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Small gems in Tuscany's wine region

By Kate Singleton

Tuscan wine is landscape in a bottle. And this, in times of crisis among European winegrowers, could be the added value that makes the difference.

Chianti, Brunello di Montalcino and Vino Nobile di Montepulciano all conjure up ideal images of the vine-clad hillsides and silvery olive groves featured in Renaissance painting and, to less effect, in a more recent literary genre.

Yet other reaches of the region also produce some delectable wines from unspoiled hillsides of remarkable beauty. What's more, they're still reasonably priced. They largely revolve around relatively new DOC (Denominazione di Origine Controllata, or Denomination of Controlled Origin) appellations. However, they also include varietals and blends that undermine tradition with aplomb. This refreshing independence of spirit has even led to the production of enjoyable whites in a region devoted to the local sangiovese red grape variety.

One of the newer districts of bibulous Tuscany is sandwiched between Montalcino and Montepulciano. The Orcia DOC appellation covers quite a widespread and variegated area on either side of the Orcia river in southern Tuscany.

"It's not easy for growers to make a name for themselves when wine writers tend to focus on established areas and the bigger estates with the sort of PR that facilitates critical acclaim," said Donatella Cinelli Colombini, a winemaker with estates producing excellent wines both in Montalcino and near Trequanda, in the Orcia DOC district (www.cinellicolombini.it).

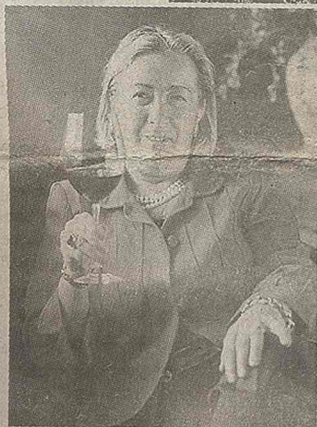
"Despite the current crisis, the larger wineries with an efficient commercial network are doing all right because they can reach out to Italian consumers, who are eating out less but buying more interesting products to enjoy at home," Cinelli Colombini said. "But for the smaller producers in the less established areas, things are much more difficult."

Cinelli Colombini has made her family home at the Trequanda estate, La Fattoria del Colle, a working farm that also offers vacation rentals and a restaurant. The 23 hectares, or 57 acres, of vineyard produce a fruity, well-balanced "Leone Rosso" sangiovese and merlot blend and an aptly named Orcia DOC called "Cenerentola," meaning Cinderella. This comprises both Sangiovese and Foglia Tonda, an ancient Tuscan grape variety that the estate has rescued from oblivion.

Far smaller is the Sante Marie winery, located on breezy, well-drained hillsides overlooking the Orcia valley, just below the ancient walled hamlet of Vignoni. Here Franco Generali produces three



Diego Banchetti (above); Caterina Baccheschi



Vineyards belonging to the Sante Marie winery, just below the ancient walled hamlet of Vignoni. At left, Donatella Cinelli Colombini, who makes Tuscan wines.

singularly elegant wines from vineyards that he says are "tended as though they were gardens." He adds: "We feel that, if the grapes are in ideal condition, then the wine naturally turns out well."

The 2001 vintage of the Sante Marie "Curzio," their Orcia DOC Sangiovese, went straight into the prestigious Gambero Rosso Vini d'Italia guide with a rating that must have turned larger, more established wineries green with envy.

Toward the coast are two other areas to delight the eye and palate. This coastal stretch known as the Maremma includes the handsome, historic town of Massa Marittima, perched among rolling, mineral-rich hillsides on which grapes are grown for the Monteregio di Massa Marittima DOC.

Outstanding among the various winegrowers in this area is the Moris Farms estate (www.morisfarms.it), producers of an appellation wine with an enticing hint of musk on the nose and a long finish. The winery's 37 hectares of vines also comprise a gently sloping vineyard surrounded by woodland and blessed with gentle winds that

keep unwanted mold at bay.

This is the source of their impressive "Avvoltore," a red made from 75 percent sangiovese with 20 percent cabernet sauvignon and 5 percent syrah grapes so rich in their own ambient yeasts that no others are added to facilitate the fermentation process.

Moris Farms is also one of the leading lights in the Morellino di Scansano DOC, which covers a lovely rural area southeast of Grosseto. Here, terse skies purified by the sea breeze, as well as deep brown to orangey soils with plenty of stony structure, make excellent vine land.

Near Magliano in Toscana, an ancient town with a languid air that belies its massive fortifications, is the Fattoria di Magliano, one of the area's finest producers (www.fattoriadimagliano.it).

"Heba," their Morellino di Scansano DOC (85 percent sangiovese with a little cabernet, merlot and syrah), is an excellent example of the appellation at its best: not overly oaked and muscular, but quietly distinctive and pleasantly fresh.

"The Morellino was never supposed to be a beefy wine, which is why we don't even try to produce a Riserva," said Roberto Da Valle, one of the estate's two partners. Moreover, the winery's "Pagliatura," made with Vermentino grapes of ancient Tuscan and Sardinian origin plus a hint of viognier, offers delightful proof of the fact that Tuscany can indeed make good white wines.