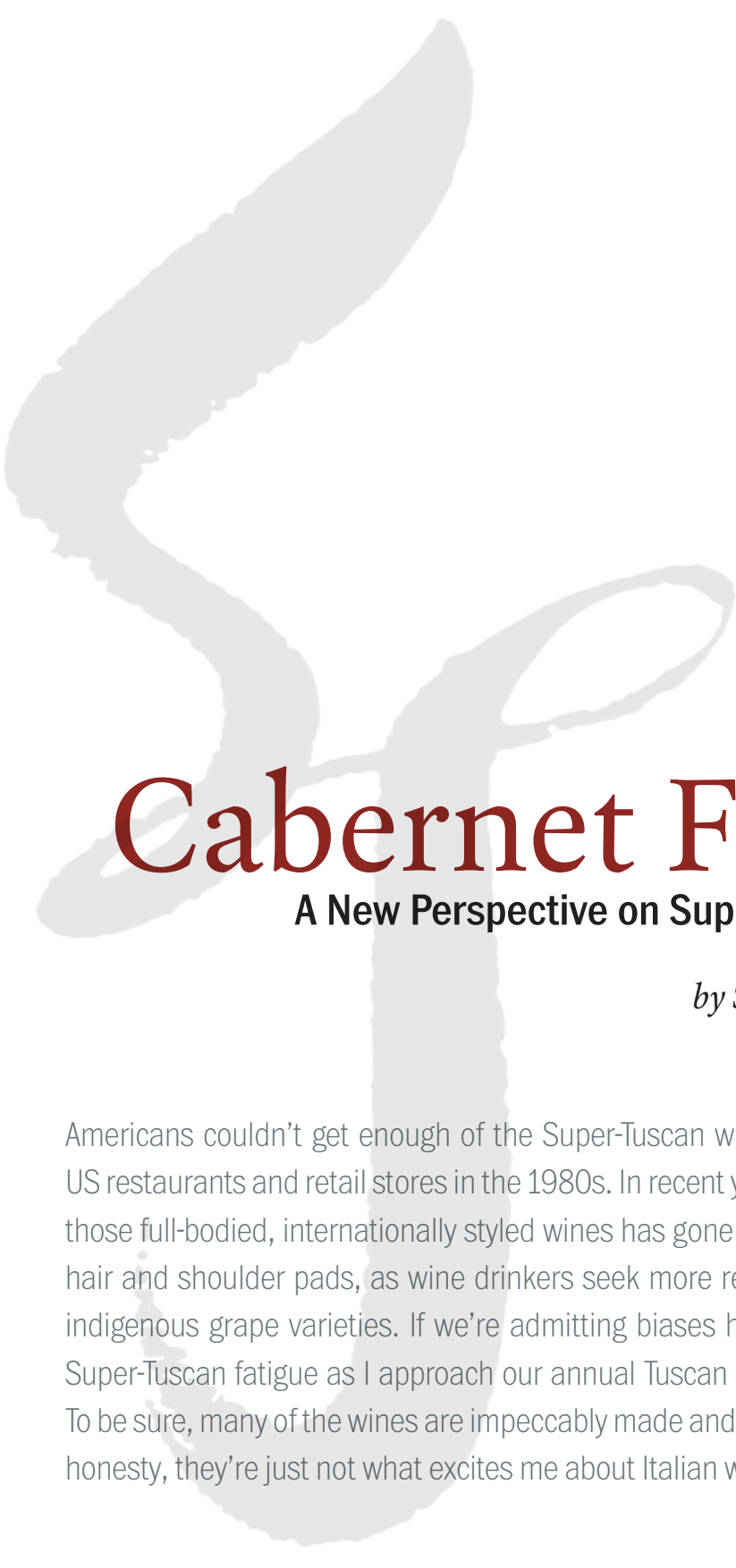




Cabernet Franc

A New Perspective on Super-Tuscan Reds

by Stephanie Johnson

Americans couldn't get enough of the Super-Tuscan wines that flowed into US restaurants and retail stores in the 1980s. In recent years, enthusiasm for those full-bodied, internationally styled wines has gone the way of feathered hair and shoulder pads, as wine drinkers seek more restrained wines from indigenous grape varieties. If we're admitting biases here, I'll cop to some Super-Tuscan fatigue as I approach our annual Tuscan tastings each spring. To be sure, many of the wines are impeccably made and built to age, but in all honesty, they're just not what excites me about Italian wines.



