Tuscany v Bordeaux at 10

25 Sep 2009 by Jancis Robinson/FT

See my accompanying tasting notes on 19 top Tuscans and tasting notes on Umani Ronchi verticals. See also the Vino Fratelli Antinori video.

Like many wine importers in Germany, Anton Rössner of Abayan specialises in Italian wines. But he noticed that although attention is lavished on tastings of mature bordeaux and burgundy, wine professionals outside Italy rarely examine fine Italian wine except when it is released on to the market. He accordingly set about enlisting the help of the Italian Chamber of Commerce in organising a tasting of top-quality Tuscan reds from the highly successful 1999 vintage. After all, 10 years after the harvest is the traditional time to assess the top wines of Bordeaux.

Thus it was I flew to Hamburg last month to take part with various other wine writers and high-profile sommeliers in a blind tasting of a dozen Tuscan 1999s at the Hotel Louis C Jacob overlooking the busy river Elbe and the Airbus factory beyond.

By chance, the day before I had been exposed to proof of just how well a much less appreciated category of Italian wine can age: dry white Verdicchio. The family-owned firm of Umani Ronchi in the increasingly fashionable Marche on the Adriatic coast have made the special Casal de Serre bottling of their best Verdicchio Classico Superiore since 1982. Massimo and Michele Bianchi Bernetti came over to London to show the 1996 at 13 years old, seriously old for a white wine that can be found for under £10 a bottle. The 1996 was only just past its best but still had great tingly, toasty freshness. The 1998, on the other hand, was in its glorious prime: a seriously complex, complete wine that would put many a white burgundy at three times the price to shame. The 2004 and 2008 look set to follow the same stately ageing curve. According to www.wine-searcher.com, it is still possible at the time of writing to find vintages as old as 2003 in commercial circulation and I would strongly recommend that any lover of serious white wine consider putting a few bottles away for a few years (with the caveat that 2003 was exceptionally hot).

The grape is the Marche speciality Verdicchio, in this case grown in two of Umani Ronchi's most prized vineyards, at relatively high elevations. Since 2001 the Bianchi Bernettis have eschewed oak in its ageing and also suppress the softening malolactic fermentation nowadays in order to preserve its natural acidity. They reported proudly that although for many years Verdicchio was associated simply with cheap plonk in amphora- or 'Gina Lollobrigida'-shaped bottles, today Verdicchio is second only to Chardonnay in the extent to which its wines are acclaimed in the influential Gambero Rosso guide to Italian wines. La Monacesca's Mirum bottling is another extremely serious example of a Verdicchio that is well worth ageing.

But of course it is substantial red wines that are more obviously associated with benefiting from time in bottle and cellar - and the Hamburg tasting was designed to demonstrate this. What gave the exercise extra piquancy was that the famous Antinori brothers Lodovico and Piero, producers of such iconic Tuscan wines as Tignanello, Ornellaia and Solaia, had flown from Pisa for the day and tasted these dozen wines, which included four of theirs, with us, in equal ignorance as to their identities.

What was immediately apparent, comparing them with the range of 1999 top red bordeaux I had tasted last June, was how much sweeter and more luscious these 1999 Tuscans are. In fact the second flight of six were much more refreshing than the first six that suffered a little from sitting for 15 minutes or so in the sun-filled room in which we tasted. The dozen wines had been selected by Hendrik Thoma, ex sommelier at the Louis C Jacob, from what could presumably have been scores of potential demonstrations of fine 1999 Tuscan reds and I do not know the criteria. I assume some (though not all) came from the Abayan portfolio. It was notable how many of the wines tasted like super-lush red bordeaux - and not just the four composed exclusively of Bordeaux grape varieties Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot and/or Petit Verdot.

Castello di Rampolla's 1999 Sammarco bottling, for example, a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon seasoned with Tuscany's own Sangiovese, tasted like a super-ripe Pomerol to me when I tasted it blind. I even wondered whether the most famous wine consultant of Pomerol had been involved. The wine that had in fact been fashioned by Michel Rolland, Ornellaia 1999, made when Lodovico Antinori still owned this property in the Maremma, seemed even richer, despite its slightly lower serving temperature. Indeed, I used the phrase 'Napa Valley Cabernet' in my tasting note on the Ornellaia - a sign of just how flattering and attractive it was to taste. There were no duds at all in this line-up, nor in the seven 2001s we drank, not blind, with dinner that evening. I, rather boringly, gave every wine I tasted a score of between 17 and 18.5 out of 20.

Overall, this range of 1999s was much more successful and pleasurable than the (admittedly much larger) range of 1999 red bordeaux I had tried earlier in the year - although the vintage is acknowledged as a much greater success in Tuscany than in Bordeaux. They were very much more precocious in their development though. Whereas quite a significant proportion of top red 1999 bordeaux are not yet ready to drink, all of these 12 Tuscans were already broachable, with the exception of Sassicaia, the bordeaux blend that put the Maremma on the map back in the early 1970s, and two of the three wines from Biondi-Santi family, the Castello di Montepò 1999 Morellino di Scansano Riserva from Jacopo Biondi Santi and the Brunello di Montalcino Riserva from the family's base well inland in Montalcino.

With the last three wines served, there seemed to be a change of gear, with the wines showing much more obvious sunshine, sometimes a certain baked character. These turned out to be Brunello di Montalcino rather than the Supertuscans that preceded them.

The most unexpected result perhaps was how well Piero Antinori's La Braccesca Merlot 1999 did. Over lunch Piero admitted that he had been so uninspired by this debut vintage initially that he had given up bottling it separately and the grapes are now lost in a relatively lowly blend. But he was so impressed by the 1999 tasted blind that it might be reprised in some form. It was the most evolved wine of the lot but was extremely delicious, and as elegant as the immaculately tailored Piero. Lodovico, meanwhile, crowed with delight about how rich and dramatic his Ornellaia tasted. A particularly benign form of sibling rivalry perhaps?

TOP WINES

Antinori, Solaia 2001

Petrolo, Torrione 1999

Antinori, La Braccesca Merlot 1999

Luigi d'Alessandro, Il Bosco Syrah 1999

Antinori, Solaia 1999

Ornellaia 1999

Antinori, Pian delle Vigne 1999 Brunello di Montalcino

Antinori, Tignanello 2001

Castello del Terriccio, Lupicaia 2001

See my accompanying tasting notes on 19 top Tuscans

and tasting notes on Umani Ronchi verticals.