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Tuscany's Cecchi Focuses In On Chianti Terroir And Sustainability



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Contributor Dining

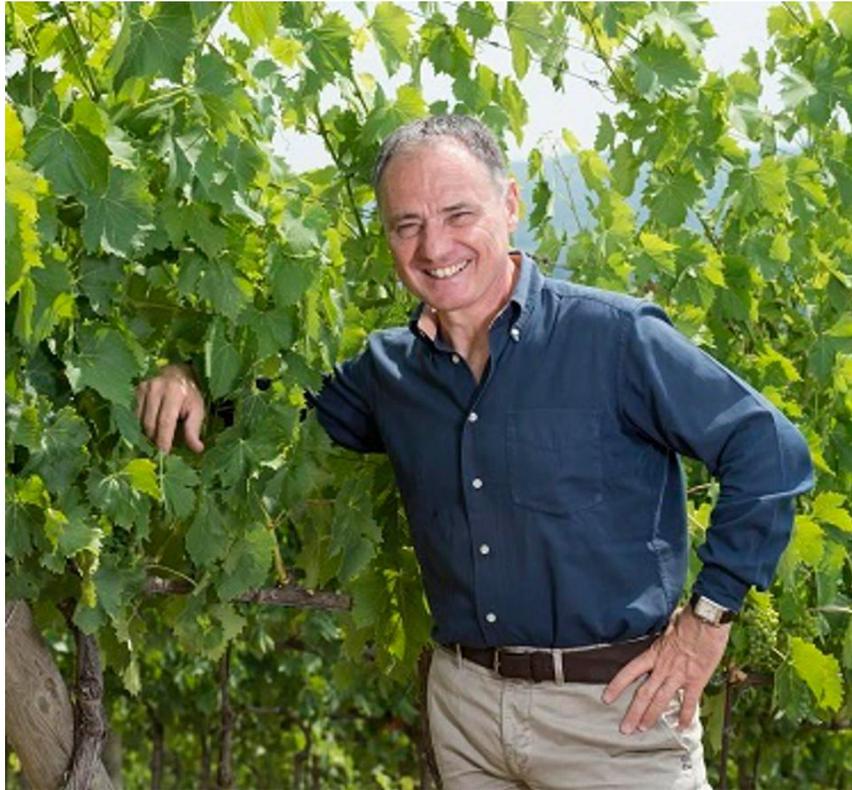


Cecchi has had more than a century to identify the variations in its Tuscan vineyards.

Back in 1893 Luigi Cecchi founded his Tuscan winery in the hills of the Chianti Classico region, which back then had a rather footloose approach to what a Chianti should be. Cecchi over the years continued to refine his wines for consistency and, even then, the sustainability of the vineyards. In 2018 the third generation of the family celebrated its 125th anniversary of Cecchi, so I interviewed the current head of the family and CEO of the company, Andrea Cecchi, to see what Chianti Classico is undergoing in 2021. Their three latest releases that I have tasted have the virtue of being distinct from one another but all of the same pedigree.



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Cecchi's CEO Andrea balances tradition and innovation at his Tuscan vineyards.

The **2015 Chianti Classico Riserva de Famiglia** is 90% Sangiovese and 10% Cabernet Sauvignon (once forbidden in Chianti, now widely used), spending 12 months in oak and at least three months in bottle, giving the wine a richer body and long life, still with only 13% alcohol.

The **2017 Storia di Famiglia** has the same grape blend and aging but slightly less time in bottle age, with 13.5% alcohol and it shows the excellence of the vintage but can be drunk with pleasure right now.

Cecchi's **2019 Chianti** (not a classico but now a DOCG) has 10% canaiolo instead of Cabernet, and is aged only for a two month minimum and has a screwtop closure. It is meant to be drunk right now and will remind you of the best non-Classico Chiantis that you drank with everything from pizza to spaghetti with easy joy.

Luigi Cecchi had a side business as a “wine taster.” What did that mean in terms of tasting others’ wines and consulting on their making?

Yes, my grandfather, before funding Cecchi in 1983, was a professional wine taster working as consultant for other nearby wine producers. This allowed him to become an expert wine maker and to better understand the characteristics of the different Tuscan areas of production.



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Cecchi's La Famiglia Riserva is held longer to age and has Cabernet Sauvignon added to the traditional Sangiovese grapes

The traditions of Italian winemaking, especially in Chianti, are perhaps outdated. What aspects do you think are sound and must be maintained and which are in need of modern change?

Italian wine laws are highly restrictive and complex. It is therefore essential to have a deep knowledge and understanding for their application in the daily activity of a winery. However, many of these regulations are in line with the requirements and principles of the European Economic Community, and they are therefore relatively homogeneous among member states. Such tight relations with the European Community is unlikely to result in their modification and revision in the near future.

Nonetheless, bureaucracy is a major aspect that requires early intervention as it often restrains daily management. I believe that most of paperwork can be prepared and organized in a simpler way, still keeping all the laws and regulations that are fundamental to protect the appellations, the patrimony, and more importantly the final consumers.

Tell me about your efforts in sustainability? Are they very costly to implement?

