



The Tuscan countryside as seen from Il Poggione.

PHOTO: JIM BRYANT



PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

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# On the Road in Tuscany

IN EARLY JUNE 2014, a subset (25) of the people on the Crystal Rome to Venice cruise with me went on a 3-night, 4-day Tuscan wine adventure. Half of this smaller group went into Rome a day early to relax and lose our jet lag. Little did they know that we had arranged to eat dinner in Italy's most famous seafood restaurant, La Rosetta. Over the course of four hours we had one of the greatest dining experiences ever. We shared liberal amounts of 15 appetizers ranging from raw to cooked to sushi, accompanied by rare Italian white wines. The coup de grâce was a large Branzino (sea bass) cooked Napolitano style, encrusted with sea salt then cracked open and served table-side. What a way to begin our adventure!

The next morning we picked up the rest of our Tuscan travelers at the Fiumicino airport and headed to Montalcino by bus. Our first stop was for lunch at the Trattoria Il Leccio, located in Sant'Angelo near Montalcino. We hiked up to the top of the hill to find our trattoria on a beautiful piazza. We dined outside with a fabulous view broken only by the almost constant passing of enough traditional Tuscan food for a much larger group. We had six to eight courses, each with ample wine. After lots of Prosecco di Valdobbiadene Bellussi

with the appetizers, we had ravioli with butter and sage served with Rosso di Montalcino. The main course was the Florentine steak with roasted potatoes accompanied by Brunello di Montalcino Friggiali 2010. Properly fueled, we rolled down the hill to the bus and went to our first winery.



Piazza Sant'Angelo

PHOTO: JIM BRYANT

Ranked within the great Brunello di Montalcino producers, Il Poggione is one of my favorites. This is a producer I have been buying since the 1990 vintage (the 1990 Riserva is drinking fabulously at the moment) and I am always amazed by the quality of the wine, both the regular or normal bottling, as well as the Riserva Vigna Paganelli. These wines are priced responsibly at the mid-range of the two wine categories, but consistently deliver quality at a higher level and represent good

value. The vineyards comprise 309 acres located in Sant'Angelo in Colle. It produces traditional style Brunello (not flamboyant fruity or oaky) in keeping with its heritage as one of the three oldest producers of Brunello. The fifth-generation owners, Leopoldo and Livia Franceschi, together with the father-son winemaking team of Fabrizio and Alessandro Bindocci, focus on optimizing the quality by concentrating most of their efforts in the vineyard. Hand-harvesting is complimented by state-of-the-art equipment housed in the high-tech new winery built in 2004. The wines are aged in large Allier oak barrels kept five meters below ground.

After a tour, the tasting was held in a beautiful room with stunning views of the Tuscan countryside. We tasted the 2012 Rosso di Montalcino, a baby Brunello in essence, with less intense or aged fruit, less age in wood and in the bottle. It was a teaser for what came next. We tasted the 2009 Brunello which, although very young, gave us an inkling of what to expect over the next two decades. A nose of intense cherries, spices, minerality, leather, and tobacco was delivered with a silky finish resulting in a rich, full mouthful.

We finished the tasting and headed to our

headquarters for the next three days and nights. Castello di Nero (photos below) is a 12th century castle located between Firenze and Siena. It is a 700 acre property with vineyards and olive trees situated in the midst of rolling hills. This property is one of the Leading Hotels of the World.



After catching our breath, we gathered outside for appetizers and Prosecco Valdobbiadene Superior DOCG 2012. The scenery was breathtaking as the sun set and lights from nearby towns twinkled. As the temperature would have

been too cold for our extended dinner, we moved indoors to one of the two wine cellars. Each wine was picked to go with specific courses and served in a fashion as our second wine tasting of the day. Our three-hour dinner was in many ways as memorable as our previous dinner at La Rosetta. The first course was red prawns served with fresh burrata cheese and a green salad. I chose a relatively unknown grape, but it matched well (the Villa Bucci Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi Reserva DOCG 2008). The acidity and crispness of the grape was somewhat tempered by the age of the wine and it went well with the prawns and cheese.

The second course was risotto flavored with asparagus and saffron from San Gimignano, the nearly Tuscan town of multiple medieval towers. I chose an unusual wine to accom-



pany this course, the Jermann Vintage Tunina 2011. Jermann is one of Italy's greatest white wine makers. Located in the northeastern region called Collio, the sparse soil and high altitudes allow production of wines of high acidity (think food friendly). Jermann takes it to the highest level. This wine (the actual name is Vintage Tunina) is astonishingly good and food friendly. It is a blend of Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Ribolla Gialla, Malvasia Istriana, and Picolet. This wine ages well (10 years) and if asparagus is used in such a dish, the Sauvignon Blanc stands up to it while the others grapes marry perfectly with the risotto.

The main course was a veal filet in a crust of pan brioche served with candied tomato and fresh mozzarella cheese sauce. With this outstanding entrée, I paired two Brunello di Montalcino. First was the 2007 from Mastrojanni, followed by Silvio Nardi Vigneto Manachiara from the same vintage. Both wines went well with the crust and the veal while the Nardi was bigger and bolder and accented the candied tomato and mozzarella cheese sauce. A tough choice, but served in the right order. By the time the lemon delight was served, no one wanted a dessert wine. Several of us had a Vin Santo with the biscottini and by then, many of the guests had trouble finding their rooms as they were spread over a large foot print, particularly with the sleepiness brought on by a long day and plenty of wine and good food. All in all, the day set a very high standard for the rest of the trip. À votre santé! U

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