

In search of the little-known
Sangiovese grape, which
can miraculously transform the
mundane into the magical

Kia McNerny

Much Ado About Chianti

It wasn't so long ago that Chianti was the wine of choice at one's local trattoria — the perfect accompaniment to pepperoni pizza — while connoisseurs tended to favour a vintage Bordeaux or Napa Valley Cabernet.

In 1996, that changed. With the arrival of the 1990 Chianti Classico and Brunello di Montalcino from Tuscany (Italian law requires that producers age such wines a minimum of four to five years before releasing them), it was obvious that Italy's stepchild, the Sangiovese grape, had entered the race for the world's next fashion darling.

The potential for exciting red wine is great in Tuscany's three main viticulture areas: the Chianti region below

Doorpull,
Villa Vignamaggio.



Entrance and gardens of Villa Vignamaggio, location for the recent film version of Much Ado About Nothing.

At a farmhouse winery on the Chianti Highway.



Florence; Rufina, to the east; and the Brunello hill towns of Pienza, Montepulciano and Montalcino, about forty kilometres south of Siena.

The vines in these areas have been producing delightful *rossos* for centuries, in a landscape marked by some of the most breathtaking views in Europe. While many wine aficionados prefer California reds for their complexity and alcohol content (13.8%), or Bordeaux for heritage, a trip to Tuscany can be a potent seducer.

September, a good time to be in Italy. The days were fine, even warm, while the nights were cool and crisp. We started our tour in the commune of Greve (pronounced Grév-a), a half-hour south of Florence along the tiny 'Chianti Highway'.

We checked in at the apartments of the 15th century Villa Vignamaggio outside Greve, an alluring, blush-coloured villa with its own vines and olive groves.

Mona Lisa was born here in 1479. More recently, the Villa's 1990 Chianti Classico was featured in *Food and Wine of Burton Anderson* and Kenneth Branagh, Emma Thompson and Michael Keaton capered about the gardens in the film version of *Much Ado About Nothing*.

Our wine-touring routine was established the next morning. Breakfast in Tuscany is a delectable array of fruits, cheeses and meats, including local *pecorino* (an aged goat cheese) and delicate pink mortadella ham. Heavy coffee with steamed milk and a crusty pope's hat of bread completed our meal.

The latter we piled with cheese for a picnic lunch. Then, armed with Hugh Johnson's wine book, a slim volume with maps and photos titled *Touring in Wine Country — Tuscany*, we travelled the country roads from Greve to Castellina and Radda, pulling up to *vendito direttas* (small wineries) or checking out *enotecas* (wineshops) in hilltop villages.

Though wine-touring in Italy is not commercial, most Tuscan producers offer hospitable tasting rooms, usually in a charming stone farmhouse with a host or hostess who speaks English.

We happened to be in Tuscany for the wine festival in late September. Held in Greve's tented piazza, the selection of Chianti Classicos and Riservas — for 4000 lira a glass (US\$2) — was extensive. As festivals go, this is a pretty tame one but it is pleasant strolling the piazza and stopping at the famous Wild Boar delicatessen, where the fragrance of fresh meats is pungent.

The Sangiovese grape offers two constant personality traits: the first, a smooth, rich taste with medium body. The second, 'conviviality' — the wine is always a delightful companion to food. This is especially true with respect to the specialties of the region — the bread and vegetable stews, sauces with game, crusty breads, fresh hard cheeses,



Display at Ristoro Lamole, near Greve.

the almost minty flavours of freshly pressed olive oil and *panzanello*, a gazpacho-like salad of tomato and cucumber.

A visit to Cennatoio, an impressive small winery with an international reputation, came about by lucky accident.

Our tour one morning took us by Ristoro Lamole at lunchtime, where we caught sight of a couple from the Villa enjoying lunch on the restaurant's balcony. They hailed us immediately.

'We're celebrating,' the man said. 'We've just found the greatest little winery in the area. Their '93 Chianti is fabulous. The '94 is good, too.' He gestured to the wine pail beside their table where a bottle of Cennatoio's Chianti Classico 1993 reposed.