In all our estates we are very sensible to sustainability. For us, it has been a focus for years and an important aspect within each estate, that needs to be constantly implemented. For instance, over the past few years, we have expanded the hectares of our vineyards that are grown organically, reaching 230 hectares (552 acres) that are certified organic. We also have three estates that have the organic certification also in the cellar and vinification areas. Due to the lack of water in Tuscany for more than 20 years, we have also developed a water recycling system that allows us to purify and reuse in our gardens the water that we use in the cellar. The recycling system allows us to keep an efficient irrigation of the gardens near by the wineries, without the use of the communal water or water from underground wells. Specifically, we have 3 active water recycle systems (Wetland) at Cecchi, Villa Cerna and Val Delle Rose estates.

How do you limit energy consumption?



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In regards of energy consumptions, we have implemented new systems that reduce the energy consumptions with innovative techniques. We are changing lights in the cellars with low energy consumption lights (such as LED). In addition, in the construction projects of our cellars we have always invested and focused on thermal insulation. This results in a homogeneous temperature in the cellar and stocking areas throughout the year, limiting energy consumption for air conditioning and heat pumps. Currently the analysis of the energy costs of our wineries demonstrated remarkable consumptions levels and cost.

Despite our current energy saving results, in the coming years further investments will be done to improve the efficiency of our energy consumption also in light of the continuous development of more energy-efficient systems.

When you say “The agricultural part, thus, is subject to continuous experimentation,” do you share this with your colleagues and do they share their new information with you?

Over the past 10 – 15 years the relationships and collaborations within producers have been improved in all the appellations where have estates. We can communicate and share new ideas with a more positive and proactive approach. This attitude with producers has been possible thanks to the various Consorzio and associations of producers in each area of wine growing.

Are the Italian wine authorities involved in enological and ampelographic research?



The hillsides of Tuscany make a great difference in the various terroirs of Cecchi wines.

Yes, the Italian wine authorities are involved in the enological and ampelographic research thanks to the collaborations with universities and Consorzio via both national and European funds. Thanks to the results of these studies, we have been able to discover and better understand autochthonal grape varieties as well as new technologies to be implemented in the vinification process. These new techniques have allowed to develop a tangible and impressive improvement on the average quality of Italian wines.

You work with a Consortium to “protect” Chianti. What needs protection?

Correct, we are working to protect Chianti. For us “to protect” means three main values: First, to guarantee the local heritage as well as the image of the product. For this reason, it is fundamental to transform and implement the operating procedures of the producers with the aim to share a more professional and sustainable vision.



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Second, “to protect” also means to defend the product and control it from unfair business practices. Last, “to protect” means to prevent possible errors that can have a negative impact on the entire appellation, which is the true and main heritage of each producer.

Why has the government awarded so many DOCGs to wines that are of negligible quality?

In part I agree with your point that the government has awarded so many DOCGs to wines that are of negligible quality. However, I believe that valuable work has been done by many producers, the consorzio, and regulators over the past 20 years. We have seen a true revolution in terms of quality as well as the image of the various areas of production. Being involved with several appellations, I see a constant improvement of the average wine quality. I am confident that we will see more improvements in the next years that will highlight the uniqueness and beauty of the Italian terroirs and viticulture patrimony. My hope is that this evolution will also be appreciated by the final consumers.

What do you see differences in the recent 3 vintages of your wines (Chianti 2019, Classico 2017, Riserva 2015)?

Italian grape varieties are characterized by variability in taste among vintages. This primarily results from their late ripening when compared to international grapes.

All three vintages, 2019, 2017 and 2015, however, were characterized by good harvests as both the weather and the grape quality were favorable.

2019 was a good vintage as it combines a well-balanced taste with freshness, resulting in a characteristic juicy flavor. 2019 wines do not show a strong structure, even though they may be aged for up to 10 years, especially for Riserva.

Vintage 2017 was characterized by a reduced production due to a mid-April frost followed by a drought of the subsequent months. This resulted in concentrated wine and an average higher alcohol content. The unfavorable weather condition of this year resulted in a less balanced wines compared to 2019. 2017 wines can still be aged, yet for a shorter amount of time compared to the 2019.

2015 is an excellent vintage with wines showing perfect balance between the acidity, which confers freshness, and structure. It is considered one of the best vintages of the last 20 years and it is indicated for wine aging for up to 15 years.

Do you think screwtops will replace corks in the future of Cecchi ?

I don't think we will replace corks in the future at our winery. Despite being a very reliable sealing method and being used for a number of our wines, I believe it will never replace natural cork. We are currently using screwtops for some IGT and DOCG wines such as Sangiovese, Chianti and Vernaccia di San Gimignano. Current regulations of the Chianti Classico limit the use of screwtops in this appellation, where traditional sealing methods are indicated. I generally prefer screwtops for simpler and young wines.

Should a riserva be kept for a few years for maximum maturity?

The philosophy of our company is to provide wine that are ready for consumption and that show a great complexity and sharpness. Sangiovese in Tuscany represents the most prevalent wine grape and it dominates most of the appellation we produce. Before selling, Riserva wines are refined in wood first and then in bottles for at least 1 year. Nonetheless, even after selling, wines continue their refinement in the bottle for few years, where the natural maturation results in a greater delicacy and complexity. I personally appreciate a good Riserva after 5 years from the Vintage.