

## PREMIUM

## Bolgheri at 25: A retrospective

As this tiny but powerful DOC toasts its first quarter-century, the region's winemakers are fully embracing the adventurous legacy of the SuperTuscan and continuing to build upon it. Richard Baudains reflects on this Tuscan crown jewel and what lies ahead for its producers, plus his top ten wines from the 2016 vintage...



Richard Baudains

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Bolgheri means fundamentally Bordeaux blends, although the production norms also allow for monovarietals. Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot account for 60% of the 1,370ha of vineyard, followed by Cabernet Franc, Syrah and the complementary variety Petit Verdot. Bolgheri Superiore is at the pointy end of the production pyramid, representing a rigidly selected 15% of the total annual bottling, alongside which there are also a limited number of IGTs of the ‘SuperTuscan’ ilk. The younger, early-drinking Bolgheri Rosso represents the second wine for most estates.

## Making a name

In August 2019, Bolgheri celebrated the 25th anniversary of the founding of its wine producers’ consorzio. It was an occasion for ‘who are we, where are we coming from, where are we going’ type reflections.

Federico Zileri, owner of the Castello di Bolgheri estate and former president of the consorzio, divides the modern history of wine in Bolgheri into three phases. In the beginning was Sassicaia, the wine that Marchese Mario Incisa della Rocchetta originally made for his own family’s consumption, which was to become one of Italy’s truly iconic wines, with an inimitable style and consistency that sets it apart from any general discussion of the wines of Bolgheri. It was the Marchese’s nephew, Piero Antinori, who persuaded him to begin commercial bottling. Antinori lent the Marchese his oenologist, Giacomo Tachis, to oversee the operation. The first official vintages caught the attention of the influential Italian critic Gino Veronelli, but mainly went unheeded on the international scene until 1978, when Sassicaia trounced the competition and came out on top in a tasting of international Cabernets in London (conducted by *Decanter*; as it happens).

In the same period that Sassicaia was gaining recognition, the Antinori family divided the extensive Belvedere property, part remaining with Piero, who created the Guado al Tasso estate, and part going to his brother Lodovico, who founded Ornellaia. Piermario Meletti Cavallari started production at Podere Grattamacco; Eugenio Campolmi founded Le Macchiole; and Michele Satta, after consulting on the planting of the first vineyards at Ornellaia, set up his own estate and winery. This was the era of the **SuperTuscan**. Since the anachronistic DOC of the time allowed only for white and rosé production, the trendsetting, super-premium reds were obliged to be categorised simply as vino da tavola – table wine.

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‘In 2015, Bolgheri really began to take off, and there was another a big leap forward in 2019’ –  
Federico Zileri, Castello di Bolgheri

The anomaly was rectified with the creation of the DOC for red wines in 1994, which heralded the second phase of the region’s development by opening the floodgates to investment in Bolgheri on the part of foreign buyers and major Italian producers from Tuscany and other regions. The German mining company Knauf came to Bolgheri to look for gypsum and stayed on to make wine very successfully at Campo alla Sughera; the Allegrini family founded Poggio al Tesoro; Guido Berlucchi, Caccia al Piano; Folonari, Campo

al Mare; and Gaja, Ca' Marcanda. In the 10 years following 1994, the area under vine shot up from 190ha to more than 1,000ha.

## Coming of age

If the first phase gave the impulse and the second laid the foundations of the current wine industry, the third phase poses the challenge of taking Bolgheri up to the next level in terms of quality and recognition. Zileri identifies the 2015 vintage as a landmark in this development: 'In 2015, Bolgheri really began to take off. The vintages that followed were also very good, and there was another big leap forward in 2019.'

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With the exception of some doubts about the drought-stressed 2017, it is hard to disagree. Perhaps even more than 2015, the currently available 2016 (see recommendations below) lends weight to Zileri's case. It is a thrilling vintage to taste: great definition of fruit, fine natural tannins, breadth but also elegance.

Bolgheri is on a roll. A number of factors are contributing to this, but perhaps the most important has been the progressive ageing of the vines. Half of Bolgheri's vineyards were planted between 2000 and 2009, which means that they are now approaching maturity. The benefit this brings to the quality of the fruit supply is reflected in the significant increase in the production of Bolgheri Superiore, which has almost doubled since 2015, going from a little more than 600,000 bottles to nearly 1.2 million in 2018.

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Recent vintages have also seen a perceptible evolution in the style of Bolgheri Superiore. The wines of the 1990s and early 2000s were typically big on mouthfeel, muscular, concentrated, rather unsubtle interpretations of the Bordeaux varieties. Tasting through the vintages prior to 2010, you also have the uncomfortable impression that many have not aged particularly gracefully. The benchmark wines of Bolgheri today reflect what producers themselves are saying about their stylistic aims. Bolgheri Superiore remains a powerful wine, but from 2015 onwards you find more agility, brighter fruit definition and more freshness than you did in the wines of the past.

'More elegance' is the way Friedrich Knauf from Campo alla Sughera puts it. Niccolò Marzichi Lenzi, from boutique winery Le Crocine, describes his style as 'big but supple drinking wines with crisp acidity, low on oak'. Cinzia Merli from Le Macchiole says that, since 2015, the winery has looked for 'a lighter style with more fruit and aroma, and with less toast in the oak'. This refocusing of style is also driving changes in the vineyard. Axel Heinz, estate director at Ornellaia, cites the 'fad' of the 1990s for hyper-dense planting aimed at maximising concentration, a practice that producers are now backing away from.

