



Robert Ardovino, Robert Dakovich, and Marena Ardovino

The history of human innovation is marked by acts of resistance. It is often one individual's courage to stand up and be different, to shake his or her head "no" in the face of an injustice, and to go farther than anyone else had thought to go before, that leads to change. The failure of some to become autonomous has given us some of our greatest achievements.

So it is with one Italian family and their wine. Since 1385, twenty-six generations of the family have spent the last 600 years personally managing their wineries in Tuscany and Umbria. Now, all these years later, the estates are still kept in the family, run by Marchese Piero Antinori and his three daughters Albiera, Allegra, and Alessia. It is the family that is important, for their story reflects the history of Italian wine, and not so long ago they helped change its course forever.

ANTINORI AND ARDOVINO'S: Understanding Italian Wines

By Jeff Becker

Photos by Joseph Burgess



On November 8th, Ardovino's Desert Crossing in Sunland Park, NM hosted a wine dinner honoring the Antinori winemaking tradition. While Marchese and his daughters were not in attendance, their wines were, and were paired with five superb courses from the Ardovino's kitchen. Highlighted by the *zuppa*, an apple cider and butternut squash soup with butter-poached snow crab and topped with savory whipped cream and toasted almonds, and the *secondo*, a beef short rib braised with the same wine it was served with, a Villa Antinori Toscano, and topped with leeks, the evening was a testament to the fact that some foods are made to eaten with wine.

In addition to the pleasures of food and drink, the evening enlightened guests to the heritage and traditions that rule Italian wine. Thought to be the world's oldest wine making region (dating back to the Romans and before), wine is no small matter in Italy and the industry there is subject to intense scrutiny, not only from consumers, but from the law. To understand Italian wine, one must understand the laws that govern its production. Robert Dakovich, who represents Antinori wines in the Western region for Ste. Michelle Estates, says, "Italian wine laws are structured to protect the consumer [by enforcing a] decided standard [on the production of wine]." On the top of every bottle of Italian wine one will find a pink slip that denotes the classification of that wine. Dakovich defines the categories as follows:

- *Vino da Tavola*- "Table wine"—this wine has little or no standard and is the base wine of Italy. Table wines can come from anywhere in Italy. No vintage is allowed on this wine. If you order a house red or white wine at a restaurant you may receive a local, inexpensive *vino tabla*.

- **I.G.T.**—Indicazione Geographica Tipica—these wines are typical of a specific geographical region. IGT's, which under the Italian government standard is one step above *vino tabla*, has become the most famous standard in Italian wines (as Super Tuscans have this classification). The world famous Solaia and Tignanello fall into this category because these wines are not made according to the strict standards that represents the next two classifications, but instead are made to be the best wines from the region using non-Italian varietals, like Cabernet, and increased oak aging for intense structure. The IGT category is a catch-all for Italian wines that do not meet the following two categories.

- **D.O.C.**—Denominazione di Origine Controllata—In 1963 DOC & DOCG standards were enacted for wines. 220 DOC zones are currently approved and growing. These wines follow the strict government rules which determine grape varietal, oak aging length, and alcoholic minimums, but the vineyards age may not be correct or the yield per acre may be too high.

- **D.O.C.G.**- Denominazione di Origine Controllata Garantita- The "G" is the guaranteed quality through tighter restrictions. In 1980, the first DOCG wine was appointed. These wines meet each standard of the Italian government that includes the above (DOC) and a yield per acre that is very small compared to the above wines. This limited yield is a measure of quality.

While these rules are in place to ensure quality, they oddly have a negative effect on wine production. These rules, Dakovich says, restrict the winemaker from making the best wine because the standards limit the types of grapes that can be blended in a wine, the length of aging in barrels and which vineyards by location can be used to make a wine.

