

# THE WORLD OF FINE WINE



ISSUE 36 2012 WINE AND ASTONISHMENT Andrew Jefford on the need to make wine strange again



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HUGH JOHNSON ■ ANDREW JEFFORD ■ MICHEL BETTANE ■ FRANCIS PERCIVAL ■ DAVID SCHILDKNECHT ■ TOM STEVENSON



(on the vine)



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# QUERCIABELLA TUSCAN BIODYNAMITE

Stephen Brook meets Sebastiano Castiglioni, a renaissance man with a green conscience and a perfectionist streak, who has turned the Tuscan estate founded by his father as a hobby into one of Italy's most respected producers

It isn't hard to grasp why rich Italians and foreigners opt for Tuscany as their first choice when buying or establishing a new vineyard. Tuscany, especially the Chianti Classico zone, is so very beautiful—an essentially unspoiled vista of rolling hills, woodlands, and vineyards. Whereas so much of Italy—the Veneto, for example—has been despoiled by uncontrolled development, with what passes for countryside dotted with factories, workshops, farmhouses, shopping centers, straggling villages, and hamlets, Chianti looks unchanged since Renaissance times. It could be criticized for being excessively preserved and ossified, but who would not to choose live there rather than, for instance, along the urbanized strip that links Pisa with Florence?

Milanese industrialist Giuseppe Castiglioni, who died in 2003, was no different. Having made a fortune in steel production in Mexico, he bought the property in 1974; but soon after, his son Sebastiano (*right*) began to play a growing role in running it. When Castiglioni bought the property, there was no more than one hectare (2.47 acres) of vines. Today, there are 76 (188 acres), and not just in the Greve area around the winery. For Giuseppe Castiglioni, Querciabella was essentially a hobby, but his son took it more seriously. When his father's health began to decline in the mid-1990s, Sebastiano was effectively in sole charge.

Although Querciabella makes a succulent Chianti Classico, it is better known for its wines from French varieties. Batâr is a remarkably refined blend of Pinot Blanc and Chardonnay; Camartina, a long-established marriage of Cabernet Sauvignon and Sangiovese; and since 2000, Palafreno, initially a blend of Merlot and Sangiovese but today a pure Merlot. All these wines see a fair amount of new French oak, yet the oak influence is subtle rather than blatant. In 2005, the first wine, Mongrana, was launched from Querciabella's sister estate near the Tuscan coast.

His other activities keep him occupied in Milan and elsewhere, but Sebastiano Castiglioni is every inch the proprietor. A portly figure, he carries himself well, managing to be serious and relaxed at the same time. The hair is now white, and the scraggly Italian-chic beard has whitened, too. The voice is softly spoken, with lightly Americanized English inflections, no doubt influenced by his American wife.

He can scarcely remember a time when wine was not part of his life. "My father collected great Bordeaux and Burgundy and knew most of the proprietors personally. Hardly a day would go by without him drinking white Burgundy, not to mention other fine wines. When he decided to buy a property and produce his own wine, he settled on Tuscany simply because it was beautiful. From the outset he had the intention of producing not just Chianti but international-style wines. The first vintage of Camartina—an early Super-Tuscan, I suppose—was back in 1981. My father wanted to make the kinds of wines he enjoyed drinking himself. That's why at Querciabella he planted Pinot Blanc high up to retain good acidity. There is more Pinot Blanc planted in the Côte d'Or than many people realize, so it was logical to create our version of that style using Pinot Blanc, as well as Chardonnay. As it happens, our Chardonnay is also planted quite high up, though there are also some lower plantings. From the outset, our soil management is designed to enhance the minerality of our white wine. Batâr, I hope you'll agree, is a wine that is never banal.

"Although my father and I never got on particularly well, by the time I was 12 years old I had already visited the top domaines of Bordeaux and Burgundy, and I studied hard to understand the wines I was tasting. Gradually I built up my own cellar, quite separately from my father's, and in later years I was surprised to find how frequently our collections overlapped."

## Biodynamics but no New Age nonsense

Querciabella is known for being a biodynamic estate, though it appears that Giuseppe Castiglioni was initially unaware of his son's heartfelt approach to farming. For Sebastiano, it's an intellectual and emotional commitment, even though his interpretation of biodynamic principles is decidedly idiosyncratic. At first glance, it also seems at odds with the rest of his life, which is sophisticated and metropolitan. He trained as a designer, but most of his work is in the fields of the fine arts and finance.

"I both deal in art and consult for banks on issues such as the authenticity of works of art, and I am involved in setting up an art investment fund. Part of my work is helping banks to navigate the large number of fakes in the art world."

Photography by Jon Wyland





Although I have been tasting the Querciabella Chiantis since the early 1980s and its more international-style wines since 1990, Sebastiano regards the real breakthrough as having occurred when the 2000 Camartina was proclaimed to be the best Italian red wine of the year, based on the scores of all the Italian wine guides: "That really put us on the map."

