

Super Tuscany

By Amy Cortese & Robert McCanless

On the trail of Super Tuscans, AMY CORTESE and ROBERT MCCANLESS discover the sensual pleasures of Italy's booming Maremma region.



Driving along country roads lined with Mediterranean pines, we at last reach the gates of Guado al Tasso. We ring the buzzer, but there is no answer. We are a little early, and this, after all, is Italy. We are in Bolgheri, a tiny town in the western region of Tuscany known as Maremma, to seek out the wines known as Super Tuscans.

At the appointed hour, we try again. This time the gates swing open, and we are met by Allegra Antinori, daughter of Piero Antinori, one of the world's most famous winemakers. Her dusty pants and denim shirt belie the fact that the Antinoris are royalty in these parts.

It was Piero's uncle, the Marchese Mario Incisa della Rocchetta, whose penchant for Bordeaux-style wines led him, starting in the 1940s, to abandon traditional Tuscan winemaking and experiment with Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc. The result, Sassicaia, released commercially in 1968, was a stunning success that proved that Italy could make wine to rival France (and, no less, in an area long considered inhospitable to growing fine wine grapes). Inspired by the marchese, Piero and his father, Niccolò, followed with their own new-paradigm wine in 1971. Called Tignanello, it was based on Chianti's Sangiovese grape, but differed from a typical Chianti in every other aspect of production. The English-speaking wine press, eager to differentiate these elegant reds from Chianti's insipid offerings, coined the name "Super Tuscans." Together, the wines helped usher Italy into the age of modern winemaking.

Super Tuscans today are made all over Tuscany, but Bolgheri, in the Maremma region, has been their incubator and spiritual center. Its maritime climate of steady, cooling sea breezes is perfectly suited for growing Cabernet, Merlot, and other New World varieties, and Maremma's maverick, frontier mentality encouraged winemakers to take risks and break with tradition.

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Not long ago, Maremma was considered a backwater—literally. It was a swamp, better known for

European cowboys, like France's Camargue region, than for cult wines. Leopold II, Holy Roman Emperor and Grand Duke of Tuscany in the late 18th century, began to drain the marsh, and Benito Mussolini continued the job in the 1930s and '40s. From the Latin for "by the sea," Maremma's loosely defined borders stretch along the Tyrrhenian seacoast starting from northern Lazio, encompass the entire Grosseto Province, and continue up to the Cecina River just south of Livorno, a port town created by the Medicis and populated by immigrants and fugitives from the law. On the east, Maremma is bounded by the Colline Metallifere (metal-rich hills) and the area of Montalcino in the Siena province.

Centuries ago, in addition to the constant threat of malaria, the Maremma coast was under continual attack by Saracen pirates and bandits who roamed the interior hills. Stone watchtowers dot the landscape. When Maremma's people were not fending off brigands, they were fighting enemies from Siena or some other landlocked Italian rival that coveted sea access. Dante once commented on how "the wild beasts, that hate the cultivated fields, [make their lairs] in Tuscan Maremma."

There's no trace of Dante's Maremma out among Guado al Tasso's neatly trellised acres of Vermentino grape vines, their trunks sprouted with green spring growth. Up in the hills, where clay soil blends with sand and Bolgheri's best red wines are made, there are still plenty of wild boar. Known as *cinghiale*, these tusked feral pigs forage on wild herbs and nuts and, to local vignerons' horror, the ripest grapes. The score evens out though when we notice that every local restaurant serves *cinghiale* in some delicious form.

"This is all Maremma," says Allegra, her handtracing a long arc from the distant hills covered with oaks, evergreens, and juniper, to the expansive plain of manicured vineyards and on to the sea. "When people come here, they never leave."



Maremma is one of the hottest regions in Italy right now. Everywhere you look, new vineyards are being planted and wineries are rising from the dirt. In addition to Sassicaia, Bolgheri is home to such superb wines as Grattamacco, Ornellaia, and Paleo. Many of the big names elsewhere in Italy's wine industry are here. Angela Gaja, the renowned Piedmontese winemaker, acquired Bolgheri's Ca'Marcanda, and the Frescobaldis (along with Robert Mondavi, who later sold his share) bought Tenuta dell'Ornellaia from Lodovico Antinori, Piero's brother. Land values in Bolgheri rival the top properties in Chianti, and development has recently been capped, making real estate even more precious.

