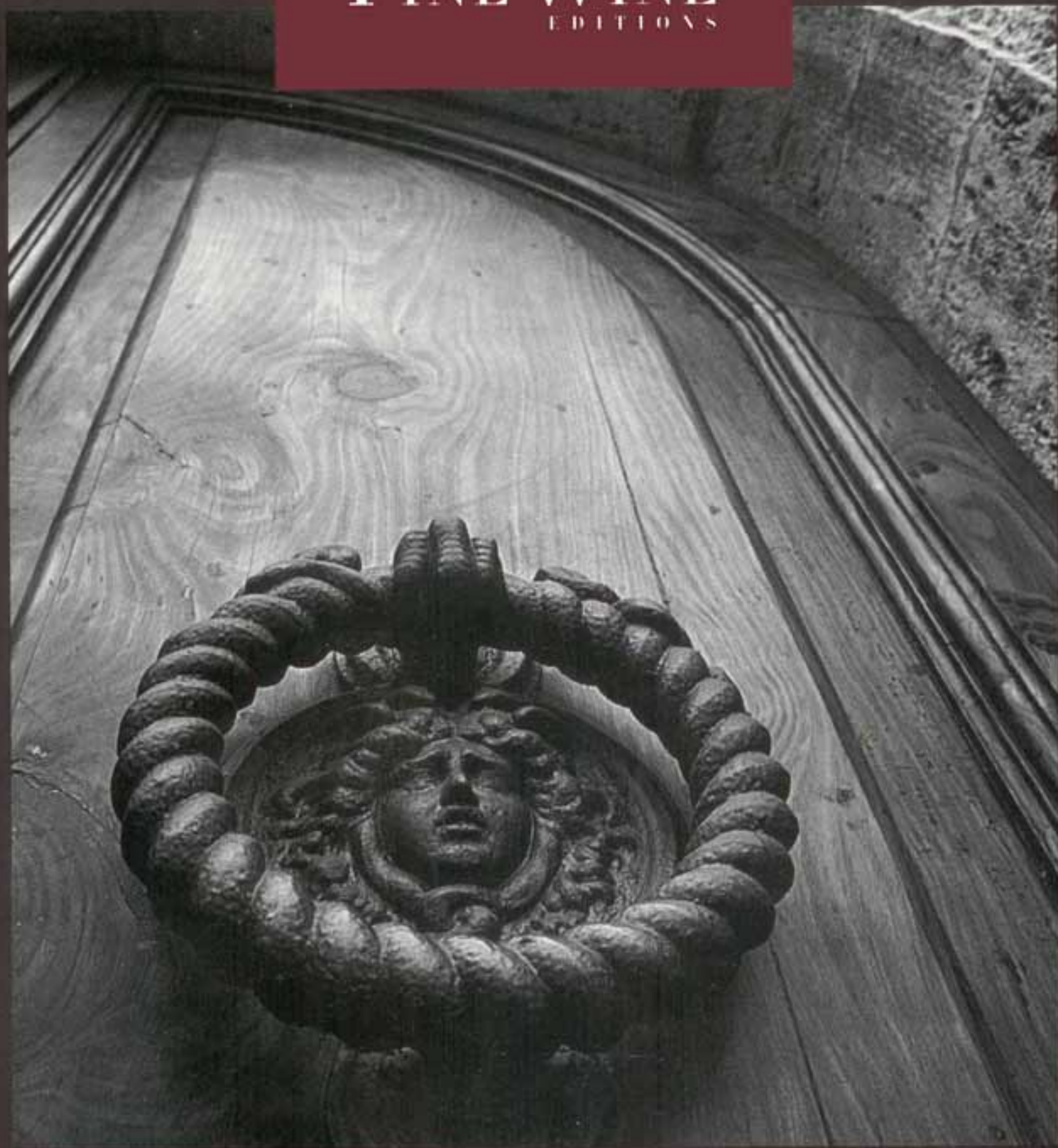


FINE WINE
EDITIONS



THE FINEST WINES OF
TUSCANY
AND CENTRAL ITALY

A Regional and Village Guide to the Best Wines and Their Producers

NICOLAS BELFRAGE MW

Foreword by Hugh Johnson | Photography by Jon Wyand



The wines of Tuscany were famous long before Leonardo da Vinci described them as “bottled sunshine,” and they are at the forefront of the remarkable renaissance of Italian wine over the past 30 years. In this groundbreaking new book, Nicolas Belfrage shares his insider’s knowledge acquired as a specialist wine trader and writer. Mindful of the region’s fascinating past, Belfrage brings the story up to date, discussing such subjects as geology and geography, grape varieties, and the latest research into Sangiovese, the variety used in the top wines of Chianti Classico, Brunello di Montalcino, and Vino Nobile di Montepulciano.