We were impressed. Our new friends own their own winery just down the road from Atlas Peak, a Napa Valley offshoot of the prestigious Antinori wine family of Italy. They seemed to know a thing or two about Sangiovese wines, and offered directions.

The winery is owned by the Alessi family. Though only ten hectares, compared to the 300 or 400 hectares of larger growers, Cennatoio produces first class wines. Emiliano Alessi, the proprietor's son, was our knowledgeable and well-spoken host.

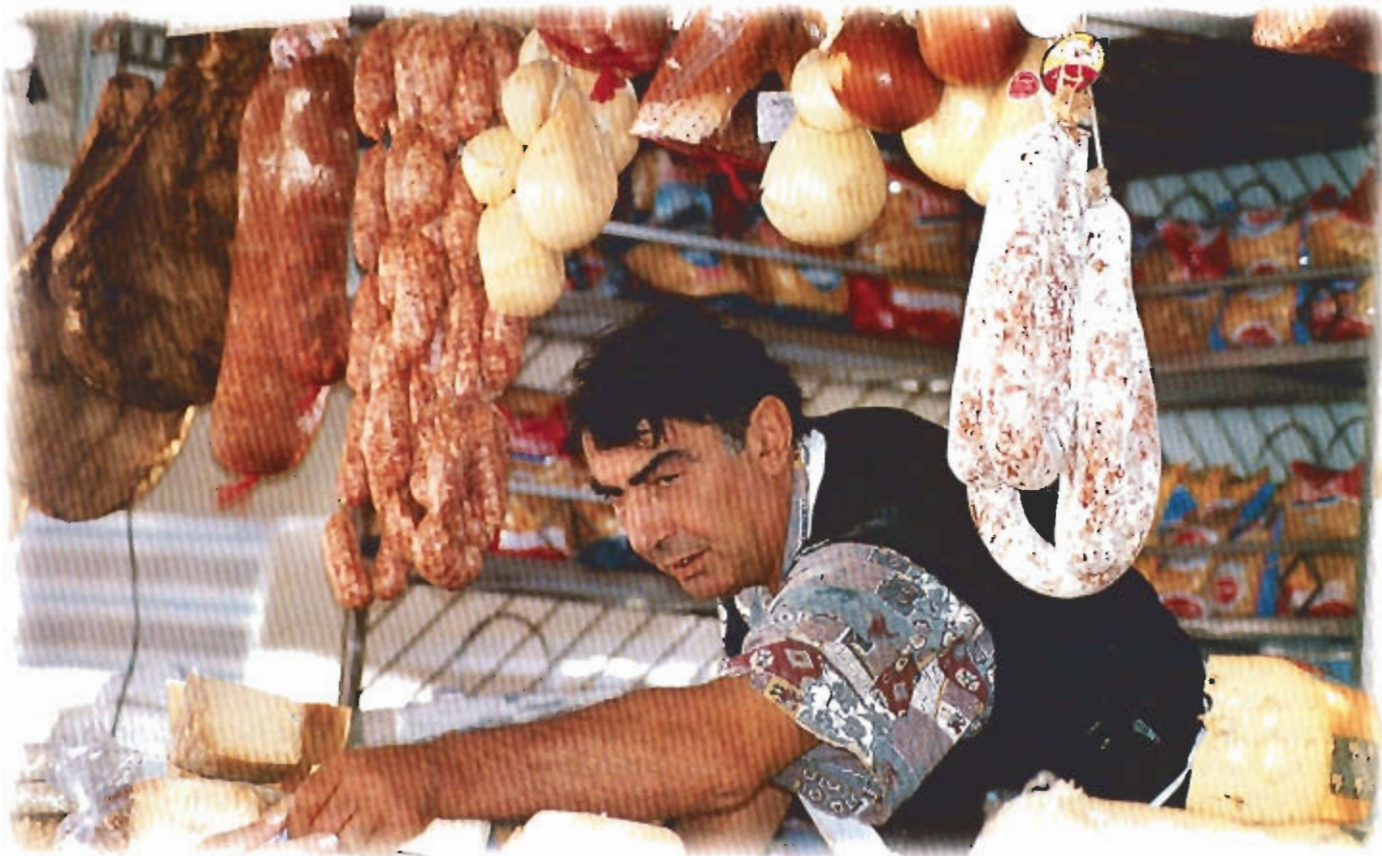
While we waited for him to finish with other guests, we glanced around the tasting room.

