

Sucking Grapes

opinions against tunnel vision

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VINO AL VINO

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Panzano's own wine fair shows (almost all) movers and shakers

While visiting Michael Schmelzer at his Monte Bernardi estate last Thursday, he told me that in Panzano a small annual wine fair was taking place, representing the Who is Who of winemaking around this town. The fair, where the estates show their wines, is held in Panzano's main square, and packed with German and American tourists when I arrive.

I tasted several wines, and although the quality was high, most of the estates add a small percentage of especially Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon to their Chianti, which gives a rounder mouthfeel, but even in small quantities seems to dominate the subtle complexities of Sangiovese. Interestingly, the 2005 vintage seems especially treated with this formula, and I have heard more than once the claim, that in a difficult year like 2005 there is a need to correct the colour with the French grapes, which apparently do the job admirably well. I, however, cannot help but wonder, what the region's Colorino is for. Even if it is not of great complexity, it can be as useful as Merlot, and if you only need colour, my guess is that Colorino doesn't change Chianti Classico's profile so radically as its foreign counterpart. Adding international grape varieties to the blend is like adding Syrah to Bordeaux and unimaginable.

I am not saying that planting international grape varieties in the vineyards of Chianti Classico should be forbidden, as there are plenty of great wines produced from them in the region, but to establish a true Chianti Classico image in the market it needs to be a genuinely Tuscan wine. And while most producers seem to opt more and more for a 100% indigenous blend, I cannot help but think that having the international varieties in your vineyard next to Sangiovese it must be too tempting not to use them to ameliorate the blend in vintages where Sangiovese has failed to ripen earlier. However, canopy management, clonal selection, reduction in yield and trials with Canaiolo, Mammolo and Malvasia Nera could be as much the answer as the use of the international suspects. However, the reader should be aware of the fact that an inclusion of 15% of "other" grapes is explicitly allowed in the Discipline of Chianti Classico.

NB 1 Castello dei Rampolla was announced in the tasting brochure that accompanied the tasting, but not unlike the first growths during the Primeur tasting every year in Bordeaux, it is not present, and as such seems to claim the status of primus inter paris.

Casaloste 2004 Chianti Classico – 90% Sangiovese, 10% Merlot, 13% vol. Cherry fruit nose of great concentration with a compact sweet fruit palate balanced by refreshing acidity. Almost Cherry liqueur on the finish. A well made wine with great length.

2003 Inversus IGT 50% Sangiovese, 50% Merlot, 13.5% vol.

Again, quite pure fruit aromas almost like juice, reminiscent of frutti di bosco. Peppery edge of the alcohol, but not unflattering. Round palate followed by ripe acidity with dusty tannins on the finish. Certainly deserves more bottle age.

La Massa The estate has decided to phase out the Chianti Classico name on all labels, which is a shame, but laudable for reasons of total clarity, as all wines include the Bordeaux grapes plus Petit Verdot, which seems to be the next hot thing in Tuscany. For Giorgio Primo this could possibly mean that the already high

percentage of 15% Merlot versus 85% Sangiovese will further increase and with it the total alcohol volume. Does the estate risk becoming unrecognisable international? 2005 La Massa IGT 60% Sangiovese, 35% Merlot, 5% Cabernet Sauvignon, 13.85(sic)% vol. Inviting, powerful fruit and spice nose. A sweet fruit attack is followed by balancing acidity and tight, compact tannins. 2004 Giorgio Primo 85% Sangiovese, 15% Merlot, 14% vol. Similar nose as the 05 La Massa, but with greater depth and polish. Concentrated fruit palate with lovely acidity and structuring tannins. Truly great length. 2001 Chianti Classico 14% vol. Elegant ripe fruit nose with hints of plums, fruitcake, tobacco and mushrooms. On the finish elegant, soft ripe fruit. Very good.

NB 2 while having dinner with friends at Al Sasso, in the Colli Euganei, we drank at the same time a bottle of Felsina's 2001 Rancia and 1999 Giorgio Primo. Although we all agreed that the Giorgio Primo's "nose" was the most appealing, everyone preferred the Rancia, and according to me this was because the palate of Giorgio Primo made a fairly sweet impression, and seemed more full bodied than Rancia, which had much more refreshing acidity, and therefore much more dinner table compatible.

