

Bolgheri: a wine to age?

Ornellaia and Sassicaia grace the cellars of many a connoisseur. But beyond these great names, how do the wines of Bolgheri age? Richard Baudains assesses which wines of this young region will go the distance

WHEN ITALIANS WANT to explain something, they invariably begin with the history. When it comes to wine, this generally involves lengthy preambles involving Latin texts of dubious relevance to what is happening today. In the case of Bolgheri, however, the timeline is the place to start – not because Bolgheri has a long winemaking history, but for the opposite reason: it is very young.

In the beginning, there was Sassicaia: first planting, 1944; first commercial bottling, 1968; international recognition, 1978, when it blew away the competition at a *Decanter* tasting of world Cabernets. Ornellaia, the other icon of the Tuscan coast, appeared in 1985. Around that time, a small group of producers including Michele Satta, Eugenio Campolmi at Le Macchiole and Piermario Meletti Cavallari at Grattamacco also began to make innovative red wines from international varieties.

The name Bolgheri first appeared in a DOC in 1983 although, curiously, it only applied to the production of white and rosato wines.

The 1990s saw the mushrooming of new estates, with the influx of foreign investment and the arrival of blue-chip Italian producers Allegrini, Berlucchi, Folonari and Gaja. Antinori started production of Guado al Tasso at its Belvedere estate, and a new DOC for red wines based on a blend of international varieties was finally introduced.

Growth since has been rapid. Of the current vineyard area of roughly 1,200 hectares, nearly 1,000ha have been planted since 1998. This

‘A significant proportion of production has only appeared in the last 10 to 12 years’

means that a significant proportion of the total production has only begun to appear in the last 10-12 years, which clearly has a major bearing on the issue of ageability.

Will it age?

The longer-established estates have vintage histories. For many of the newer ones, the issue is not ‘can Bolgheri age?’ but ‘will it age?’. If you consider the precedents, the potential should be there. The investment value of Ornellaia and Sassicaia is based on their longevity.

Although they age in different ways – Ornellaia expresses power and depth and Sassicaia restrained elegance – both wines have a prodigious ability to defy the passing of time. And it is an ability that is not limited to great vintages. Sassicaia from the notoriously wet 2002 is a masterpiece, and incredibly seems still to be improving (‘Yes, it has come along nicely in the last few years,’ says Marchese Nicolò Incisa della Rocchetta, president of Tenuta San Guido).

For a benchmark, both Ornellaia and Sassicaia consider 1998 or 1999 to be at their peak now. Among the other longer-established estates, Grattamacco and Michele Satta’s Piastraia 2001s are drinking beautifully now, with mature, complex aromas of maquis, with a fresh, dark-fruit vein and fine-knit textures.

There is no doubt, then, that Bolgheri wines can evolve in a way that makes it well worth laying them down. But does this hold true for the DOC as a whole? The answer is elusive. ➤



CASTELLO DI BOLGHERI

BOLGHEE

DENOMINAZIONE DI ORIGINE CONTROLLATA

SUPERICE

2011

BOLGHERI ROSSO SUPERIORE

Bolgheri has extremely varied terrains. A recent study identified no fewer than 27 distinct soil profiles and it is probable that not all have the same vocation for producing long-lived wines. Significantly, the wines with a proven track record for ageing are sourced, in part, if not entirely, from higher vineyards with stony, calcareous soils.

The DOC norms predispose towards the production of concentrated, barrel-aged wines: yields are low; entry-level Bolgheri rosso gives producers the possibility to cream off the best of the crop for the top Bolgheri superiore; and ageing requirements are similar to Bordeaux's. Not all producers, however, opt for the vin de garde style. Batzella's Tam, Levia Gravia from Caccia Al Piano and Le Fornacelle's Guardaboschi all begin their bottle life with chunky oak tannins that discourage early drinking, and encourage cellaring. Other producers take a softer line on oak ageing, which allows the fruit to express itself more spontaneously and makes for more immediate drinking.

Varietal mix

Federico Zileri from the Castello di Bolgheri reasons that because his wines have such naturally soft tannins, there is no need to inflict new oak on them, which means earlier drinking windows. Many 2009s are ready now.

Then there's the question of grape varieties. Bolgheri's ageability derives in large part from



Above: Castello di Bolgheri does not age wines in new oak – steel or old oak is used instead, making wines suitable to drink earlier

Cabernet Sauvignon which, along this stretch of coast, grows magnificently. It forms the backbone of the typical Bolgheri Superiore blend (40% of the total vineyard area is planted to the variety). The wines with the longest vintage histories are all – with rare exceptions – Cabernet-dominated blends.

Modification to the DOC norms in 2011 opened the way to monovarietal Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Syrah, introducing another variable into the ageability issue. Producers are starting to question the suitability of the Tuscan coast for the fast-ripening Merlot grape. Cabernet Franc has delicious fleshy red fruit (Axel Heinz from Ornellaia believes Bolgheri is one of the best places in the world to grow the variety), but it is not a grape renowned for its ageing ability.

Baudains' top Bolgheri reds, 2009-2011



Castello di Bolgheri, Bolgheri Superiore 2011

19/20 (96/100)

£34-£60 **Amazon.com, FortyFive10°, Huntsworth Wine Co**

Intense wild berries on the nose, hints of eucalyptus and thyme. Juicy impact on the palate, very fine tannins and a silky suppleness. Has body, with elegant refinement.