But if Bolgheri's countryside feels like the carefully tended grounds of a private club—an exclusive realm of dreamy, tree-canopied roads and gated wineries—then southern Maremma is Italy's Wild West. Centered around Grosseto, it is Tuscany's last frontier. Italian cowboys, known as *butteri*, tend cattle, and large swaths of coastland and forest remain undeveloped. There are Etruscan ruins and walled cities every bit as enchanting as Lucca, the well-known medieval town to the north, but the tour buses that crowd central Tuscany are absent. There are Tuscan hills, but also miles of sandy beach.

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With Bolgheri's desirable land snapped up, investors are turning south, to Maremma Bassa ("lower" Maremma). In the last few years, capital has poured into new vineyards, hotels, and spas. Wineries designed by famous architects such as Renzo Piano are popping up, giving the area a budding reputation as Tuscany's Napa Valley. The roster of new owners in southern Maremma is a Who's Who of Italian wine: the Biondi-Santis of Montalcino (Cantina Montepo); the Widmer family of La Brancaia in Chianti (Brancaia in Maremma); celebrity Erik Banti; Chianti's Mazzei family, of Castello di Fonterutoli fame (Belguardo); leading Montepulciano producer Frederico Carletti; and American restaurateurs Mario Batali and Joe Bastianich (La Mozza).

Along with the Moretti Group, Alain Ducasse, with more Michelin stars to his credit than any other chef in the world, has turned the former hunting lodge of Leopold II into L'Andana, a stylish and luxurious inn and spa set among vineyards that will soon produce their first vintage.

"The potential for Maremma is endless," says Batali, who owns the Italian restaurants Babbo and Del Posto in New York. "It is magnificent for food, wine, and tourism."

The coastline is a landscape of white sandy beach, dense scrub brush, umbrella pine, strawberry tree, oak, and heather that gives way, as one drives inland, to classic Tuscan rolling hills covered in olive trees, grapevines, and sheep. Local shops and restaurants serve delectable cinghiale prosciuttos, ragus, and sausage. And there is a bounty of seafood from the Tyrrhenian and, from inland waterways, lagoon fish served fried and crunchy and heaped on platters.

Local officials years ago had the foresight to set aside over 100 square kilometers of parkland along the coast, preserving the sandy beach, pine forests, and swamps that are home to numerous types of birds and wildlife. Agritourism opportunities abound, as at the serene La Parrina, a working farm and guest house that produces sublime cheese, wine, and produce.

We visit Pitigliano, a walled city with a historic Jewish district. The town rises spectacularly atop Etruscan tombs, many of which are used by modern residents to store wine, cheese, and other necessities, such as an old car. Closer to the sea is Capalbio, a picture-perfect medieval town that Puccini once frequented. (He is said to have been a lousy hunter with a big ego—traits that can easily be forgiven when you see his operas.)

We drive on serpentine roads through stunning Argentario, once an island in prehistoric times and now connected to the mainland by natural land bridges. The Pelican, a villa-turned-hotel that clings to Amalfi Coast-like cliffs, will soon be joined by new five-star hotels and golf courses. Farther up the coast near Elba, the island that was the site of Napoleon's first exile, Ferragamo (the fashion group that also owns Swan, a brand of high-end yachts) has built a sparkling new marina.

All the development along the coast, however, can't match the explosion of winemaking just inland. Morellino di Scansano is a fast-rising star on the Italian wine scene. Based on the eponymous small-berried Sangiovese clone, it sparkles with a freshness of fruit and a lively, dancing character. Delicious with food, it's perfect as an everyday drinking wine, and is an affordable alternative to the rich (in all senses of the word) Super Tuscans.

