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Building up Chianti

By Sonya Hook



Chianti needs a bit of a revamp in the UK and the market is crying out for a strong brand, one which offers a range of Tuscan wines at different price points.

The Chianti and Chianti Classico DOCG wines that found their way into the UK some decades ago were rustic in both taste and packaging.

It's a style a number of producers have been working hard to steer away from, and now many wines from the region are more refined and elegant, but UK consumers aren't necessarily aware of this.

This is the opinion of wine producer Famiglia Cecchi, which is on a mission to address these points by taking a new approach in the UK.

Tuscany is favoured by British holidaymakers and the region boasts glorious weather, enviable scenery, rolling hills and cities filled with culture, alongside simple but tasty Italian cuisine and, of course, wines, the most famous being Chianti.

Yet Tuscany doesn't have the presence in the UK off-trade that it perhaps could have and Cecchi, with its history, diverse range of wines and meticulous approach to the study of the Sangiovese grape in particular, believes it has a good chance of not only filling this gap, but revamping the image of Chianti in general.

FAMIGLIACECCHI

Cecchi, which celebrated its 125th anniversary last year, has seven estates, mainly added to the portfolio in the past 20 years, equating to 180ha of vineyards in total.

Andrea Cecchi, who runs the company with brother Cesare, says: “Chianti Classico is a bit quiet in the UK. I think the perception of the market is a bit dusty. We have seven different expressions of Chianti Classico and three levels of quality, so we have a lot we can offer. We believe Tuscany has a great heritage and value over the world.

“Chianti producers lost their way in the 1990s but now are about elegance. We have replanted a lot of vines to move on from that rustic style that was synonymous with Chianti. We also changed our techniques so the way we look after the soil has changed since the 1990s. Our approach is generally minimal intervention so we can maintain our respect for the vineyard and for the area.”

In Tuscany Cecchi acts as a negociant, but also grows its own grapes for its domaine labels in the Tuscan appellations of Chianti, Chianti Classico, Morellino di Scansano, Maremma and Vernaccia di San Gimignano.

SECURING A FOOTHOLD

Cecchi’s wines have already secured a foothold in the UK, predominantly through own-label, and it has seen success with retailers such as Sainsbury’s, Majestic and Waitrose.

Next for the producer is to introduce Cecchi-branded labels, and it is working with specialist Italian wine supplier Vinexus on this.

Vinexus director Nick Bielak says: “It is an ambitious project but currently the region doesn’t really have a strong brand that can corner all the different channels in the UK. Cecchi is an authentic, family-run producer of Tuscan wine that has already been able to become a household name in a lot of markets.

“With all of the estates it has it can also corner the quality pyramid. With Italy there are a lot of homemade brands that don’t really communicate anything about the brand or the wine, but this is a real story and Cecchi has the productive power to meet the needs and challenges of the UK, which is probably the most difficult market in the world.”

Cecchi has experimented with different rootstocks to see how Sangiovese performs in various areas, particularly its Villa Cerna estate in the Chianti Classico DOCG.

Cecchi says: “Villa Cerna for me is the true taste of Chianti Classico, typical of a Sangiovese from this area.”

In 2016 the company bought the Villa Rosa estate with the aim of investing in Chianti Classico and to make a Gran Selezione wine. It replanted 50% of the vineyards, trying out different clones of Sangiovese to see how the grape behaved in different plots.

Marketing director Giacomo Tarquini says: “We see a dramatic difference in composition of the soil within a few metres. We have replanted a lot of the Sangiovese and now in one area we can see a lot of differences, which makes this a great estate. The previous owners had left it to go wild and we now have four or five times as many plants per hectare as before.

FAMIGLIACECCHI

“We have planted different clones of Sangiovese, including ones we had already tested at Villa Cerna, with good quality results. Some are a more modern type of Sangiovese for a more modern Chianti Classico. Sangiovese very much reflects the terrain whereas a grape such as Cabernet Sauvignon is more weather sensitive.”

Cecchi adds: “The Cassetto Palgione part of our Villa Rosa estate is the area we haven’t replanted and these are the vines destined for Gran Selezione wines. That area has a stony soil and vines dating back to the 1960s and the wines really reflect the area. I feel these wines are very authentic.”

Cecchi also has an estate in the Maremma region, Val delle Rose. Originally it was 35ha, acquired in 1995, but this has been expanded to 105ha. The whole estate will be classified as organic by 2021.

With the Maremma site the company has focused on a number of projects, including Vermentino and Maremma Toscana Rosso. It also has international varieties, such as Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc, but primarily the area is dedicated to Sangiovese.

Cecchi says: “We are just beginning in Maremma. Back in 1993 the Chianti appellation had an overproduction and my father wanted to look for a new area to make good wines. In 1995 we discovered Maremma and we were pioneers. Others followed from around 2002 but we were one of the first to move into the area.”

From Maremma the producer has a number of wines, including a pale rosé made from 100% Vermentino – Val delle Rose ‘Litorale’ Rosato 2016, with a rsp of £9.99. It also has wines designed to be “very drinkable” the year after harvest, such as La Mora Morellino di Scansano Riserva DOCG, 2015 (rsp: £11.99).

Also of interest to UK retailers who might be looking for something different is Val delle Rose, Ciliegiolo priced at £10.99. The wine is made from a single vineyard from 100% Ciliegiolo, an indigenous grape variety related to the Sangiovese family.