



*A Nichols Worth of Wine*

## *In the Vineyard*

June 2007

Chasing the grape in Tuscany for visitors here is almost obsessive. There are just so many vineyards. You could draw a huge cross right through the map of this central part of Italy running north to south from above Florence to below Montalcino in the south and then from the sea in the west to Umbria in the east and that would be Tuscany. It is a huge area geographically and home to thousands of grape farmers big and small, most producing decent wine, some who should find another line of work and a few who are clearly committed to and focused on producing quality wines. La Buca di Montauto, in San Gimignano, falls into this latter group. It would be unfair though to refer to La Buca as just a vineyard as I was to discover not long after my arrival on an early June evening.

The trek down from the Pisa airport was filled with anticipation. I had selected La Buca as my temporary Tuscany home for two weeks based on a random search and seeing their website. A rutted, dirt road up through row after row of grapevines, led me to a spectacular hillside retreat with unobstructed views of the walled city of San Gimignano. I was greeted by the owner, Mauro Ghini, who despite our mutual language barriers helped me complete the paperwork required by Italian law for all visitors. Thankfully, he was generous enough to have placed a welcome gift of two bottles of La Buca wine – his Chianti and vernaccia, in the apartment. My good fortune as all the stores in town were by now closed. We managed to agree to get together during the week and talk about La Buca. I settled in with a glass of La Buca vernaccia and watched the sun dip behind the Tuscan hills. Not a bad start.

Early Sunday morning, I wandered into the medieval San Gimignano. Soon inside the walls, I found the La Buca store and was somewhat surprised to see Mauro behind a counter filled with cheeses, salami and prosciutto. Introductions to his wife, Antonella – whom I quickly learned was the “capo de capo” of the La Buca domaine and to the sales manager, Tiziana, who spoke superb English, led to my first lesson on “cinghiale”, or wild boar meat. I was treated to a tasting of more than a half-dozen different styles of salami, a number of locally produced pecorino cheeses, and the most incredibly lean and flavorful prosciutto you could imagine. The store offers an amazing array of Tuscan food products; many produced from the La Buca farm or in partnership with other local food artisans, as well a handful of the currently available La Buca wines. The store also carries a small, but amazing selection of other Tuscan wines, including a number of Brunellos from the legendary 1997 vintage. I learned that Mauro would be making salami on Monday morning and he would be happy to have me watch this operation. Now, not many people would get overly excited by this prospect, but I was ecstatic!

A bright sunshine Monday morning, along with the crowing of roosters, the squeals of newborn boar and the fragrance of an incredible array of colorful flowers, greeted me as I

took my morning coffee on the patio. Off in the distance, I saw Mauro providing breakfast for the herd of the boar down in the valley. An hour later, I was in a small barn thirty yards from my apartment watching Mauro supervise the salami production with three of his employees, some of whom I learned were relatives. There was little doubt who was in charge of this operation as it was Mauro who determined when the pork was sufficiently blended and he was the one who added just the right proportion of fennel, pine nuts or other seasonings, depending on what was being made at the time. I was beginning to wonder if there is there anything this guy doesn't do. Once the blend was complete, others took over stuffing the casings and hanging the meats to be put into refrigeration for curing. What amazed me was how sanitary everyone worked. All of this was done without the oversight of a health department. You just had the sense they worked this way because at many meals, their family was their best customer. After preparing and hanging a hundred or so salami, Mauro agreed to sit for an interview the following morning at the store.

Tuesday morning, I met Mauro at the store along with Antonella, and Tiziana who translated most of the questions and answers.

*NWN.* Mauro, first of all I want to thank you for taking the time to meet with me. You have given new meaning to the term "a busy man". I'd like to start with a little background on the property. How long has La Buca been a farm?

*Mauro.* Since sometime in the 1800's.

*NWN.* How did it get the name La Buca? What does that mean?

*Mauro.* Tiziana explains that the term La Buca has a few interpretations including cave or hole. When you stand on one of the higher hillsides overlooking the property, topographically, it looks like a bowl, another possible meaning.

