

Italy: The Tuscan Ten

- **Monica Larner**
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This article, the Tuscan Ten, is an experiment. If it is well received by you—the reader—then I hope to repeat the format again next year and the following years after that. The Tuscan Ten is a special selection of ten iconic wineries spanning this sun-kissed region in Central Italy from the Tuscan Coast and Bolgheri to the inland area of Chianti Classico. The purpose of the article is twofold. First, it gives us the chance to provide you with early reviews of some of Italy's most celebrated estates; we normally schedule our coverage of these Tuscan wines towards the end of the year. The Tuscan Ten gives us a window for timelier preview tastings. Second, the Tuscan Ten awards us the opportunity to assess the latest vintage to hit the market.

In this case, the focus is on the 2014 season. Some of these wines have already been released; others were tasted from barrel. Unfinished wines will be tasted a second time and given a final score when I do my in-depth Tuscany tastings in September. A big benefit of the Tuscan Ten format is the flexibility that it allows. I can change the lineup of estates chosen each year. And I can adjust the number of wineries included. The Tuscan Ten could be expanded to the Tuscan Twenty or the Tuscan Thirty in the years to come. The idea is to offer you a delicious morsel of some of the excellent Tuscan wines that we can look forward to later in the year.

The first thing you might notice about this report is that 12 estates are included, not ten. This is because Tenuta dell'Ornellaia and Masseto have been listed separately to reflect the bifurcated branding that is now underway to establish these as two independent wineries. In fact, the new Masseto winery is now under construction and should be operational by the 2018 harvest. I also listed the Antinori family's Marchesi Antinori brand apart from Tenuta Guado al Tasso, in order to reflect how we normally input these estates in the Robert Parker Wine Advocate database. You also might notice that Tenuta San Guido's 2014 Bolgheri Sassicaia is not included in the Tuscan Ten, despite its irrefutable icon status. I thought it more appropriate to include it in the Italy, Tuscany: Tenuta San Guido retrospective also published in this issue.

Reporting for this article took me to Florence at the beginning of February where I tasted barrel samples of Monteverdine with vintner Martino Manetti. A few weeks later, I jumped into my car to visit Stefano Frascolla at Tua Rita; Frascolla poured his wines together with his very talented winemaker Luca D'Attoma of Duemani. Tua Rita and Duemani are two estates I felt strongly about including in the Tuscan Ten. Later that day, I drove to Bolgheri for tastings with Cinzia Merli of Le Macchiole and later her neighbors Tenuta dell'Ornellaia and Masseto. That evening, I drove to San Casciano in Val di Pesa (Chianti Classico) to sleep in my favorite hotel with morning views of the Tignanello vineyard at dawn's first light. I tasted wines from Marchesi Antinori and Tenuta Guado al Tasso at the fabulous new Antinori winery in Bargino. I ran into a very jubilant and upbeat Piero Antinori on his way to Florence for the day. I completed my tasting with General Manager Renzo Cotarella and Albiera Antinori, in their technical tasting space at the back of the winery. Later that afternoon, I drove to Panzano in Chianti where I met with Giovanni Manetti and his son at Fontodi. They had just finished varnishing the wooded ceiling and paneling in the new tasting room on the upper floor of the winery. We moved our tasting to a space with neutral ambient aromas. I caught a spectacular Tuscan sunset with fire-red skies on my way to Castello di Ama. Marco Pallanti and I tasted at dusk as my dog and his dog played in the garden immediately outside his new tasting room. The next morning, I drove to Fèlsina in Castelnuovo Berardenga for a complete tasting with the winery team. That afternoon, I headed back north to my final appointment with Paolo De

Marchi at Isole e Olena. I caught another postcard-perfect sunset before heading back home to Rome.

My drive south along the A1 superstrada to the Italian capital gave me ample time to reflect on the 2014 vintage. To say that the vintage opens to low expectations would be an understatement. Besides the universally panned 2002, I can't remember a growing season more laden with laments. The winter season never got cold enough to reset the vines or kill off lingering disease. Spring months opened to irksome rains that continued well until the end of August. The summer months were characterized by below-average temperatures, dimmed skylight luminosity and fierce battles with fungus-based disease. Many producers will remind you that the season (the four weeks of September) ended on a high note before harvest with dry climatic conditions and strong sunshine. One school says that the last minute heat was enough to put the grapes back on track. The other school disagrees completely saying that the season was flawed from the beginning. My tasting results tend to agree with the first, more optimistic school.