Drink 2016-2025 **Alcohol** 14.5%

Grattamacco, Bolgheri Superiore 2011

19 (96)

£35-£37.72 **Amazon.com, Farr Vintners**

Complex and already quite open on the nose, with lovely ripe fruit, violets, liquorice and hints of savoury herbs. Broadly woven on the palate, with mouthwatering concentration of flavours.

Drink 2016-2025 **Alc** 14%

Ornellaia, Bolgheri Superiore 2011

19 (96)

£111-£133 **Armit, Fine & Rare, Private Cellar, The Wine Society, TryWines Expertise**

Massive concentration of colour belies a fresh, refined nose with delicious fruit (blackberry and sour plum). Palate of breathtaking depth and texture, and an amazing combination of power, balance and elegance. A wine with a dazzling future. **Drink** 2018-2030 **Alc** 14.5%

Poggio Al Tesoro, Dedicato A Walter, Bolgheri Superiore 2010

19 (96)

£43.60-£55.99 (2008) **Imbibros, Liberty Wines, Loki, Thedrinkshop.com**

Delicate blackberry and violets on the nose, with light spice in the background. Fluid palate, fine balanced tannins, silky texture and just the right firmness on the finish. Young, but dripping with class.

Drink 2016-2025 **Alc** 14.5%



Tenuta San Guido, Sassicaia, Bolgheri 2011

19 (96)

£105-£116 **Armit, Fine & Rare, Private Cellar, The Wine Society, TryWines Expertise**

Initially a little oaky on the nose, but underneath there is pure vibrant fruit. Great fruit concentration on the palate with a fleshiness not typical of

Sassicaia in its first years. Tight-packed, needs time. **Drink** 2018-2030 **Alc** 13.5%

Argentiera, Bolgheri Superiore 2010

18.5 (95)

£54.33 **Farr Vintners**

Classic Cabernet nose of blackcurrant and tea leaf. Firm and slightly austere palate, tight tannins but lots of length and appetising mineral-fruit contrast on the finish. Excellent expression of the vintage,



‘The wines with the longest vintage histories are all – with rare exceptions – Cabernet-dominated blends’

Syrah has sparked a lot of interest in recent years – in the opinion of Michele Satta, it is the grape variety that best expresses the Mediterranean character of the coast. But again, monovarietal wines seem to give their best in the mid- rather than long term. What seems to be emerging here is a niche category (production is limited) of wines that deliver the plush, soft-textured fruit of Bolgheri, rather than its ageability.

Bolgheri is exciting. The wines are capable of a fruit quality and a silky finesse in the tannins that few Italian regions can match. And as the vines age, they are acquiring more personality. Bolgheri can deliver long-term ageability – a universally recognised criterion of excellence in red wines – but it is not the only source of drinking pleasure. If you want something special that you do not have to wait 10 years to drink, Bolgheri can do that too. **D**

Above: about 40% of the Bolgheri vineyard area is planted with Cabernet Sauvignon

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drinking now, but with prospects for the future. **Drink** 2015-2020 **Alc** 14.5%



Campo Alla Sughera, Arnione, Bolgheri Superiore 2009 18.5 (95)
£34.86-£39.50 **Mondial Wine, Vini Italiani**

Freshness on the nose, notes of plums, black cherry, violets. Fine chalky tannins on the palate, full-bodied and more broad than long, but all very together; a pure fruit vein and juicy finish.

Drink 2015-2020 **Alc** 14.5%

Donna Olimpia 1898, Millepassi, Bolgheri Superiore 2009 18.5 (95)
£36.88 (2011) **Genesis Wines**

Starting to show some evolution in colour. Mature, warm nose of baked plum, with a touch of apple crumble and creme fraiche.

Round on the palate, velvety tannins, good length, precise fruit and savoury, mineral finish. **Drink** 2015-2020 **Alc** 14.5%



I Luoghi Campo Al Fico, Bolgheri Superiore 2011 18.5 (95)
£82.90 (2009) **Aubert & Mascoli**

Fresh, complex and very personal nose; savoury herbs, liquorice, a touch of tar. Great volume and length on the palate, with very fine, ripe tannins, delicate plummy fruit, and a hint of green walnut and a bone-dry finish. Intriguing. **Drink** 2016-2020 **Alc** 14%

Drink 2016-2020 **Alc** 14%

Le Macchiole Il Paleo, Bolgheri Superiore 2011 18 (93)

£54 **Farr Vintners, Lea & Sandeman**
Delicately floral, with plummy fruit, herbs and hints of sweet red peppers. Bags of

substance on the palate, chewy texture and concentrated tangy fruit on the finish. Needs time, but has lots to give in the future. **Drink** 2018-2025 **Alc** 14.5%



Caccia Al Piano 1868, Levia Gravia, Bolgheri Superiore 2009

17.5 (91) N/A UK www.berlucchi.it

Starting to show some evolution in the colour, but still fresh on the nose, with blackberry fruit and a touch of green olives. Refined tannins and sweet fruit on the palate, quite round and

fleshy in texture, but with a firm grippy finish. Drinking now, but you could confidently lay this down for a few years. **Drink** 2016-2020 **Alc** 14%

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