*NWN.* How long has it been in your ownership?

*Mauro.* It was purchased by Antonella's family in 1979. Back then it was primarily a simple farm that raised boar for their butcher shop. There were grape vines, but they played only a minor role at that time. The total farm now stands at about 11.5 hectares (just under 30 acres). Five of those hectares are planted to grapes.

*NWN.* Tell me a little about yourself, you seem to do it all. You're the innkeeper who checked me in upon arrival; you're a shopkeeper, although I suspect you'd rather be back on the farm. You're a winegrower, you tend the olive grove, you're a hog farmer – excuse me a wild boar farmer and a butcher. You're even the property handyman, you fixed my broken showerhead. Now I understand why Antonella calls you *Super Mario!*

*Mauro.* I was born and raised here in San Gimignano. My family for generations were farmers. For a while I was determined to pursue a career where I thought I could make a better living, so I spent a few years as what you would call a cabinet maker. I returned to farming after meeting and marrying Antonella.

*NWN.* I know that Antonella works here in the store everyday. Is she involved in other aspects of the business? You also have a daughter. Is she involved in the operation?

*Mauro.* (With a sly grin) Yes, she's the boss. (Antonella readily agrees and gives Mauro a look that says "good answer"! ) My daughter is a student at the university in Florence but does work during the really busy periods if called to.

*NWN.* Thanks for the background, now let's talk about the wine. You told me you produce about 40,000 bottles a year, yes?

*Mauro.* The 2006 harvest came in at about 45,000 bottles, or a little less than 4000 cases. The DOCG allows me to produce more, based on the size of the property, but I am not looking for how much wine I can produce, only that I can control the quality. The vernaccia grape in particular can be very difficult. The Chianti almost grows itself, but if you want to capture the flavor and especially the "perfuma" of vernaccia, then you have to treat it with a great deal of respect. (Here Tiziana tells me that Mauro believes that the secret and most difficult task to great vernaccia is to capture the pineapple and almond aromas reflective of the best grapes.)

*NWN.* What is the breakdown by varietal and do you grow any other type of grapes?

*Mauro.* Last year, I made about 9,000 bottles of Chianti, 20,000 bottles of vernaccia. The Chianti is 90% sangiovese with small amounts of cabernet, conaudo, and colorino. The vernaccia was blended with 6% chardonnay.

*NWN.* As I do the math, that adds up to less than 30,000 bottles. What happened to the rest?

*Mauro.* I also made 3000 bottles of Fornacino, which is a red made from the same grapes, but doesn't get the one year of barrel aging required by the DGOC to call it Chianti. Our winery has a limited capacity to produce just so much; the rest I sell to a larger winery, Baroncini.

*NWN.* I seem to recall hearing of the conaudo grape, but not the colorino. How much of this grape do you grow and why?

*Mauro.* Colorino is an original Chianti grape that is rarely grown anymore. It is used in very small amounts to add color to the wine. It is the only grape that when you break the skin, the flesh is red, or deep purple. With all other grapes, it is only the skin that provides the color.

*NWN.* Any plans to jump on the "Super Tuscan" bandwagon?

*Mauro.* No, there are very good super Tuscans, but I want to make only "true" Chianti, which are sangiovese wines. This is just a personal choice for me.

*NWN.* Any plans to expand production?

*Mauro.* No. For one thing there is no more room on the farm to plant more grapes and even if I could maybe buy adjoining land, the DOCG has made it very difficult and expensive to plant new vines. Under the law, I could also purchase up to 30% more than I currently produce, but rarely have I seen the quality I want. I believe if you have good grapes, why sell them to someone else. Make good wine yourself. Besides I do not have the space, equipment or time to make more. All that I make and keep is sold in the store.

*NWN.* Let's talk about vintages. How many vintages have you done at La Buca and which was your favorite?

*Mauro.* I have produced wine here since 1979. One of my personal favorites was the 1995, but I think the 2004 was the best I ever made. The weather, especially August, which is the most critical month, was very good, but overall since 2000, the technology and the changes winemakers have made has made the biggest quality difference in Tuscany.

