



*A Nichols Worth of Wine*

## Chasing the Grape July 2007

When I set out in April of this year to spend a few months in Europe, I thought I had only two objectives. Explore the food and wines of Provence in France and to spend a few weeks living on a vineyard in Tuscany.

As I wrote in the May issue, Provence was an unbelievable experience from so many perspectives. The people were so much friendlier than I expected, the food – especially my daily ration of a baguette and some new type of cheese, was fabulous - and the wines were fresh, uncomplicated and inexpensive. I especially gained a newfound appreciation for the roses` from Provence, which were considerably better than any I tasted from American vineyards. Spending two weeks at the vineyards of La Buca, in San Gimignano, was genuinely a dream come true. Visiting Tuscany is a little like visiting Oz. It often seems surreal with its magical landscapes, medieval villages, the abundance of incredibly fresh food and wines that capture the passion of the people producing them. A hedonistic pilgrimage.

At 35,000 feet somewhere over the Atlantic on the flight home, I began to realize that there was perhaps a more accurate, albeit underlying foundation for my travel; an almost three decade love affair with the vernaccia grape. Oh my, I can almost see the raised eyebrows and hear the distant snickering of my wine educated colleagues as they surmise that I may have raised just one too many glasses of this golden liquid.

It was at an obscure little Italian restaurant in Mill Valley, California, just north of San Francisco sometime around 1980, that I was introduced to my first glass of vernaccia. Admittedly, it was not one of those life-changing experiences some wine drinkers often pontificate about. What most intrigued me was that I had never heard of the grape and also that there was a mysterious, underlying subtleness to the wine's flavors I couldn't quite identify. It wasn't until weeks later on a return visit to the same restaurant that I thought again about this wine. After my second experience with vernaccia, I just had to know more about the grape. The trouble was, there was very, very little vernaccia available in the domestic market at that time. Unfortunately, nearly thirty years later, little has changed in terms of the availability of vernaccia in America.

Over the years, I have always sought out vernaccia wines in many of the cities and towns where I lived and worked. Being in the hotel, restaurant and hospitality industry afforded me access to these wines more so than the average wine drinker, but it has never been easy to find more than two or three labels. So traveling to the vernaccia mecca of San Gimignano where you might find as many as a dozen selections on restaurant wine lists, or twice that in the wine merchant stores lining the ancient streets of the walled city, was overwhelming. I was swimming in holy waters!

There are few true fans of this varietal outside of Tuscany. Wine critics frequently claim this is with good reason. They will often describe the wine as ordinary, insipid or lacking in character.

I beg to differ. No, it is not a ridiculously priced bottle of Montrachet or one of the too numerous over-oaked California chardonnays. It doesn't have the vibrant and zesty fruit of a New Zealand sauvignon blanc and it's not German(ly) sweet or spicy. It is not an over-the-top fruit bomb. What it is, or can be, is like most things gustatory from Tuscany, refined and made with care and pride. It is neither pretentious nor powerful, you have to –dare I say – look for the subtleties and nuances the grape has to offer. I would encourage critics of vernaccia to give it another try. Not unlike winemakers the world over, the quality of vernaccia has and continues to improve thanks in part to the new generation of Tuscan winemakers, who are working with smaller yields and longer hangtime. I can tell you that virtually every restaurant I visited in Tuscany (and there were many) where the customer had white wine on the table, that wine was vernaccia!

There are now more than 200 producers of vernaccia in San Gimignano, the only place on earth the official grape – Vernaccia di San Gimignano, is grown. There are a few other places in Italy that have attempted to grow this grape, but none successfully and Sardinia's Vernaccia di Oristano is a totally different grape altogether. The history of vernaccia dates back to the year 1276 when, in an attempt to keep as much of the wine local, the town fathers of San Gimignano imposed an export tax of three coins for every sum of vernaccia shipped outside the city. For obvious reasons, this law did not apply to either the succession of Popes who favored vernaccia over all other white wines, or to the generations of the powerful Medici families, for whom it was prized and served only at the weddings of their daughters and on other special occasions.

Vernaccia was the first wine to receive the Italian governments approved DOC status when it was established back in 1966 and it received the more prestigious DOCG classification in 1993. Today, vernaccia – considered to be the oldest Tuscan wine, is planted to only 2000 acres of grapes and produces about a half million cases of wine – 60% of which never leaves Italy and half of that amount is purchased in San Gimignano. When compared to some of the world's larger producers, this is a minuscule amount of wine. Vernaccia production continues to be limited and very little gets to the US market. Outside of Italy, Germany is the largest consumer followed by America and then Japan. The selection of vernaccia labels here is dismal at best.

There is very little land available in San Gimignano for planting new vines and the continued popularity of Chianti makes it unlikely there will be any significant re-grafting of sangiovese to vernaccia grapes in the foreseeable future. New plantings for the most part are to cabernet and merlot due to the increased demand for Super Tuscan wines. The fact that vernaccia is much more difficult to grow than sangiovese does not help to increase the interest of winemakers, but a number of Tuscan “purists” thankfully are committed to preserving the heritage of vernaccia.

I consider vernaccia to be one of the better food wines, especially when paired with fish, shellfish and Asian dishes. It generally has very good acidity, a component that some critics like to label as a bitter taste. The flavor most universally associated with vernaccia is almond and it is not uncommon to detect pear, apple and pineapple. It may take some searching, but look for these producers when buying vernaccia - Carpineto, Cesani, Falchini, Il Palagetto, Mormoraia, Panizzi, Spalletti, Strozzi, and Tenuzzi & Puthod. You'll be rewarded. *Eat, drink and be merry!*

### *Did you know...*

France sells more of its rose` wines than their white wines within its own borders.