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In fact, for all of their fame, Super Tuscans are the subject of much grousing. Many wine professionals lament the homogeneity that has resulted as winemakers everywhere try to mimic Sassicaia. Others complain about the big, extracted style that has come to define Super Tuscans—a style closer to an overblown California Cabernet than a refined Bordeaux. Critics say that, at least, Super Tuscans should be well aged before they are consumed, to give the oak and tannins time to integrate with the fruit.

But the carping does not diminish the importance of the pioneers. Step back in time, and you can appreciate the transformation Sassicaia represented. Italy's rich winemaking heritage, dating back nearly three millennia to the Etruscan era, may imply that quality was always spread across its lands. Yes, a few excellent regional wines, such as Barolo, Barbaresco, and Brunello did deserve their reputations, but up until the late 1980s, Italy's production was an ocean of bulk wine, bought at a cantina, served at a trattoria, or shipped north to France or Germany for house blends. Consider that, in 1991, Michael Broadbent's *The New Great Vintage Wine Book* devoted just eight pages to Italian wine, compared to 280 pages to French. What is astonishing is how far Italian winemaking has come in such a short time. In many ways, it tracks California's mercurial rise.

Italy's first wine laws were passed 44 years ago to establish zones similar to France's effective Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée system. Agricultural officials hoped to develop strong regional identities that could translate into marketable, export-driven brands. At the outset, the system, called Denominazione di Origine Controllata, or DOC, had the opposite effect from what was intended. Tuscany's Chianti region, among the first official DOCs, was a prime example. DOC regulations expanded the production zone beyond its historical borders, and dictated a formula for authentic Chianti. Based on a blending recipe credited to Italy's second prime minister, Bettino Ricasoli, himself an ardent winemaker, it set in stone production methods that were anathema to any producer trying to make high-quality wines. White grapes were a required part of the formula (up to 30 percent white grapes were allowed), large chestnut barrels (called *botti*) were specified for aging, and vineyard yields were set high (a preference for quantity over quality). The regulations led to Chianti's disastrous 1970s, when what had been a refined product plummeted in quality, flooding the market with dusty, pale swill.

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Against this backdrop, the Super Tuscans took the stage, and one begins to see why the Marchese Mario Incisa della Rocchetta's Sassicaia was so revolutionary. Aided by his cousin Niccolò Antinori's enologist, Giacomo Tachis, himself an adherent of methods espoused by the great University of Bordeaux winemaking expert Émile Peynaud, the marchese gradually adopted practices of modern winemaking at his Tenuto San Guido estate. Sassicaia was commercially released in 1968. While it owed a debt to Bordelaise winemaking, Sassicaia was unmistakably a product of Tuscan soil.

"It showed that Italian wine could compete on a world stage, and opened the door for others to follow," says Jeremy Parzen, a wine historian and marketing director at Vino, an Italian wine store in New York's Gramercy Park neighborhood. "Could there have been a Brunello craze without Sassicaia? I don't think so."



Because wines such as Sassicaia, Tignanello, and their followers fell outside DOC rules, they were labeled *vino di tavola*, a lowly classification reserved for nonvintage table wine. In Italy, the Anglo term “Super Tuscan” came to stand for winemaking that dared to defy tradition and break the rules. Yet the force of the Super Tuscans’ presence stirred change and eventually led to a reformed DOC system—so much so that, nowadays, Tignanello falls within Chianti’s DOC regulations. In 1992, Italian authorities came up with a new category, Indicazione Geografica Tipica, or IGT, that designates a geographic area, while giving wide latitude in winemaking. Many Super Tuscans today fall under this designation.

While still a potent marketing device, the rubric “Super Tuscan” has become a sort of catchall for wines wishing, it seems, to glom onto the cachet of their forebears.

Quality winemakers across Italy now use modern techniques common throughout the world. One typically finds stainless-steel fermentation tanks and oak barriques in the winery, and closely spaced vines—meticulously pruned to get the most concentrated fruit—in the fields. Yet, modern methods alone don’t guarantee great wine. What characterizes the best of Maremma is *expression*—that elusive quality where sun, sand, clay, sea breeze, and grape unite into wines of exceptional character, from an exceptional place.

Amy Cortese and Robert McCanless are working on a book about Italian wine.