



*Badia a Coltibuono is an ancient monastery with great history, beautiful gardens, and excellent wine.*

## Adventures in Tuscany, Italy

ON SEPTEMBER 22, 2022, our group of 16 of us met in Rome to start our Italian adventure. We chose Rome for two reasons. First, we were fortunate enough to find one of Italy's finest seafood restaurants, La Rosetta, and feasted there five years ago and wished to return. Second, we needed to make sure we were in Italy the day before our trip began due to the difficulty of securing ultra-high-quality accommodations in Tuscany in case our inbound flights were canceled or significantly delayed.

After checking into the Sini Bernini Bristol Hotel, we ate a light breakfast or lunch and prepared ourselves for a feast at one of Italy's premier seafood restaurants. As the photograph depicts, a cornucopia of the sea's finest was offered. We started with a fabulous seafood salad which was accompanied by Vernaccia di San Gimignano Vigna Santa Margherita by Panizzi.

Next came a main course of beautiful shrimp and branzino with a delightful "new" wine for many of us. It was produced from the Grillo grape which is indigenous to Sicily. Its acidity, fruitiness,

and touch of salinity paired extremely well with both the shrimp and branzino. We also enjoyed a rare wine from Piedmont, Timorasso Vigneti Massa, 2019, after a luscious dessert of a chocolate log filled with mascarpone, fresh fruits, and whipped cream. Then it was time to treat our jet lag and prepare for our first day in Tuscany.

### TUSCAN WINERIES

After a two-hour bus trip, we arrived at one of my favorite Chianti producers—Felsina. Although it was raining slightly, we oversaw the landscape, beautiful buildings, and then assembled for a very impressive tasting with an excellent lunch. We were served six wines, one with each light course, beginning with a simple rosé from their new nearby winery Pagliarese.

Then we moved to the Felsina Chianti Classico 2020 followed by the Felsina Chianti Classico Reserva 2018, both of which were prototypical examples of Chianti Classico. The Reserva showed great complexity and only needs more time to be better. The next two wines are among my most favorite wines from this region. Both the Rancia



*Winery guide Silvia Piazzoli and Jim Bryant at Castello Di Ama.*





*The group stayed for a week at hotel Castel Monastero.*

*The vineyards at Castello Di Ama.*

Chianti Classico Reserva and Fontaloro IGT are 100% Sangiovese, and I have had practically all vintages produced and have never failed to be inspired. Although moderately expensive at \$50-\$60 each, they nevertheless are great values and will age magnificently for decades.

The grapes for the Rancia are generally the highest quality of the winery except those for Fontaloro are from vineyards straddling the border between Chianti Classico and the Chianti Colli Senesi appellations. Felsina believes that Fontaloro is the most representative expression of its Sangiovese. After the delightful lunch and tasting at Felsina, we checked into our hotel, the Castel Monastero, for the next seven days.

We had a memorable dinner in the beautiful hotel restaurant La Contrada. Our appetizer was San Marzano tomato soup, burrata cheese, and basil paired with 2019 Timorasso produced by Vigneti Massa which has complex elegance, splendid minerality, and original and enveloping aromas of dried fruit.

The Brunello Ciacci Piccolomini d'Aragona 2016 vinified from 100% Sangiovese Grosso was matched with our second course of braised veal ravioli, spinach, marrow, and saffron sauce. The rack of lamb was the evening's feature and most of us had this accompanied by two great wines—the 2018 Il Carbonaione from Podere Poggio Scalette,

a rare 100% Sangiovese which went perfectly with the lamb and paired well also with the remaining Brunello.

### SOME WENT TO FLORENCE

On Sunday, most of the group went to Florence for an art and culture immersion. Eight of us opted for more wine and had a great day starting with a visit to Badia a Coltibuono, which is an ancient monastery with lots of history, beautiful gardens, and excellent wine. Cooking classes are also offered there.

Our next stop was at Castello Di Ama, one of my greatest winery visits. Our guide was Silvia Piazzoli who made an unforgettable impression on all of us. She was so charming, intelligent, knowledgeable, and passionate about the three great wines she chose for us. They rate along with a single handful of other Sangiovese producers as the best in the world. The Vigneto Bellavista is a Chianti Classico Gran Selezione DOCG with 80% Sangiovese and 20% Malvasia Nera. The 2007 is aging slowly and beautifully with a luscious, rich mouthful.

The Vigneto La Casuccia is a Chianti Classico Gran Selezione with 80% Sangiovese and 20% Merlot. The 2007 is slightly reminiscent of a highly classified Bordeaux with black fruit, minerality, and wild herbs. The wine is aging slowly, but beautifully. The final wine tasted was the Vigneto L'Apparita. This wine is 100% Merlot. The 2009

vintage tasted was rich, refined, and elegant with aromas of red and black fruits, lavender, mint, sage, spice, and cloves.

The current vintages (2018) are \$250-\$300 with the vintages tasted well over \$300 and difficult to find. Nevertheless, you should accept the challenge as all are among the world's finest wines. Happy hunting!

Wrapping up our visit, we had a lovely lunch at Casa Emma which featured five of their wines with four courses. This insured a quiet ride back to the hotel. A Votre Santé! 🍷



PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

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