

## Revolution in a Bottle

by Noah Rothbaum

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The Antinori family has been making wine since 1385, but it took another 586 years before they got the world's attention—by starting the Super Tuscan craze. And even as Bordeaux lose value, Tuscans are still going strong.



*Marchese Piero Antinori*

*Photograph by: Craig Lee/SF Chronicle*

In 1966, Marchese Piero Antinori had just become the 25th generation of his family to make wine, taking over the Tuscan business from his father, Niccolo Antinori. At the time, much of the wine produced in Tuscany was simple and inexpensive, but the 28-year-old winemaker craved wine that had the complexity of France's great Bordeaux vintages. He wasn't alone.

"Consumers were starting to get tired of the traditional wines," he said. "They wanted to enjoy something different, more elegant and sophisticated."

So, Antinori began growing French grapes in his Italian vineyards, adding them to his traditional blends, and experimenting with different types of barrels. Today this would hardly be noteworthy—winemakers use a bewildering variety of grapes and high-tech techniques—but at the time, it was revolutionary.

A wine director spends \$2 million a year on the Mandarin Oriental Hotel's wine list. It also helped launch a style of wine that can now be found in top collections and on five-star wine lists, next to bottles of Château Lafite, Château Margaux, Opus One, and Screaming Eagle. Forty years ago, the idea that collectors might pay a premium for Tuscan wine would have

seemed as laughable as paying Bordeaux prices for California cabs. Neither wine region, of course, is a laughingstock anymore, and Super Tuscans command super prices. The current vintage of Antinori's top-of-the-line Tuscan, Solaia, has a suggested retail price of \$285 a bottle and in some big Italian wine markets, like New York and Los Angeles, it can be marked up to \$350.

Auctions of high-end wines, the drink of choice for Wall Street, have been affected by the global financial crisis. But, while some Bordeaux prices have been slashed, according to Peter Meltzer, a wine-auction expert and author of *Keys to the Cellar: Strategies and Secrets of Wine Collecting*, "Super Tuscans haven't been heavily hit." In fact, at the top end, many of the wines have even gone up in price. There "hasn't been a flight from Super Tuscans," he says.

Tuscany obviously wasn't always a favorite of wine collectors. Up until the late 1960s, much of the wine the region produced was either sold in bulk, used to make cheap table wines, or went into Chianti, which was exported. There wasn't really a market for wines from Tuscany that weren't called Chianti, and most winemakers couldn't afford to produce anything else. "The only market was Chianti," said Sergio Esposito, co-owner of New York City's Italian Wine Merchants and author of the new memoir *Passion on the Vine*.

But among the rows of traditional grape varieties was a smattering of French vines. "My father started in the 1930s to blend small quantities of cabernet with sangiovese with very good results," Antinori said. The family's cousin Marchese Mario Incisa della Rocchetta went even further, planting cabernet and cabernet franc on his estate, and making wines with the grapes. After working for more than two decades on the wine, he released just a few thousand bottles of the 1968 vintage, which he called Sassicaia ("stony ground"). The world would come to know it as the first Super Tuscan.

"Sassicaia came first and broke the mold," said Richard Brierley, former head of wine sales at Christie's Americas.

Corti Brothers in Sacramento claims to be the first store in America to sell the groundbreaking wine. It went on the store's shelves in the spring of 1972 for \$6.98, which was more than any of the store's other Italian wines. "It was very good wine," says Darrell Corti, co-owner of the store. But at first it was "very difficult to sell." Customers didn't know what to make of the Sassicaia, since it was so different from any other Italian wine. Over the next few years, a cult-like following developed for the wine and collectors still prize this special bottling, not only because of its historical significance but for how it tastes. It's "still tremendous. Out of this world," says Esposito, who tastes the wine every few years. (He says it now sells for about \$3,000 a bottle.)

A wine director spends \$2 million a year on the Mandarin Oriental Hotel's wine list. At about the same time, Antinori, inspired by his father, was working on Tignanello, using grapes from a single 116-acre vineyard known for its rocky soil. The wine had been a traditional Chianti Classico Riserva, but Antinori began changing the blend and including the French grapes cabernet sauvignon and cabernet franc. Just like Sassicaia, he aged the wine in small oak barrels instead of in the common larger barrels. Antinori produced about 6,000 cases of the wine in 1971. The demand for the wine has grown so much over the years that today the winery produces

between 25,000 and 30,000 cases of each vintage.

In 1978, Antinori introduced another Super Tuscan wine, Solaia (the "sunny one"), originally made from cabernet sauvignon and cabernet franc grapes grown on an even smaller vineyard of just 25 acres. After the 1979 vintage, Antinori began adding sangiovese to the blend. "When we realized that Solaia could become much more than just an experimental wine I decided that it was appropriate to give the wine a more distinctive 'Tuscan' character," he said.

Antinori's wines were able to catch on quickly because in many ways they were familiar to drinkers. These first Super Tuscans contained cabernet; they were darker than many of the region's wines and looked like wine from Bordeaux. More importantly, they tasted more like French wine. Super Tuscans "struck a familiar note for the international palate," Esposito said. Suddenly, it became easier for Tuscan winemakers to get the foreign press and wine sellers to taste their wines. Antinori was confident that his wines would sell but recently admitted, "it was easier than I thought."

Soon the market was flooded with these flavorful non-traditional Italian wines. (For example, Antinori introduced wines made with merlot, syrah, and chardonnay grapes grown in Tuscany.) America, in particular New York with its high concentration of high-end Italian restaurants, became the major market for Super Tuscans. Throughout the 1980s and '90s there were some exceptional Tuscan vintages, but it was 1997 that, according to Brierley, was really "the landmark vintage." The grapes were particularly good and full of sugar because the summer was extremely warm and sunny. Many wine experts consider it one of the great vintages of the century.

Super Tuscans have become so popular, Esposito said, that drinkers began to get interested in other types of Italian wine made by smaller producers and from less familiar varietals. Super Tuscans "have opened doors for Italians," says Esposito. Antinori agrees. "Super Tuscans have been instrumental to elevate the reputation of the other Tuscan wines and put our region on the map of fine wines." We'll drink to that.