He also clarifies the regulatory framework and follows the recent controversial developments in viticulture and winemaking, including the rise of the Super-Tuscans and the ongoing “Brunellogate” scandal that broke in 2008. At the heart of the book are in-depth, illustrated profiles of more than 90 of the most interesting producers, large and small, with insightful notes on the essential character of their finest wines. The author also offers a comprehensive review of vintages and selects his top 100 wines in 10 different categories, while wines of special quality or value are indicated throughout.



The Finest Wines of Tuscany and Central Italy is part of a major new series of illustrated guides created by the editorial team at *The World of Fine Wine* magazine, working with leading authorities who give unrivaled treatment of a classic region’s producers, vineyards, and vintages. Adopting the definition proposed by Hugh Johnson, these innovative studies focus on “the wines most worth talking about,” giving space to those themes of greatest interest to the growing number of serious wine lovers by telling more of the story under the vines and behind the wines—not only what they taste like but why they taste that way and how they reflect the particular places, people, and times that made them.

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Preface

by Nicolas Belfrage

This book may be approached like a Tuscan meal. The first part (chapters 1–6), the antipasto, presents a quick history and general background information on Tuscan and central Italian wines, plus a more in-depth look at the area's geography, viticulture, and winemaking; a bit rich, perhaps, or abundant, but gets the gastric juices going. The second part, the *primo piatto* (which is always the centerpiece of a Tuscan *pranzo*), is all about the production zones, the finest producers, and their wines, the best of which are indicated by a star. The third part, the *secondo piatto* (often a bit of an anticlimax after the flights of the *primo*), takes a look at related matters such as vintages and wine-and-food pairing, and, for *dolce*, provides ten lists of ten wines or wineries that I consider top in their category.

It is important to note, however, that unlike the Tuscan meal, the different parts of the book do not have to be taken in ritualistic order but may be consumed separately—there is no need to plow through the whole of the chapters on grape varieties and winemaking practices before proceeding to the heart of the matter, though if you do, you might find the information provided useful when tackling subsequent chapters. Nor, even, need the profiles be read consecutively, though to do so will help one's understanding of the zones and subzones from which they spring. The third part, like the first, may be looked at separately.

All selections are subjective, though I like to think that, over a quarter of a century specializing in Italian wine, there may also have crept in a measure of objectivity about what's good. I have tried not to be dogmatic but to present producers with different approaches and ideologies, even if I do not necessarily

agree with them. I greatly regret not being able—for reasons of time and space (pardon my metaphysics)—to include certain producers, especially those whose wines well merited inclusion and who were only too willing to cooperate. I tried to home in on those I knew well or reasonably well, and in an area like central Italy, where there are so many wineries, it is impossible for one person to get around to visiting them all, however worthy they may be. At some point I have visited almost all of those represented, and I think I have met them all and obviously tasted their wines. Those noted under “Finest Wines” are, in keeping with the definition used for this series, those that I think are most worth writing about, be it for their absolute quality, some other intrinsic interest, or value.

I will no doubt be taken to task for including certain producers I represent commercially or have done at some point in a longish career as a buyer, retailer, importer, and broker of Italian wine. But I decline to apologize for this since, as I have said elsewhere, the writing side of my life has been helped immeasurably by the opportunities afforded by commercial activities,

just as the commercial side has been a great enabler of and motivator for research. So yes, my people, past, present, and future, are in here, if only because, by definition, I believe in them—or I wouldn't be dealing with them. But as I say, I have tried—as I always try, no doubt not entirely successfully—to be as objective as possible with my writer's hat on.

So, *salute!* Or should I say, *buon appetito?*

Nicolas Belfrage

To Will, Gabe, and Sacha: tomorrow's team



Poggio Scalette

The most significant aspect of this estate is that it was founded by one of the elite of the Tuscan wine Renaissance—a man who, since the earliest days in the 1970s, acted as consultant enologist to owner-producers rather than making wine for himself. Not quite the poacher turned gamekeeper, but something along those lines.

