

Sangiovese

Until recently Sangiovese, Italy's most widely planted vine variety, was a grape in the wilderness. And whenever the name Sangiovese did appear on a label it was far from a guarantee of greatness. Rather the reverse. The most common wines that carried the name Sangiovese on the label were Sangiovese di Romagna, cheap Italian reds which were typically extremely light, pale, tart confections with little of interest to offer the wine lover.

Perhaps the most exciting development in the recent dramatic upgrading of the reputation of Chianti, however, has had the side effect of suggesting that it was slack winemaking rather than any inherent shortcomings in the Sangiovese grown in Romagna north-east of Tuscany that was at fault.

Sangiovese is and has always been THE dominant grape of Central Italian red wines, and Chianti in particular. Because in the mid-20th century Chianti was frequently lightened with the addition of tart, pale-skinned Trebbiano grapes and stretched by the addition of fuller reds imported in bulk from the south of Italy and the islands, it was far from easy to determine what Sangiovese's innate qualities and characteristics were. It has been only in the last couple of decades, thanks to a systematic research programme by producers in the Chianti Classico heartland of the greater Chianti region, that the myriad clones of Sangiovese grown all over Central Italy have been studied and assessed.

After years of research it has emerged that two of the finest clones, R24 and T19, are in fact from Romagna. I enjoyed a fascinating tasting of some of the most promising vine selections in 1996 with Paolo De Marchi of Isola e Olena in the heart of Chianti Classico country. From a range of almost a dozen different Sangioveses, the R24 had the most sumptuous mulberry flavours whereas one selected by the University of Florence (SS-F9-A 5-48 was its romantic name) was much tarter and simpler, one from Montalcino was almost too soft and another from Corsica (where Sangiovese is known as Nielluccio, or more often in local dialect Niellucciu) was sweet and almost inherently oaky.

Sangiovese's dominant viticultural characteristics are that it can vary as much as Pinot Noir in its sensitivity to place and that it ripens relatively late. This means that if it is planted too high in Tuscany it can all too easily produce wine that is tart and unripe. The Chianti Classico research programme has concentrated on trying to match suitable clones to the varied local conditions of this quite extensive region whose upper reaches can be at the limit of successful grape-ripening territory. Many of the best producers deliberately try to have a range of different selections in their vineyards and therefore wines.

In the bad old days, Sangiovese tended to be overproduced which accentuated its tendency to exhibit high acid and unripe tannins. Thanks to its thinnish skins and frequent blending with white grapes, this all too often meant that the wines turned brown after only a few years in bottle.

Today, fine Sangiovese is an altogether nobler wine. It will be the product of much lower yields so that there is real concentration of colour and flavour. As for the elusive flavour of pure Sangiovese, it ranges in a spectrum somewhere between mulberries, prunes, spice, tobacco, sometimes leather and chestnuts (there seems to be some common thread of colour here!) It tends to be savoury rather than sweet, and if not fully ripe can smell distinctly farmyard-like.

Chianti is still often a blended wine, but the tendency nowadays is to make it with an increasingly high proportion of Sangiovese - sometimes 100 per cent. There was a vogue in the late 1970s and 1980s to minimize Sangiovese's role and blend in very obvious proportions of Cabernet and Merlot. Marchese Piero Antinori set in train a huge fashion for blending in these Bordeaux grapes with the local Sangiovese when he released the then mould-breaking Tignanello in the early 1970s (mimicking the recipe for Carmignano on the other side of Florence). He also demonstrated that Sangiovese could cope with an entirely different ageing regime from the traditional practice of keeping it in large, old *botte*, upright casks of usually Slavonian oak and leaching the colour and guts out of it. Nowadays, many producers supplement or substitute for *botte* with much smaller barrels, typically made from French oak - just like the ones used in Bordeaux. This, just as much as anything else, has helped to make Chianti Classico a much more concentrated wine - although there are still too many that taste too obviously of oak and/or Cabernet Sauvignon.

And now that the right clones have been identified and are increasingly planted, Sangiovese is allowed to shine in all its glory without depending on make-up imported from Bordeaux. The much-amended regulations now allow producers to add up to 25 (this may be reduced to 20) per cent of other varieties, but many of the finest wines are made entirely from Sangiovese. And if other grapes are added, they are today just as likely to be the traditional and local scented Mammolo,

rather ordinary Canaiolo and/or the deep-coloured Colorino as Cabernet and Merlot - and no self-respecting producer depends on bulking out the blend with the Trebbiano that used to dilute and bleach Chianti in the bad old days.

Perhaps the most famous selection of Sangiovese was first promulgated by Biondi Santi of the hilltop town of Montalcino in southern Tuscany in the late 19th century. This particularly deep-coloured, tannic selection is known as Brunello and thus Brunello di Montalcino, one of Italy's most noble and long-lived wines made entirely of this local vine speciality, was born. Brunello tends to need many more years in bottle to develop than even the sternest Chianti Classico but the DOC Rosso di Montalcino identifies the earlier-maturing reds of the region.

Just to the east of Montalcino, around the town of Montepulciano, there is a similar system for the local wines, known as Vino Nobile di Montepulciano, whose local strain of Sangiovese is called Prugnolo Gentile. Quality here has been improving steadily of late, with Rosso di Montepulciano playing a similar role to its counterpart from Montalcino.

On the southern Tuscan coast, Sangiovese goes under the alias Morellino and makes particularly toothsome wine in unusually acid soils around Scansano.

Sangiovese is still the standard red grape of the Romagna region, and it is still easy to find vapid, pale, stretched examples but producers such as Zerbina have shown that top-quality Sangiovese is also bottled in this region.

In Umbria to the south Sangiovese is the standard red vine and can make some delicious Montefalco Rosso, while as Nielluccio, the Sangiovese vine is the most widely planted vine on the French island of Corsica.

Vine growers are becoming increasingly curious and Sangiovese is now being planted from Chile to Argentina, but the place with the greatest recent interest in Sangiovese outside Italy is California. Here a vogue for all things gastronomic and Italian in the 1990s led to unparalleled experimentation with growing Sangiovese under warm west coast skies. The results have been decidedly mixed but Shafer with their Firebreak blend, predominantly Sangiovese, has managed admirable consistency.

Argentina with its considerable Italian immigrant population also has quite a bit of Sangiovese (and Nebbiolo and, in huge quantity, the northern Italian variety Bonarda) planted, but it is still to perform even half as well as the dominant Argentine vine Malbec.

And in Australia Coriole and Pizzini have shown that Sangiovese can thrive in such different wine regions as McLaren Vale and the Victorian Highlands.

Some top wines:

- Flaccianello (Fontodi, Chianti Classico)
- Le Pergole Torte 1999 (Monteverdine, Chianti Classico)
- Zerbina Riserva Pietramora (Zerbina, Romagna)
- Riserva (Case Basse, Brunello di Montalcino)
- Asinone (Poliziano, Vino Nobile di Montepulciano)
- Poggio Valente (Le Pupille, Morellino di Scansano)