

## The Lorenzo Galli Wine Scholarship 2010

**'Best Written Essay' awarded to: Gabrielle Poy**

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**SANGIOVESE IS ONE OF THE MOST POPULAR VARIETIES IN ITALY. DISCUSS THE REASONS FOR ITS BURGEONING SUCCESS IN THAT COUNTRY AND HOW DO YOU GAUGE ITS POTENTIAL IN AUSTRALIA.**

Sangiovese is Italy's most widely planted vine variety<sup>1</sup> with its roots in central Italy. The success of the grape can be attributed to its ability to convey multi-faceted expressions, depending on the clone and the ambient growing conditions, and its long growing history embedded in Italy.

Historical, geographical and social factors will be explored that have shaped the vine along its way.

Italy's achievements with sangiovese has enthused winemakers from afar such as California,

Argentina and Australia to plant the vine with mixed results.

### Historical significance

Wine emerged as a status symbol in the Renaissance where the art of winemaking and the quality of wines was overhauled by the clergy and nobility<sup>2</sup>. Wealthy aristocratic families living in the hills between Florence and Sienna owned large estates worked by farm hands and share farmers, who also made wine for themselves. Even today many of these families are still involved in the wine industry including the Mazzei's from Fonterutoli, the Antinori's and the Corsini's from Le Corti.

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<sup>1</sup> Robinson, Jancis. 'Sangiovese' [www.jancisrobinson.com](http://www.jancisrobinson.com) September 2008

<sup>2</sup> Anderson, Burton. *Vino, The Wines & Winemakers of Italy*, McMillan Publishers Ltd, UK. 1980

A wine scene had been created, however it was centered around a white chianti wine as sangiovese was almost unknown prior to 1700.<sup>3</sup> Over the following two centuries local red and white grapes were blended together and labeled chianti, with sangiovese taking the lead role. Consorzio's were formed in 1920 and the introduction of the DOC in 1967 and the higher DOCG classification for Chianti Classico in 1984 paved the way for better clonal selection and a marked improvement and perception of sangiovese in the 90's, most notably in the form of Super Tuscans and Chianti.<sup>4</sup>

### Geographical significance

Sangiovese is officially authorized to be planted in 13 Italian provinces<sup>5</sup>, but falls mainly in Central Italy. Being the dominant red grape in Tuscany, Umbria and Marche it is also widely planted in Emilia-Romagna. Clonal variation is rife within the varietal as too it's differing local name. It's wide geographical spread and stronghold on many regions is testament to its success.

Within Tuscany, definitive sangiovese growing areas have been established coupled with particular wine styles; Chianti, Brunello di Montalcino, Rosso di Montalcino, Super Tuscans, Morellino di Scansano, Vino Nobile di Montepulciano and Carmignano. Amongst these, the three that have made the largest impact upon international markets and gained recognition are Chianti, Brunello and the Super Tuscans.

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<sup>3</sup> Robinson, Jancis. 'Toscana' in *The Oxford Companion to Wine Edition 3*, Oxford University Press. 2006

<sup>4</sup> Robinson, Jancis. 'Chianti Classico- Thoroughly red now', [www.jancisrobinson.com](http://www.jancisrobinson.com), 5<sup>th</sup> July 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Clark, Oz & Margaret Rand. 'Sangiovese' in *Grapes & Wines, The Key to Enjoying Modern Wine*, Websters International Publishers, 2001.

The emergence of Tignanello, a sangiovese and cabernet blend and Sassacaia, a cabernet sangiovese both from Bolgheri on the Tuscan coast, saw Super Tuscans- namely French grape varieties blended with sangiovese and aged in French oak, become fashionable in the 80's.<sup>6</sup> While these wines stylistically were a success in propelling sangiovese onto the international market, the essence of sangiovese was drowned out by its blending partner (be it merlot, cabernet or syrah) and high tone oak characters. The success of these wines led to a new classification group called Indicazione Geografica Tipici (IGT), and channelled the way for other producers to cultivate formerly tabooed grape varieties.

Brunello, a relatively latecomer onto the wine scene was granted DOCG status in 1980 and the advent of international interest, especially from America led to a flood of new wineries springing up in Montalcino; in 1990 there was just 87 producers of Brunello and in 2006 there were 200.<sup>7</sup>

Chianti in its basic form provides very good everyday drinking wines, and at its pinnacle in the form of a riserva is an age worthy wine with structure and intensity. Plagued with a colourful history it is good to see that over the last decade the quality has improved due to better viticultural practises and source material, and a return to larger sized oak format such as *tonno* and *botti*.<sup>8</sup>

### Social significance

Wine and food are an integral part of everyday living in Italy. In the Tuscan Middle Ages polyculture was the favoured form of agriculture. Share-farmers worked the land planted to varied crops of grain, pasture, fruit and nut trees and vines that would support their families needs

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<sup>6</sup> Robinson op cit 'Sangiovese'

<sup>7</sup> Robinson, Jancis. 'Brunello gets bigger in all senses', [www.jancisrobinson.com](http://www.jancisrobinson.com) 20th May 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Robinson op cit 'Chianti Classico- Thoroughly red now'

throughout the year.<sup>9</sup> They were able to produce their own wine therefore making it accessible to all classes, not only the wealthy.