Fattoria Le Fonti 2005 Chianti Classico 90% Sangiovese, 10% Merlot, 13% vol. A mineral nose is followed by quite sweet fruit and drying tannins. A viscous mouthfeel, with a fragrant finish. "Big" on the palate, and "light" on the fruit with highish acidity. 2004 Chianti Classico Riserva 90% Sangiovese, 10% Merlot, 14% vol. A bright cherry and cassis fruit nose, followed by a sweet, intense palate, again quite viscous. Very good length. 2003 Fontisimi IGT 60% Sangiovese, 40% Cabernet Sauvignon, 14% vol. Ripe fruit nose with notes of pumpernickel, touch of oak and cedar. Again, hallmark sweet fruit attack, followed by a big palate of tobacco laced fruit.

Monte Bernardi Jennifer Schmelzer, who is responsible for Monte Bernardi's marketing, shares half the task with her brother Michael to pour the wines during the fair. This afternoon it is her turn and with the patience of an angel, she answers the same question about soil and grape varieties again and again. The estate produces a minuscule amount of bottles and for the fair only approximately 75 bottles are needed, which makes a considerable dent in the estate's enoteca. Except for the current 2005 Chianti Classico, Jennifer also brought two older vintages of Sa'etta which were produced before the new "regime", and although a 100% percent Sangiovese, were labeled as IGT. 2000 Sa'etta IGT 100% Sangiovese, 13.5%. Pale ruby with brickstone rim. A mature, complex nose with cigar notes and touch of vanilla. A soft fruit palate with fine tannins, ends warm. 2005 Chianti Classico 13% Soft spicy plum fruit and hint of cherry. Lively, almost juicy fruit underlined by soft, slightly rustic tannins. Elegant finish. Very good for the vintage.

Fattoria di Rignana During my last visit to Monte Bernardi I met Susanne Janotka, Austrian by birth, and working as an office administrator for Michael and Jennifer, and has a second job at the Fattoria di Rignana as a Sales Manager. As I had not heard previously of this estate, I paid Susanne a visit at the stand, where she poured me the following wines: 2006 Rosado IGT 90% Sangiovese, 10% Canaiolo, 13% vol. Sweet cherry pie with meaty notes. Spicy fruit palate, with a phenolic note. Not overly long and a touch too alcoholic, but this project looks viable for a saigne wine. 2005 Chianti Classico, 90% Sangiovese, 10% Canaiolo 14% vol. Medium concentrated colour. Cherry and meaty notes again, multi layered. Restraint cherry fruit and compact tannins. Highish acidity, but good length. Needs time. 2003 Chianti Classico riserva, 85% Sangiovese, 15% Merlot Mature plum notes with tobacco notes and pumpernickel. Round lively cherry fruit palate with quite sweet finish. Very attractive.

Villa Cafaggio 2005 Chianti Classico 100% Sangiovese, 13% vol. Closed, hinting at leather. Closed palate, showing crunchy tannins and structuring acidity. Bodes well for the future. 2004 Chianti Classico Riserva, 100% Sangiovese, 14% vol. Matured in second year oak. Warm, spicy nose with balsamic touch and hints of fruitcake. A sweet fruit attack is followed highish acidity. Grainy tannins showing on a closed finish. Needs time, but very interesting. 2001 San Martino IGT 100% Sangiovese, 14% vol. Slightly more forward than the previous two wines, probably due to the use of new oak. Notes of cedar, plums and cassis liqueur. Stylish red fruit palate, with fine but persistent tannins, and structuring acidity. Impressive. 2003 Cortaccio IGT 100% Cabernet Sauvignon, 14% vol. Soft fruit cake opening, with inviting underlying cherry fruit. The fruit is dominated by compact but persistent tannins, but there is enough fruit on the finish. Needs more cellaring, and could become quite an elegant bottle.

NB 3 Although Vecchie Terre di Montefili was present at the fair, the stand was very busy, and I couldn't get through. I will try and re-taste the wines, especially as a few days before we drank a bottle of their 2005 Chianti Classico, which seemed fairly lean and mean, and made me wonder if this was the result of a too rigorous selection procedure in favour only of the top wines, or the result of the less than generous vintage.