Vittorio Fiore, Tuscan by adoption only (he was born to Italian parents in German-speaking Alto Adige), studied viticulture and enology at San Michele all'Adige in Trentino and Conegliano in the Veneto. In his 20s he moved around northern Italy taking various jobs, including that of director of the Association of Italian Enotechnicians, a post he held for eight years until 1978. Thereafter he decided to take up an offer to work in Tuscany, at Fattoria le Bocce. One year later, finding his services much sought after by the wealthy greenhorns who had by now begun buying up bargain Tuscan properties for tax purposes, he turned *libero professionista* (freelance consultant) and never looked back.

Poggio Scalette has perfect exposure; the kind of mean, rocky soil that gives the best wine; and a quality of light of which even Leonardo would—and probably did—approve

He did look forward, though, to the day when he would have his own property—to the time, indeed, when he would retire from consultancy and have the leisure to pour all his passion into his own product.

The chance came at the end of 1991, when he learned of an abandoned property on a hill above Greve, smack in the middle of the historic Chianti zone at between 1,150 and 1,640ft (350–500m) above sea level, with perfect exposure; the kind

of mean, rocky soil that gives the best wine; and a quality of light of which even Leonardo would—and probably did—approve. Best of all, there was, mixed in with the olive trees, a wealth of old Sangiovese vines stretching back some 80 years or more.

Vittorio Fiore is a fortunate man—or at least a good father, of the sort that children wish to emulate, all four of his sons having chosen the way of wine. The eldest, Jurij (b. 1968), arrived at Poggio Scalette (“hill of little steps”) from wine school in Beaune in 1993 and worked alongside his father to the point where, today, Jurij is pretty well running the show—with the benevolent paternal eye looking over his shoulder from time to time, of course.

With all his experience, Vittorio is also a mine of information, and I had a chance to pick his brains during an extremely bumpy ride around his estate with him and Jurij. The answer to the \$64-million question—“Is Sangiovese a great grape?”—seems appropriate here. “There are two schools of thought on this,” he replied. “One maintains that Sangiovese needs to be blended; the other, that Sangiovese can be great on its own. For me, Sangiovese is one of the greatest vines in the world, but it still requires much more study—we are now only two thirds of the way to understanding it. It is very sensitive to cold and to excessive rain, and it is very productive. The quantity has to be controlled at a maximum of 1.5kg [3.3lb] of fruit per plant. But when it is treated right, it is capable of giving wine of extremely high quality.

“Californians have asked me why they can't make great Sangiovese *in purezza*. I have told them they were treating Sangiovese as if it were Cabernet Sauvignon, trying to get up to 8kg [18lb] of fruit to the plant. Cabernet may give a decent wine at these production levels, but Sangiovese gives only *vinello* [plonk].”



FINEST WINES

Il Carbonaione (Alta Valle della Greve IGT)

The name of the estate is derived from the charcoal (*carbon*) deposits in the nearby woods. I tasted a range of Il Carbonaione—the only wine made at Poggio Scalette—back to the first vintage, 1992. The overall level was high, even though the 2002 and the 1992, being from the two poorest vintages of their respective decades, were at most respectable and, one suspected, somewhat refreshed. The color in all cases was deep and vibrant; the tannins were ripe, plentiful but reasonably soft; and the concentration was impressive, particularly considering the altitude of the vines, from which one would expect more elegance than power. In most cases there was an equilibrium of fruit and structure that augured well for the longer haul. As “best of the bunch” it is hard to choose between the 1999 and the 2001, with the 2004 only fractionally behind those two.

Sweet cherry fruit shines out on the palate, concentrated and seductive. A carpet of velvety tannins. An excellent example of the “new Sangiovese”

1992 Made entirely from old vines. Deep of color without excessive signs of age, but the nose is curiously flat. Good fruit-acid balance but the flavors are more earthy than fruity. Impressively alive for a 1992, but somewhat lacking in grace.

1993 The color is deep and reasonably youthful. Some lift on the nose—morello cherry. Concentrated and flavory with some finesse on the palate. The acid-fruit balance is typical of Sangiovese, and there are fine, ripe tannins. This has lasted well, showing no sign of breaking up—indeed it improves with air.