*NWN.* How is the 2006 Chianti looking? It is still in the barrel, right?

*Mauro.* (Smiling,) What can I say; it is going to be a great wine! It was a good growing season, but it is still very early. The 2004 is the most complex wine I have produced and I think will have a lot of aging potential and there are some early signs that 2006 will also be a great year. The barrel samples were just sent to the DOCG for review and approval this week. I then have three months to bottle the wine, or I have to go back to them and reapply. It will then get 4-6 months of bottle age depending on how quickly sales of the 2004 and 2005 go in the store.

*NWN.* I'd like to hear about the La Buca vernaccia. I had my first glass of vernaccia more than 30 years ago, but it was – and still is – a wine that has very limited distribution in the US. Why is that?

*Mauro.* Vernaccia, good vernaccia, is very difficult to grow. It requires constant attention both in the vineyard and in the winery. Once picked, everything has to move very, very quickly. The grapes have to be hand selected to ensure the correct ripeness; slight temperature fluctuations can reduce flavor and aroma. And San Gimignano is one of the few places in world where it is grown. At a little less than 2000 cases a year, I am considered a medium-sized producer. I think there are only about 800 hectares of vernaccia grown in San Gimignano and most never leaves Tuscany.

*NWN.* I see you also have Grappa. Tell me about that.

*Mauro.* I do not make it here. The skins are sold to a cooperative that distill it and I get back 300 bottles, enough to sell in the store The rest is sold to other people who put their label on it, like with the excess wine I cannot produce on the farm.

*NWN.* Before we move on to the rearing operation and the olive oil, I'd like to ask one last question about the vineyards. Global warming is gaining more attention in the world of wine. Have you seen any climatic changes here in Tuscany in terms of temperature changes?

*Mauro.* No, we certainly experience the year to year changes that happen, but as yet, there have been no noticeable long-term changes in temperature here at La Buca.

*NWN.* Tell me about the salami and prosciutto production. Before we start though, you refer to your herd as "semi-wild" boar. What does that mean? Are they only a little "wild"?

*Mauro.* (Grinning) We introduced true wild boar to a domesticated animal to create a line that produces an extremely lean meat.

*NWN.* How many boar do you raise and how big or fat do they have to get before they're ready to become salami?

*Mauro.* The population fluctuates, but at any one given time, there are about a hundred boar on the farm. Generally, we raise them to 120 kilograms (close to 300 pounds) before slaughter.

*NWN.* I have tasted a number of the salamis and the wild boar prosciutto, you also make a traditional pork prosciutto, yes? Are you making anything else from the boar?

*Mauro.* We make anywhere up to a half dozen or more kinds of salami, including those flavored with fennel, pine nuts, walnuts, pistachio, truffle, chianti, and our vernaccia grape. We also make sausages and offer wild boar filets. Because the way our boar are raised and fed, they produce very lean meat and require only about a month and a half of curing. We make about 500 kg. of salami a month and 300-400 prosciutto hams a year.

*NWN.* On to the olive oil operation; I know you have olive trees, they're right outside my bedroom window. They only have very small berries on them now. When do you harvest the olives and how do you make the oil?

*Mauro.* There are four types of olive trees on the property and they are harvested just after we are finished with the wine – usually in early to mid-November. We send all of the olives to one of the few olive oil cooperatives here in San Gimignano to press and produce the oil for us. In general, we end up with about 700 liters of oil a year.

*NWN.* Well, that pretty much wraps up everything I can think of. I just want to thank you again, first with being so generous with your time, I know how busy you are. But more importantly, thank you for staying so true to your passion for producing the best possible products this unbelievable land of San Gimignano has to offer.

My time at the farm at La Buca has been a phenomenal experience and I am truly honored to have met you and Antonella. The best of luck to another great vintage and harvest!

### *Did you know...*

The first Italian wine to ever receive DOC approval was – Vernaccia de San Gimignano!