While I visited with Fontodi's Giovanni Manetti, he declared: "The 2014 vintage is a vintage of opportunity." That is an interesting choice of words. In fact, 2014 did award opportunity to those willing to eliminate a significant percentage of the harvested fruit. The wineries included in this article reduced yields anywhere from 20-60% in the 2014 vintage. They made absolutely certain that the fruit used represented the best possible quality, even if bottle production was painfully reduced. This extreme choice paid off and you will see that most of the iconic wines of the vintage—Castello di Ama L'Apparita, Duemani, Fontodi's Flaccianello della Pieve, Isole e Olena's Cepparello, Le Macchiole's Paleo, Marchesi Antinori's Solaia, Masseto, Monteverdine's Le Pergole Torte and Tua Rita's Redigaffi—all scored above 93 points in the 2014 vintage. Hey, these are icon wines for a reason, in sickness and in health. Those vows still hold strong.

What I found surprising about the 2014 vintage is how much the wines fleshed out and integrated throughout their oak regime. I believe that 2014 is singular in this regard. Wines that seemed lean, watery and short immediately after the harvest slowly put on immense weight and intensity in the barrel. These wines expanded by an impressive factor to become richly endowed both in terms of aromas and textural substance.

In all, I think 2014 should not be overlooked. This is an "annata piccola" (a small vintage) that delivers oversized results.

Enjoy the photos from my trip below!



Luca D'Attoma manages his own estate Duemani and many others on the Tuscan Coast.

2016 Duemani SÌ

Rating	90+
Price	NA
Drink Date	2017 - 2021
Producer	Duemani
From	Toscana IGT, Tuscany, Italy
Variety	Syrah
Source	230, The Wine Advocate

The Duemani 2016 SÌ is a unique wine that merits its own introduction. This is a Syrah-based Rosé that is fermented in amphorae made with white clay from the mountainous north of Italy. The wine opens to an off-ruby pink color and delicate luminosity. The bouquet is redolent of bright raspberry, cranberry and bitter almond. The Syrah grape adds a noticeable sense of firmness and structure that comes through in this vintage. The wine has the fiber to pair with shellfish or white meat. In other words, it is a far step forward in terms of sophistication compared to other Tuscan Rosato wines. I tasted this wine from vat about two weeks before bottling.

2014 Duemani Cabernet Franc Duemani

Rating	93
Price	NA
Drink Date	2018 - 2030
Producer	Duemani
From	Costa Toscana, Toscana IGT, Tuscany, Italy
Variety	Cabernet Franc
Source	230, The Wine Advocate

The 2014 Cabernet Franc Duemani is a profound and penetrating wine that reveals a very dark and side of this mighty red variety. Cabernet Franc is showing spectacular results along the Tuscan Coast and this expression by precise vintner Luca D'Attoma is a prime example. What makes this wine so special is that it reaches such a high level of quality despite the difficult vintage. Despite the challenges, the grape seeds showed perfect ripening following a heat spell at the very end of the growing season. Luca adjusted the oak aging (down to 22 months of barrique) to compensate for mature fruit. There is a wild side to the wine with black fruit and spice, but the effect is softly succulent and rich on the palate.

2015 Duemani Merlot Cabernet Franc Altrovino

Rating	91
Price	NA
Drink Date	2018 - 2028
Producer	Duemani
From	Costa Toscana, Toscana IGT, Tuscany, Italy
Variety	Merlot Cabernet Franc
Source	230, The Wine Advocate

This is among the wines I most admire from winemaking duo Luca D'Attoma and Elena Celli. The 2015 Merlot Cabernet Franc Altrovino is an austere red blend made without barrique. Instead, this vintage marks the first edition in which Tuscan clay amphorae plays a role as do large cement vats. Only a small percentage of the wine (15%) is aged in terra-cotta, but the wine's personality has been noticeably changed. This unique approach allows for more fruit expression and you certainly get that loud and clear in this wine. There is a wild, untamed and brambly element to the bouquet with forest floor, dark berry fruit, grilled herb and scorched earth. The wine shows a sharp and edgy personality that will soften with another year of bottle aging.