1995 This was picked during late October, in a year when late picking was essential. Deep-hued and impressively youthful. Typical cherry aromas of Sangiovese. Firm but ripe tannins on the palate, with a chunky structure and a wealth of cherry/ berry fruit. Good life ahead.

Left: Vittorio Fiore, who after 20 years as a consultant was able to acquire his own perfectly situated vineyard above Greve



1999 A star—deep of color and very young looking. Some oak on the nose, but fruit is there, too. Sweet cherry fruit shines out on the palate, concentrated and seductive. A carpet of velvety tannins. An excellent example of the “new Sangiovese”—but if it has a flaw, it’s slightly too much oak.

2001★ Another star, though different from the 1999, the aromas tending more toward marzipan and spice than fruit. Round, ripe, full, concentrated, but elegant on the palate with firm but voluptuous tannins. A very long life ahead. This is perhaps marginally better than the 1999, lacking that obtrusive oaky note.

2002 The color is deep, the nose clean if a bit confected and oaky. Forward, immediate fruit on the palate, rather too supple, going on soupy. In a year reckoned to be disastrous for Sangiovese, this restores some confidence, even if it doesn’t inspire.

Poggio Scalette

Area under vine: 15ha (37 acres)
Average production: 40,000–42,000 bottles
Via Barbiano 77,
50022 Greve in Chianti, Florence
Tel: +39 05 58 54 61 08
www.poggioscalette.it

Castelluccio

There is a sense of déjà vu about this estate, set amid the steep, sometimes dramatic slopes of the foothills on the other side of the Apennines from Tuscany. This is because, like Poggio Scalette in Chianti Classico, the farm (or 70 percent of it, at least) is owned by the family of illustrious consulting enologist Vittorio Fiore, a northerner who made his name in Tuscany. In charge now is the second of the four Fiore sons, Claudio, aided and supported by his wife Veruska.

Claudio offers a bit of history: "Castelluccio was established as a domaine by Gianmatteo Baldi, a film director with a passion for wine, in the 1970s. The first vineyards came into production in the early 1980s." Baldi, according to Claudio (other producers like Fattoria Paradiso may disagree), was the first producer in these parts to fix his sights on quality. He also had the idea, certainly the first in this zone, of

Castelluccio was one of the first producers in these parts to fix sights on quality, and certainly the first in this zone to divide production into crus

dividing production into crus, which he named after various *ronchi* (singular *ronco*), using the Romagnan name for hill (the equivalent of Tuscany's *poggio*). At that time there were three *ronchi*, two planted to Sangiovese *in purezza* and one to Sauvignon Blanc. This last, called Ronco del Re, rapidly became a cult wine and reached a retail price of 75,000 lire per bottle—a fortune if you recall that most Romagnan white could be had for pennies. Claudio continues: "In the late 1970s, Baldi persuaded my father to act as consultant, and he was here until 1990, when there was some kind of falling out. In 1999, the company that had taken over asked my father to return as consultant and even offered him some of the shares. Today my family owns 70 percent of the company.

"In 2000 my father offered me and Veruska [a Tuscan lass despite the name] the chance of taking charge, giving me the task of returning the azienda to the glory of earlier days. I jumped at it. I had a good memory of the place from when my father used to take me with him on his travels, and I knew from various tastings that the wine was capable of being outstanding. I had good experience behind me with Livio Felluga [in Friuli] and Castello di Meleto [Tuscany], and I was confident I could handle it."

What are the differences between the Tuscan operation and the Romagnan? Claudio opines that in many respects, in particular in relation to the vinification, the differences for them are not significant, since the presiding genius is Vittorio Fiore in both cases. The sole major difference is the soil and, more generally, the terroir. Here the predominant *terreno* is clay, which gives minerality, freshness, and structure, as distinct from the *galestro*, or flaky schistous rock, and sand of Poggio Scalette, which tends to deliver less power but rather more elegance.

As to the making of the wines, as indicated, Claudio sticks pretty much to the paternal principles, with certain modifications. Harvesting is in 44lb (20kg) boxes, and the fruit of different vineyards is rigorously kept apart. In an effort to get as much color as they can with a minimum of harsh tannin, they employ *délestage*, involving the total mixing of the skins with the juice, about four times in a total maceration period of five to seven days. Temperature control, of course, at 82–86°F (28–30°C); and malolactic fermentation immediately after the alcoholic fermentation, which, importantly, takes place in wood. The barrels are larger than barriques—350 liters instead of 225—and they try to limit the influence of oak aromas by using only 50 percent new barrels (for Ronco delle Ginestre) or only barrels already used at least once (for Ronco dei Ciliegi). The wines spend 12–14 months in barrel, then up to a year in bottle prior to release.