Sebastiano is not inclined to brag about the critical success of his wines, although it must be gratifying. What really interests him is biodynamism.

"Biodynamics is central to my thinking, but I want to make it clear that I am not attracted to it by the mystical aspects of the system. I'm an atheist, and I have no time for astrology or any New Age nonsense. For me, it is very important to understand what makes it work, since there is no doubt that some of the world's greatest wines are made according to biodynamic principles. Plant scientist Dr Peter Barlow of Bristol University is an expert on the information networks that exist between different plants. He has long collected data on the effects of lunar forces on plant development and has established that they are absolutely crucial. Even when plants are isolated from external influences, those forces apply. And it's not just the sap that moves according to the phases of the moon; it's the entire life of the plant that's affected. After all, it's hardly news that the phases of the moon have affected winemaking practices such as racking for centuries.

"I want to understand biodynamics in a scientific way, but it annoys me when people condemn it because it's not rational. What is rational about conventional farming practices that employ poisons as a way of controlling plant and animal growth? I feel it's the conventional farmers who have a case to answer, rather than those who employ biodynamic principles.

"But at the same time, I'm at odds with most practitioners of biodynamics. Rudolf Steiner himself argued that farming had to adapt to the local environment. But his acolytes have erected rigid systems, applying his principles on a universal basis. This is what I disagree with. For me, biodynamism is a validation of the interconnectedness of everything—a recognition that even small actions have repercussions. I have no interest in manipulating nature by applying biodynamic principles. I maintain the forests around my vineyards because I want

nature to take its course, not because I want to impose my ideas on the natural world.

"Where I differ from strict practitioners is that I refuse to use animal-based preparations, and that includes cow horns. Raising cattle causes immense environmental damage, especially in the creation of greenhouse gases. It has a greater impact globally than all transportation put together. So, I reject animal products and insist that all my preparations are plant-based. I don't use compost but employ cover crops instead. In the place of cow horns, we've invented a ceramic horn. The idea behind the cow horn is that it is an impenetrable substance, and the same is true of a clay-based ceramic horn. I concede that biodynamics is based on ethical considerations, too, but my applications are even more rooted in ethical principles. I want to take into account the effect of my actions on future generations, and I don't believe *Homo sapiens* is the only species that deserves a place in the ethical sphere."

But can he really claim to farm biodynamically with these deviations? "Steiner argued for balanced farming. I adhere to this and integrate a sense of global balance and ethics, so you could say I'm more authentically biodynamic than some of those who claim to be the custodians of Steiner's thoughts."

Even if one concedes the system's minimal impact on the health of the planet, what effect do these practices have on the finished wine? "I find that biodynamic wines are more harmonious from the outset."

Having chosen to deviate from the conventional biodynamic pathway, is he interested in persuading others to follow his example, or is it merely of internal interest? "We've been organic since 1988—a long time—since we consider these are minimum standards for quality, and I haven't shouted about it. I never felt it necessary to make a fuss about the fact that I don't use fertilizers from petroleum by-products. My reasons for being organic were environmental and ethical, not for marketing purposes. But I would like to communicate more about our biodynamic ideas, so as to persuade others to follow in our path."

When we go to lunch, the talk turns to his other property in the Maremma. Lunch itself is strictly vegetarian, with a succession of exquisitely prepared and presented small dishes. There is a daunting array of wine glasses at each

setting, and Sebastiano's assistant tells me the boss had spent a great deal of time in the cellar before I arrived. Being a member of the Grand Jury Européen, Sebastiano knows his way around the world of wine. As an *apéritif*, we sip 1995 Krug Clos de Mesnil, and alongside vintages of Querciabella's Batàr is the monumental 1990 Musigny Blanc from De Vogüé—an instructive contrast rather than competition. And there would be more to come in this vein.

### Terroirs and varieties

The Maremma property is a 32ha (80-acre) estate near Grosseto along the Tuscan coast, which he acquired in 1997. In his words, it was "born" biodynamic. "The first wine, Mongrana, a simple wine, was first made in 2005. There will be two cru wines, and it's probable that we will release the first of them from the 2010 vintage. They are a Bordeaux blend and a Rhône-style blend, from Syrah, Mourvèdre, and Cunoise, a variety I'm very fond of. We pick early so as to avoid overripe and burned-tire flavors. The soils, of course, are completely different, being sand and limestone, but we can get good acidity in the Maremma, and the roots can go deep thanks to biodynamic methods."

That seems like a long gestation period. Why has it taken so long to release these wines? "It's because we're serious about what we do and because we felt the vines weren't ready earlier. We can afford not to rush things. At Querciabella, we are notorious for skipping vintages we're not happy with. I also feel we're out on a limb. What we do is economically risky, and I doubt many others will want to follow us. For a start, our way of farming is up to eight times more expensive than the norm."