It was their bending of these rules that allowed the Antinori family to inspire one of the most important changes in Italian wine. By setting out to make wines that attempted to raise the quality standards of Italian wine, even if it was contradictory to Italian wine laws, the Antinori's pursuit eventually led them to break the Italian wine laws. Marchese Antinori himself has been quoted saying, "Ancient roots play an important role in our philosophy, but they have never held back our spirit of innovation." It was in fact Piero Antinori in 1970 that made the first Super Tuscan wine (now widely regarded as some of the best in the world). At the time, Italian law demanded that chianti be diluted with mediocre white grapes. Inspired by his cousin, Marchese Incisa della Rocchetta, who was making small quantities of a renegade, cabernet sauvignon-based wine named Sassicaia, Piero eliminated the white grapes from chianti and replaced them with robust cabernet sauvi-

With Dakovich's assistance, we are able to offer this informative look at the some of the innovative Antinori wines served that evening.



Villa Antinori Bianco (White) Toscana IGT: A blend of three varietals—40% Trebbiano, 30% Malvasia, 15% Chardonnay and 15% Pinot Grigio. From the Tuscany vineyard situated between Siena and Florence. Stainless steel fermentation makes for a fresh, delicate fruity wine that can be served with or without foods. A Pinot Grigio-style wine that is more interesting because it offers more body and structure.



Castello Della Sala Chardonnay Umbria IGT: The 13th century castle in the hills of Umbria about 18 km from the historic town of Orvieto was purchased by the Antinori family in 1940. This wine is 100% Chardonnay with forward fruit and a well-balanced finish. This wine could be served before meals or with white fish or grilled chicken. A Chardonnay with American appeal and old-world charm.



Vermentino Bolgheri DOC: The Bolgheri region of Italy is 60 miles south-west of Florence, bordering the Mediterranean Sea. The goal of the wine is to capture and preserve the natural aroma and delicate flavors of this Italian varietal. Early morning harvest, gentle pressing of the grape to cold fermentation in stainless steel combines to offer a well balanced, dry style, crisp white wine. This wine could be enjoyed by itself or with shellfish, shrimp or cheese. A real find in Italian white wines.



Pian Della Vigne Brunello di Montalcino DOCG: By law this wine must be made with 100% Sangiovese, here called Brunello. While it's nearly identical to the Sangiovese grown to the North in Chianti Classico, its clonal variation gives it a more pronounced aroma, a fuller mouthfeel and structure to cellar for years. The Pian Della Vigne Estate is located six kilometers south of Montalcino, above the Val d'Orcia valley. This Brunello is majestic, well structured, ripe supple fruit and balanced tannins for a lengthy finish. This is a great dinner wine; a wine made for red meats.

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gnon (thus breaking the standards). By introducing non-traditional grape varieties to their wines like Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Merlot, Syrah and Cabernet, the Antinori's went on to create the well-respected Sassicaia, Solaia, Tignanello, and Ornellaia. In addition, their pursuit of ever-better wine led to advances in stainless steel fermentation at controlled temperatures, a wide range of clones and root stocks in the vineyard (this allows the wine grower to graft on the desired vines, offering more control over the outcome), and the initiation of malolactic fermentation (where tart malic acid in wine is converted to softer-tasting lactic acid).

"Our mission is not yet complete," Antinori says. "We are driven to express the vast potential of our vineyards and reconcile all that is new and undiscovered with Tuscany's traditional, cultural, agricultural, artistic and literary heritage. These things represent the identity of Antinori, and one of our greatest strengths is that we are in Tuscany – our essential 'Tuscan-ness', if you will."

Food lovers owe a debt of gratitude to restaurateurs like Robert Ardovino as we owe one to the Antinoris. People like Ardovino seek out these great winemakers and they go to great lengths to bring them and the wonderful stories surrounding certain vintages and varieties to us. Drinking wine and enjoying food is one pleasure, knowing where it came from and learning from it is another. With a wine dinner we often get both. *

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For more information on upcoming wine dinners and events at Ardovino's email adcinnm@elp.rr.com

Look for Antinori wines at Greenery Market and Billy Crews in El Paso and Toucan Market in Las Cruces, or wherever fine wines are sold. To learn more about them, find www.antinori.it.