FINEST WINES

Ronco dei Ciliegi and Ronco delle Ginestre

Today, Claudio Fiore makes the same three crus as existed in the early 1980s. Of the two pure Sangioveses, **Ronco dei Ciliegi** is the elegant one, being grown on soil that contains less clay and more limestone than the more full-bodied **Ronco delle Ginestre**. I tasted five wines from each Ronco together, dating back to 1983 (Ciliegi) and 1982 (Ginestre). Ciliegi generally had characteristic tea-leaf and herb aromas, with hints of cherry and, in the older wines, leather. The 2001 was the star, but the 2002 was equally remarkable for the year. Ginestre was more mineral, almost medicinal, with some tar, as well as more concentration, a greater wealth of fruit, and distinctly more oak, which marred the otherwise deep, structured 2001, the smoother 2000, and the again surprisingly successful 2002.

Ronco dei Ciliegi

1983 Color aging, but not badly. Fairly fresh, tea-leaf and herb aroma, not strong. Lacks concentration but has definite Sangiovese character on the palate—leather, herb, tea leaf, dried cherry. Smooth tannins and good, firm acidity. Subtle rather than powerful, quite respectable, but slightly underwhelming.

1990 Garnet heart, orange rim. Nose clean and typical (tea-leaf and herb), but you have to search for it. A bit more concentration than the 1983, with firmer backbone. Still drinking well, but not particularly exciting for the vintage.

2000 Fairly deep, bright, youthful color. Cherry/berry fruit on the nose, and good follow-up on the palate, with ripe tannins, good acidity, and pretty good length. Fruit character develops with air, nothing hot or jammy, and no excess of oak. Nothing overstated, nicely balanced.

2001★ Tight-grained ruby. Fresh cherry fruit on the nose. Currently restrained on the palate, with firm structure; quite earthy. A superior wine needing time, now somewhat closed but promising to develop into a fine and elegant bottle.

2002 They made around 4,000 bottles instead of the usual 10,000–15,000. Deep, youthful hue. Attractive, cherry syrup/berry nose. Firm acid, tight-grained tannins, good concentration, no hint of rot. The best wine of this tasting. It needs time but will be extraordinary for the vintage.

Ronco delle Ginestre

1982 Light, aging color. Nose herbal, almost

medicinal; mineral. Good tannin-acid structure, agreeable cherry fruit as well as dried herb. Elegant and balanced, with sweet fruit and mineral notes on the finish.

1990 Still lively color, medium deep. Mineral notes and yeast extract on the nose. Lively though not excessive acid, with more concentration than the 1982 but not more complexity. A slight disappointment for such an illustrious vintage.

2000 Deep, youthful, almost opaque color. Oak sits on the nose, blocking the fruit, an influence that runs right through the wine. Wine guides and point systems enter the mind, rather than individuality and terroir. Impressively rich and concentrated, but it lacks Sangiovese typicity. Perhaps with time...

2001 Deep, almost opaque. Oak influences the nose, but the fruit comes through, chunky and concentrated. Plenty of everything—tannin, acidity, cherry/plum fruit. Tight and closed, it needs time but should prove very good, even though it could do with a little less Massif Central.

2002 Perhaps the deepest color of all, tight-grained. Oak again predominates on the nose, though the concentration of fruit on the palate is impressive (plum and dark berry). Like the Ronco dei Ciliegi of the same year, this is another surprisingly good result for the vintage.

Sauvignon Blanc Ronco del Re

I have tasted this wine less often, but I am not convinced. It may be good for central Italy, but northern Italy, and certainly the Loire's Central Vineyards, can do a lot better.

Massicone

This Cabernet Sauvignon/Sangiovese blend was introduced relatively recently. It is quite rich and reasonably balanced, but for authenticity I would take the red Ronchi any time.

Castelluccio

Total area: 50ha (124 acres)
Area under vine: 12ha (30 acres)
Total production: 90,000 bottles
Via Tramonto 15,
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