illustration by Tom Labaff

One consistent point of light during these tastings has been Paleo, a pure cabernet franc from Le Macchiole. Like most Super-Tuscans, Paleo started out as a blend back in 1989, but proprietor Cinzia Merli recalls her excitement at the cabernet franc she and her husband, Eugenio Campolmi, were vinifying separately: “We loved it from the first moment. It’s juicy and vibrant; it has body but not too much; and the quality of the tannins is very high, never dry or hard.” She began supplementing Paleo’s blend with increasing doses of franc until, by 2001, the transformation was complete. In the best vintages, Paleo stands out among more flamboyant wines from the region for its combination of ripeness and restraint. Although collectors may assign higher value to Le Macchiole’s Messorio (merlot) and Scio (syrah), Paleo inspires greater passion and loyalty within the wine trade. And it is, after all, the only wine of the trio to have

its own fan club, *Amici del Paleo*.

Paleo was Tuscany’s first pure cabernet franc, and for some years its only one. Perhaps that’s because cabernet franc isn’t the easiest variety to grow in the region, according to Merli and others. Merli calls it a “wild” variety that’s hard to control, almost like an unruly teenager. It can’t be forced to do anything; you can only nudge it in the right direction. Elena Pozzolini calls it the most “unforgiving” of the Bordeaux varieties she has worked with at Tenuta Sette Cieli since 2013. The Ratti family planted cabernet franc vines on their estate in 2002 as a possible blending component, but the fruit they grew was so good they began vinifying it separately as Scipio. Sette Cieli’s vineyards lie just outside of the Bolgheri zone and rise to 1,300 feet above the Tyrrhenian coast, where constant breezes and cooler evening temperatures lead to delicate aromas and fresh acidity.

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—Cinzia Merli

Farther yet from the coast, in Tuscany's Orcia Valley, avowed Francophile Andrea Franchetti established Tenuta di Trinoro in the early 1990s and created blends that paralleled wines from Bordeaux's Right Bank (Tenuta di Trinoro) and Left Bank (PalaZZi). Franchetti planted cabernet franc in three plots with different soil types, at elevations ranging from 1,500 to 2,000 feet. He vinified fruit from each plot separately, and began to recognize differences among the wines. Franchetti believes that in Tuscany's climate, with its more extreme temperature changes between June and October, cabernet franc ripens even more reliably than in Bordeaux. By the 2014 vintage, he was ready to release three pure cabernet francs from those separate plots: Campo di Camagi, Campo di Tenaglia and Campo di Magnacosta. It's an impressive debut, especially in a cool and wet vintage. Each wine has a distinctive voice, yet all sing unmistakably of the variety, if perhaps in a higher register than their coastal compatriots.

Cabernet franc is viewed by some as a poor relation to the more prestigious cabernet sauvignon, even though cabernet franc is the parent variety, but cabernet franc joined the Super-Tuscan big