In this tiny winery in the Tuscan hills, 45 minutes from any real thoroughfare, the walls were filled with international awards. Cennatoio had scored extremely well at the Beverage Tasting Institute in Chicago, where its 1993 Mammolo (Merlot) won a prize, and its Cabernet and Etrusco (100% Sangiovese) 1993 received 90 points each out of 100.

The Etrusco represents a newer trend among Italy's growers, involving experimentation with the Sangiovese grape. Some 'super-Tuscans' like Cennatoio's produce a smooth, fuller-bodied wine using 100% Sangiovese, while others are a product of blending the grape with Cabernet Sauvignon.

One cannot leave the Chianti area without visiting one of the more prestigious of wine producers. The Fontodi winery, known for its superb wines, is a graceful compound of stone farmhouses, terraces and lush gardens. Its super-Tuscan, Flaccianello delle Pieve, is one of the best of the 100% Sangioveses, while its Chianti Classico and cru Vigna del Sorbo are both stunning.

Threading our way south via the beautiful Via Cassia (old road), we



Proprietor and produce, Wild Boar delicatessen, Greve.

headed for the wine-growing region of Montalcino. It is here that the highly desirable Brunello di Montalcino wines are produced. The character of Brunello di Montalcino, like its cousin Chianti, derives from the Sangiovese grape, called in the south Sangiovese grosso, or simply Brunello, meaning 'little dark one'.

La Saracina, an intimate compound of stone farmhouses restored to rustic luxury, was well placed for our visits to Montalcino, Pienza and the other towns of the Brunello region.

At Altesino, north of Montalcino, a fine small tour is offered. Their 1990 Brunello di Montalcino received 98 points in *Wine Spectator*. Their premium grape is grown alone in the Monte Soli field; its 1990 Riserva went for 53,000 lira (US\$35), reflecting a well-deserved international reputation.

Though the winery had sold out of its 1990s, we found Altesino's Riserva and other highly regarded Brunellos — including Caparzo's single-vineyard wine, La Casa — in the *enotecas* of Pienza.

Altesino's super-Tuscan is 70% Sangiovese and 30% Cabernet, casked for one year in Gamba oak from France. The use of French rather than Slovenian oak represents a new trend among Italian growers. Some suggest that the wines will be more opulent, though the results will be seen more fully in 1998 when the 1993 Brunellos are released.

Within each region are many microclimates that account for the excitement and variety of issue from growers who may be only a few kilometres apart. Variations among Montalcino wines are obvious when one compares those from the south — Banfi Corporation's Poggio alle Mura, for example — with those from Caparzo or Altesino in the north.

By Italian law, the Brunello's alcohol content must be 13.5%. Otherwise it is de-classed to *rosso*. Thus, many fine *vino di tabolas* (table wines) are found in restaurants or *enotecas* at good value.

Montepulciano is by far the most interesting of the hill towns because of its fascinating wine caves. An old fountain in the piazza, crowned with lions and falcons, is just a few steps from half-hidden entrances to Cantina del Redi, a frescoed cave and wine cellar beneath the city.

I wish there was space to write about all the great wines and lively conversations we enjoyed at tasting rooms and *enotecas*. The growers we spoke to have high hopes for the 1993 Riservas, to be released in 1998. And we will be waiting.

In a wine world dominated by Bordeaux and Burgundy, the Sangiovese grape is the charming stepsister who is finally attracting the princely interest she deserves. ♣

SIA flies from Singapore to Rome three times a week.

Kia McInerny is both an author and an attorney. She recently resigned her Beverly Hills practice to focus on her writing.