

Tenuta dell'Ornellaia



I had an opportunity recently to taste one of the best-in-class Super Tuscan's, *Tenuta dell'Ornellaia*, with a wine industry group at the fabulous *Sea Salt* restaurant in Old Naples. Located in the western Tuscan region of Bolgheri on the Mediterranean Sea, *Ornellaia* makes a number of "Super Tuscan" wines, in prices ranging from about \$25 a bottle for the *Le Volte* to the ultra-premium *Masseto* that sells for up to \$1000.

Le Volte is made mostly from sangiovese grapes sourced through long-term relationships with local growers. The remainder of the blend is merlot and cabernet from estate vineyards. This is *Ornellaia's* bread and butter wine. They make a lot of it, but the quality is first rate and comparable to many Super Tuscans that sell for far more.

The next level is the *Le Serre Nuove*, *Ornellaia's* "second label" wine, but this is far from being a second-class wine. While the exact composition of grapes going into the blend of all of *Ornellaia's* wines varies slightly with each vintage (except for the 100% merlot of *Masseto*), the *Le Serre Nuove* is generally about 50% merlot, which explains its softer, richer, more voluptuous profile. At \$60, it is about a third the price of the iconic *Ornellaia*.

The flagship *Ornellaia* I tasted at *Sea Salt* was one of the most incredible wines I've ever experienced, bar none, and I taste a fair number of wines. Actually, we had the

opportunity to taste two vintages, the 2005 and the just released 2006 side by side.

These wines came from the same vineyard, were made by the same winemaker, and had a very similar blend, with cabernet sauvignon being the dominant grape. But the two wines couldn't have been more different, accentuating the impact Mother Nature can have on a wine in any given year. The 2005 was more elegant and structured while the 2006, an incredible vintage in Tuscany, is rich, lush and opulent. Is it worth the \$175 price tag? No question - if you can afford it - and if you want to own one of the greatest wines ever made!

That old adage, "necessity is the mother of invention" must have been on the minds of some Italian winemakers early in the decade of the 1970's. The government of Italy, never known for it's flexibility, imposed very restrictive laws regarding how wines were made in their often ill-fated attempts to guarantee quality. At least that's the theory. Except for the rare *Barolo* or *Brunello* producer, Italian wines for the most part were rarely synonymous with virtue until a few decades later when Super Tuscans, like *Ornellaia*, exploded on to the world wine stage.

Most of us over thirty will remember those straw bottles filled with cheap and barely quaffable Chianti served at spaghetti and pizza joints around the country. Chianti, the wine, not the region, until fairly recently had to be made using a government mandated recipe of a minimum of 70% sangiovese and also required that local white wine grapes be blended into the wine. Tuscan winemakers who wanted to deviate from this method were prohibited from using the term Chianti on their label. Instead these wines were classified as *Vino de Tavola*, or table wine, not exactly a boost to their marketing efforts.

Led by internationally celebrated producer, Pierre Antinori, winemakers snubbed the government's regulatory agency, the *DOC* (loosely translated, the Department of Control). Wineries like *Tenuta dell'Ornellaia* began blending traditional Bordeaux-style grapes, cabernet sauvignon and merlot, into their wines, vastly improving quality and in the process creating a new brand of wine - *Super Tuscan*, reportedly coined by wine critic, Robert Parker. These better-made wines caught the attention of wine consumers throughout Europe and here in the US and seemingly overnight, a few Italian wines skyrocketed out of the single digit price category. Today, the most "super" of the Super Tuscan's sell well into the hundreds of dollars a bottle.

Buying a wine based on it's geographic identity however is never a sure bet, whether from Napa Valley, Bordeaux or Bolgheri. All too often when the pendulum of control swings too far from regulation, less oversight can encourage "questionable" winemaking. In the case of the Super Tuscan's (and any wine), that is not always a guarantee that the

wines will be all that "super!"

Savvy wine buyers though know to rely on proven producers, and *Ornellaia* is certainly in that class! Casual wine consumers should shop at small independent wine merchants who are well versed in the wines they carry and can make a recommendation based on your individual tastes and preferences. When dining out, remember that better restaurants sell better wines. Most will have a sommelier or wine director to help you decide which wines, super or otherwise, are best suited to your palate and pocket.

While some super-priced, super wines, are having a tough go of it in these economically difficult times, many top-tier Super Tuscan's are bucking the trend, selling out soon after being released or as futures before they ever hit the market. Fortunately not all Super Tuscan wines are priced out of reach of the average wine buyer. The *Le Volte* is an excellent example of super-quality, super-value, Super Tuscans within the reach of the great majority of wine buyers!

For more information on *Tenuta dell'Ornellaia*, visit their website www.ornellaia.com. If you need help finding any of the *Ornellaia* wines, send me an e-mail at napleswinenews@comcast.net