leagues with the establishment of Tenuta di Biserno, the second-act project of former Ornellaia owner Lodovico Antinori, brother of Piero Antinori. The Tenuta di Biserno property lies in the Bibbona hills, just beyond Bolgheri, and after surveying its stone-studded soils, Antinori decided they were a perfect match for cabernet franc. Vintner Helena Lindbergh points to luminosity as an often-overlooked aspect of terroir and believes that the excellent sun exposure at the site, combined with cooling breezes from the sea, brings cabernet franc to perfect ripeness. Biserno produces three blends anchored by cabernet franc in varying proportions, and the variety's herb-tinged elegance shines through in each of them. The firm's top cabernet franc is Lodovico, made only in the best vintages with cabernet franc from the northern slope of the Bellaria vineyard (the southern slope lies within Bolgheri), supplemented by just ten percent petit verdot. The 2013 Lodovico was one of the most impressive and complete Tuscan wines we tasted this year. Priced north of \$400, it's not going to land on the tables of casual diners, but it propels cabernet franc into the ranks of the most elite and collectible Super-Tuscan wines. ■

Tuscan Cabernet Franc

Tasting Notes by **Stephanie Johnson**, *W&S Italian wine critic***Tenuta di Biserno 2013 Toscana Lodovico**

The estate's top wine, Lodovico is produced in select vintages from a small plot of vines (primarily cabernet franc) planted in 2002. The long, moderate growing season in 2013 yielded an intensely concentrated wine with flavors that range from brambly blue fruit to loamy soil, molten chocolate and savory charred meat. The wine feels broad-shouldered yet clad in a sable cape, its flavors densely packed and gripped by powerful tannins. It requires several days of air to reveal more detail, layers of black licorice, sage, rosemary and miso surging forward on a wave of vibrant acidity and reverberating long after the wine is gone. (*Kobrand, Purchase, NY*)

**Le Macchiole 2014 Toscana Paleo Rosso**

The wet growing season yielded a 2014 Paleo Rosso with a lean frame that wraps around a silky texture, enveloping flavors of mixed red and black fruits that are cooled by lively acidity. Scents of spiced apple, lavender and orange peel lend enticing aromatic complexity that's amplified with exposure to air, unveiling further layers of tobacco and bitter chocolate. (*Vintus, Pleasantville, NY*)

**Tenuta di Biserno 2013 Toscana Bibbona Biserno**

Cabernet franc takes center stage in this blend's flavors of dark berries and leafy tobacco. The wine rested for a year and a half in new French oak barriques, honing the firm tannins and lending notes of sweet spice. It feels fresh and precise, taking on savory tones of roasted red pepper and wild mushroom to balance the ripe fruit. Plenty of aging potential here. (*Kobrand, Purchase, NY*)

**Tenuta Sette Cieli 2013 Toscana Scipio**

This cabernet franc grows in vineyards that climb 1,300 feet in altitude, overlooking the Tyrrhenian Sea. The cool air at these heights was an advantage in the warm 2013 summer, preserving the acidity in the wine's ripe plum and cherry fruit. Notes of espresso and Mexican chocolate picked up during two years in French oak barriques (40 percent new), and the tight, chewy tannins suggest the wine will benefit from a few years in the cellar. (*Wilson Daniels, St. Helena, CA*)



Cabernet franc vines at Andrea Franchetti's
Tenuta di Trinoro in the Orcia Valley



Tenuta di Trinoro 2014 Toscana Campo di Camagi

Campo di Camagi, from low-yielding 25-year-old vines rooted in thin soils of broken quartz and limestone at 2,000 feet above sea level, is the most powerful of Tenuta di Trinoro's three cabernet franc-based blends. Initially, its taut tannins frame flavors of dark plum and black cherry. The wine begins to unfold after a few hours in the glass, revealing earth and spice notes along with hints of leafy tobacco and dark chocolate. A few years in the cellar will allow it to open up even more. (*T. Edward Wines, NY*)



Tenuta di Trinoro 2014 Toscana Campo di Tenaglia

This comes from less than one acre of vines planted in deep soils of crumbled limestone. It feels more open-knit than the brooding Campo di Camagi, with lifted scents of cool green herbs and pink rosebuds that lend delicacy to the vibrant dark-berry flavors. Lively acidity and a hint of tartness in the fruit give it a playful personality and the versatility to pair with a range of dishes. (*T. Edward Wines, NY*)