The accessibility of chianti at different social levels is part of its broad appeal. Today chianti is commonly sold in bulk format (*damigiana*) to locals who take home the larger vessel and bottle the wine themselves. On the upper scale a bottle of Sassacaia can fetch in excess of \$300. Generally speaking a very drinkable bottle of chianti DOCG will cost 15 euro.

### Australia & Sangiovese

Sangiovese is a sensitive grape and needs attention to site, clone and yield.<sup>10</sup> It tends to early budding and late ripening and requires warmth, yet not excessive amounts. As it is a vigorous vine, canopy management, astute soil selection and judicious planting densities are essential to prevent shading and unripe fruit.

The Chianti region is a large hilly area with altitudes varying between 150 – 500 metres.<sup>11</sup> South and South-west facing slopes on infertile soils are desirable to control vigour and produce ripe grapes, and the continental climate ensures large diurnal shifts in temperature which builds fruit flavours. As a result of the difficult conditions only 10% of the region is planted to vineyard.<sup>12</sup> Conversely, the Tuscan coastal region of Bolgheri endures a maritime climate with a hotter and shorter growing season on flat planes, resulting in richer and broader flavoured wines.

The history of Sangiovese in Australia is quite limited and consumer acceptance quite skeptical. In 2009 the total tonnes crushed of sangiovese grapes represented just .03% of the total Australian

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<sup>9</sup> Stantich, Barbara. *The Original Mediterranean Cuisine*, Wakefield Press. 1995

<sup>10</sup> Clark & Rand op cit

<sup>11</sup> Johnson, Hugh & Jancis Robinson. *The World Atlas of Wine*, Mitchell Beazley, 2007

<sup>12</sup> Clark & Rand op cit

harvest.<sup>13</sup> Sangiovese is still in an experimental stage with producers from all over Australia trying their hand at the variety with mixed results. Regions planted to sangiovese include: Mudgee and the Hunter Valley in New South Wales, McLaren Vale, Adelaide Hills, Clare Valley and Mount Crawford in South Australia, King Valley, Beechworth, Rutherglen and Heathcote in Victoria and the Canberra district in the Australian Capital Territory.

Two wineries applauded by Robinson for their Sangiovese's are Pizzini and Coriole.<sup>14</sup> Whilst Pizzini is based in the higher and cooler regions of the King Valley, Coriole is subjected to the maritime climate of McLaren Vale. Parallels can be drawn between the climatic data of the Chianti region and the King Valley, and the warmer coastal areas of the Maremma and McLaren Vale.

Poor clonal selection is a limiting factor to Australian sangiovese. Most of the plantings before 2001 were from H6V9 material which is attributed to producing light-bodied, fragrant wines with low intensities.<sup>15</sup> New clones such as Brunello and Prugnello have been planted and winemakers are enthusiastic about future results. Clones must also be matched to Australia's regional growing conditions. Nursery work on vines has been carried out by producers such as Chalmers in the Murray Darling, NSW and Brown Brothers in Milawa.

The potential to sell Sangiovese wines in Australia has an opening due to our Italian cultural connection with immigrants and the abundance of Italian influenced food we find in our every day living. Steve Webber of De Bortoli wines has released a Sangiovese with fruit sourced from the King Valley under his price point conscious Windy Peak label to 'introduce consumer's to the variety at entry level pricing.'<sup>16</sup> This is an important feature of the wine that may win the consumers confidence and lead to further sales and increased knowledge in the future. On the

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<sup>13</sup> Wine Australia, Australian Winegrape Prices & Tonnes Crushed. [www.wineaustralia.com/australia](http://www.wineaustralia.com/australia) 2009

<sup>14</sup> Robinson op cit 'Sangiovese'

<sup>15</sup> Crittenden, Rollo in 'Australian Style Sangiovese' in *Wine Industry Journal*. Vol 19:3,2004.

<sup>16</sup> Webber, Stephen in 'Australian Style Sangiovese' in *Wine Industry Journal*. Vol 19:3,2004.

export front however, it may be difficult to sell Australian Sangiovese unless it was blended with shiraz that would make it a unique Australian blend.

Sangiovese is embedded in the Italian wine culture. It is the most widely planted vine in Italy and the dominant red grape of Tuscany, Umbria and Marches. It also features strongly in Emilia-Romagna. Many different clones and growing conditions exist translating into numerous styles. The most celebrated forms of Sangiovese are represented by Chianti, Brunello di Montalcino and Super Tuscans.

Sangiovese has been growing in Italy since 1700 whilst in Australia since about 1970. The Italians have had over 300 years to learn about the grape, compared to just over thirty years in Australia. While the results in Australia have been mixed to date experimenting with growing regions and clonal selection should make for interesting times ahead.

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Wine Australia, Australian Winegrape Prices & Tonnes Crushed. [www.wineaustralia.com/australia](http://www.wineaustralia.com/australia) 2009