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'2016 Bolgheri is a thrilling vintage to taste: great definition of fruit, fine natural tannins, breadth but also elegance'

The approach to pruning is also coming under scrutiny. At Ornellaia, Heinz says his team is ‘returning to some of the ideas of the past’, which, decoded, means pruning canes a little longer, with less emphasis on the concentration of the grapes and more on the balance of the vine.

## Next chapter

I ask Albiera Antinori, newly elected president of the producers’ consortium, if Bolgheri is a brand or a terroir. ‘It is both,’ she replies. Herein lies the challenge for the future of Bolgheri: on the one hand, to establish a collective identity; on the other, to give expression to a range of diverse terroirs. The common denominator is, without a doubt, Cabernet Sauvignon, which produces results unrivalled in the rest of Italy. By contrast, Merlot is extremely terroir-specific, as the famous clay plot at Masseto demonstrates. So is Cabernet Franc, which, in the right soils, makes world-class monovarietal wines and brings refined elegance to Bordeaux blends.

Satta says with great conviction that Bolgheri is terroir. He underlines the view by pointing to the vineyard where he produces a great Viognier, and another, a stone’s throw away, from which he sources a unique Sangiovese. As one of Bolgheri’s earliest independent producers and a founding member of the consorzio, Satta has followed the development of winemaking on this stretch of the coast from the days of the SuperTuscan vino da tavola, through the period of exponential expansion, when external consultants made wines for absentee owners according to theoretical models, to the present day. For Satta, the future lies in the Bolgheri of the vigneron, driven by the second generation producers who have grown up among its vines and have assimilated the messages of its terroir.

Merli, whose estate was another founding member of the consorzio, says: ‘Where we have been determines where we are now.’

As an area with no history of winemaking, Bolgheri has had to invent itself, but it has had the freedom to experiment and to find its own direction. And on that count, Merli says: ‘We are just at the beginning.’

## Bolgheri Superiore 2016: Baudains’ top 10



### Tenuta San Guido, Sassicaia, Bolgheri 2016

[+ Add to My Wines](#)

A vintage for the annals of San Guido estate. Extraordinary complexity and definition of fruit and Mediterranean garrigue on the nose and palate, with a breath-taking combination of depth and finesse, infinite length and purity on the ...

Points 99



## I Luoghi, Campo Al Fico, Bolgheri Superiore, Tuscany, 2016

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A lovely ruby-garnet shade, dark plummy fruit, violets, aniseed, lavender, a whiff of truffle, a hint of tea leaf and lots more. Fresh attack, round, deep; long grippy finish with the classic Bolgheri note of eucalyptus. Beautiful wine.



Points 97

## Ornellaia, Bolgheri Superiore, Tuscany, Italy, 2016

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An Ornellaia vintage of subdued power, but also great elegance and a certain souplesse which hints at a stylistic evolution at the estate. Plum-pudding and cherry brandy nose, broad palate with feather-cushion tannins and a long and voluptuous...



Points 97



## Castello di Bolgheri, Bolgheri Superiore, Tuscany, 2016

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Great depth of colour. A little closed, but there's ripe fruit on the nose and, behind it, notes of mint, pine kernels and liquorice, plus a hint of pepper. Muscular palate with great depth, energy and grip, all a bit unknit at the moment but built for the ...

Points 96



## Donna Olimpia 1898, Millepassi, Bolgheri Superiore, 2016

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An enticing kaleidoscope of aromas: wild berries, cassis, incense, Mediterranean scrub, white pepper. Then a palate with great fresh impact and layered, velvet-textured progression, lots of flesh on the finish.

Points 96



## Le Macchiole, Paleo, Bolgheri Superiore, Tuscany, 2016

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Paleo in its secretive pre-release stage. The pure red fruit hidden away in the depths of the wine hints at the elegant complexity of which Cabernet Franc (100%) is capable in Bolgheri. Soft and round with great volume on the palate and an infinit...

Points 96



## Michele Satta, Marianova, Bolgheri Superiore, Tuscany, 2016

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Satta is one of the very few in Bolgheri to grow Sangiovese, and this is the second vintage of an equal-parts Sangiovese-Syrah blend which repays his faith in the variety. Complex fruit and herb aromas and a tangy intensity on the palate, very ...

Points 96



## Grattamacco, L'Alberello, Bolgheri Superiore, 2016

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Some maturity in the colour. Slightly uplifted floral nose, with notes of violets next to ripe dark fruit and Mediterranean scrub. Solid palate with weight and breadth in the weave, very natural grape tannins and a long, dry, savoury finish. Classic.

Points 95



Tenuta Argentiera, Bolgheri Superiore, Tuscany, Italy, 2016

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Blackberry jam, a touch of potpourri and a hint of vanilla on the nose, followed by a bright, mouthwatering berry-fruit palate with silky refined tannins and a long, juicy finish. The oak is still a little evident here, but the wine has the power to absorb it.

Points 94



Guado al Tasso, Bolgheri Superiore, Tuscany, Italy, 2016

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Bright, attractive, mid-depth ruby. Ripe, sweet-fruit nose with a touch of carob and savoury herbs. Agile, nicely balanced palate with refined tannins and a return of the savoury-sweet contrast on the finish. Stylish.





Points 94

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See also:

[SuperTuscan evolution: Comparing Tignanello and Solaia](#)

[Top SuperTuscan wines](#)

[A taste of Bolgheri: Ornellaia wine 1990-2016](#)