Querciabella makes a consistently delicious Chianti Classico but is probably better known for its international-style wines. One expects that from the Maremma but not so much from Greve. Sebastiano gives a tight smile. "I'm a bit impatient with comments such as those. Cabernet Sauvignon has been in Tuscany since the 17th century, and Merlot has been here for a very long time, too. So, how long do we have to justify producing wines from these varieties here? I'm not in the slightest bit apologetic about it. I even have a plan—not fully formed yet—to plant Riesling at a very high location here.

"I find it paternalistic for certain wine critics to insist that we should only produce folkloric wines here using exclusively local varieties. That said, remember that 80 percent of our vines at Querciabella are Sangiovese! Moreover, for ten years we have been working on the idea of releasing different single-vineyard wines, all Sangiovese-based. We are unusual among medium-sized estates for having vineyards in many different parts of the Chianti Classico region, and of course these produce very different wines. There was a famous pure-Sangiovese Super-Tuscan in the 1980s called Cetinaia from San Polo. It no longer exists, but we have acquired those vineyards, so that would be a strong candidate for a cru wine. Once we've worked out precisely which vineyards to use and how to vinify and age the wines from each, we'll release boxes containing a set of bottles from each cru.

"Unfortunately, the wine authorities here don't like the idea of focusing on individual terroirs. They'd rather flatten everything out to produce a more uniform style of wine. But I like detail and

individuality. We're not going to apply the identical production methods to each cru, but Guido de Santi, our winemaker, will establish what works best with each style of wine. We are meticulous about barrels, and I like to match specific forests with specific grapes. We've conducted innumerable trials and have been studying forests, coopers, and toasts for many years."

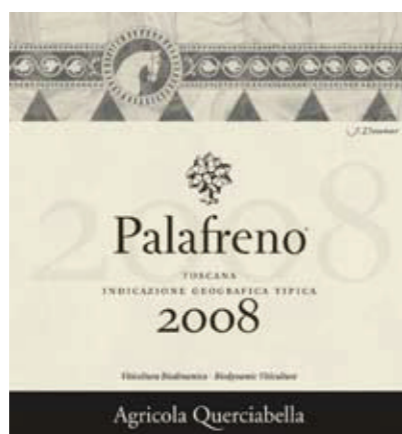
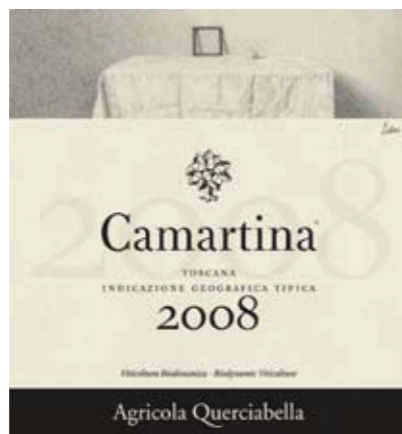
Chianti producers have told me that although they may produce additional wines from Merlot or Cabernet Sauvignon, they find less vintage variation with those varieties than with Sangiovese, which reflects soil and vintage with more subtlety. I wondered whether Sebastiano agreed? "Yes, it's true that the French varieties can taste very similar from year to year. Sangiovese is undoubtedly a difficult beast, and we can't always explain why. But difficulties don't equate with nuances. Anyway, I dislike the notion of indistinguishable vintages."

What other wines give you pleasure? "Mostly French wines, I admit. As well as the great Bordeaux and Burgundies, I love white wines such as Clos St-Hune, Haut-Brion Blanc, and Coulée de Serrant. I can't say I'm keen on California wines—their high alcohol bothers me—but I've had very good wines from South Africa and from Australia, such as Hill of Grace in the Barossa and Cullen in Margaret River. I love Riesling, too, from Germany and Austria, as well as from Alsace. But Burgundy is my favorite."

Away from wine, he is passionate about music, especially Bach, as well as art. He takes his children around Europe to attend art exhibitions and concerts, as his own parents did with him. He has formed a link with his fellow vegan Stella McCartney, organizing wine tastings at her Italian boutiques.

It doesn't sound as if this busy man, whose principal home is in Switzerland, has much time left to involve himself in the production of the Querciabella wines. "I trust my team. Guido has been with me since 1988. And we have taken on as a consultant Luca Currado from Vietti in Piemonte—an extraordinary winemaker with experience in California and at Mouton Rothschild. I do taste the proposed blends and offer my comments.

"For me, bitterness is a defect, and I do like natural acidity; if it's insufficient, we're unlikely to bottle the wine." What's a great wine for you? "A wine with a lack of defects, such as excessive oak or corrected acidity. I want complexity and uniqueness, which is much the same as a sense of place." ■



**CONTACT INFORMATION & PRICES FOR RECENT VINTAGES**

//// Camartina	//// Palafreno
//// Batàr	//// Mongrana
//// Chianti Classico	

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**Querciabella Estate**  
 17 Via di Barbiano  
 50022 Greve in Chianti, FI, Italy  
 Tel: +39 055 8592 7777  
 www.querciabella.com  
 See Directory for stockists

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 //// \$76-150/€51-100/€51-100   //// more than \$150/€100/€100