Vintners at last year's London International Wine Trade Fair.

But better value perhaps is the **Umbrian Sangiovese 2000**, aged in American oak, currently on sale at the British supermarket Tesco at £4.99. Produced by Barbi of Orvieto, this is another convincing blend of true Sangiovese character with thoroughly modern winemaking.

When it comes down to it, the best (and worst) Sangioveses are made in Italy.