

FAMIGLIACECCHI

Wine Spectator

WINE SPECTATOR – 30 APRILE 2019



VERNACCIA DI SAN GIMIGNANO

The old Land Rover rattles and groans up the rutted path, here and there breaking through sun-dappled forest into vineyards. Tuscany is not all stately villas set in manicured gardens—up in the hills, much of it feels like wilderness.

A nearby vineyard is rooted in a light-colored soil. “This is all old seabeds,” explains Elisabetta Fagioli, the proprietor of Montenedoli, one of San Gimignano’s historic and leading estates. “This is where the white wine comes from.”

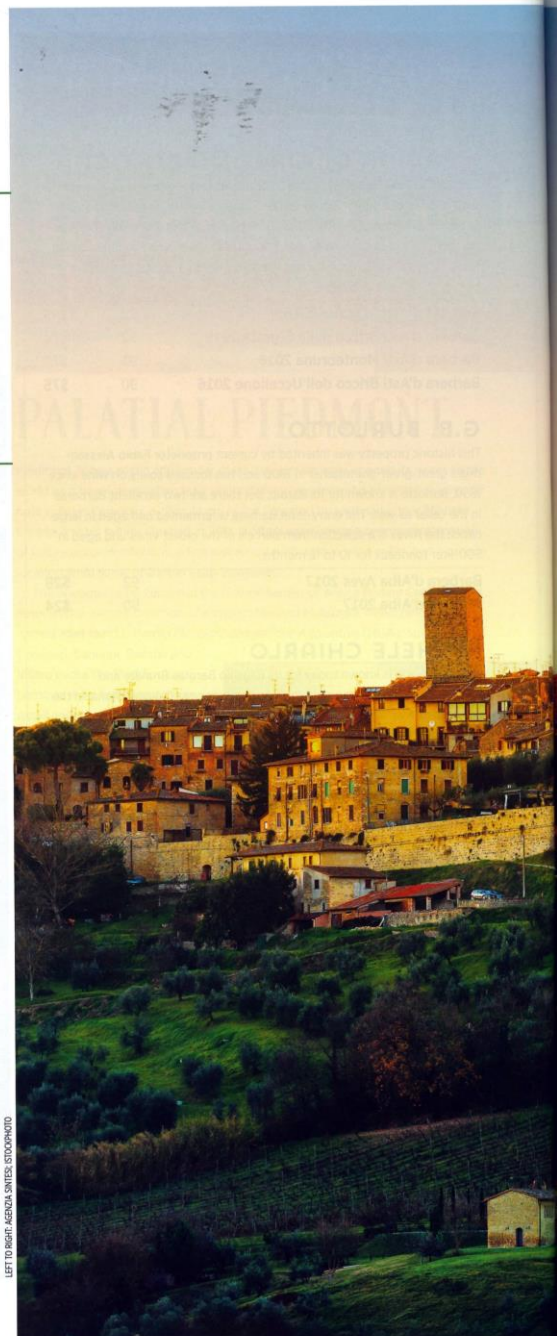
San Gimignano is the spiritual home of Vernaccia, an ancient white grape that thrives within the 1,780-acre DOCG. Vernaccia makes some of the best white wines in Italy, and if not for its tiny area of production, it would be a lot more familiar to wine lovers in the United States.

Vernaccia from San Gimignano is complex but not complicated, making the wines very drinkable and compatible with food. A good Vernaccia is earthy and salty compared with the peach, apricot and spice of Pinot Grigio or the citrus, pine and petrol of Vermentino.

Vernaccias range from bright and crisp in style, evoking apple, almond and straw flavors, to smoky, malty and textural, either creamy from age and lees contact or tactile from the presence of light tannins. There is typically a saline, mineral component and occasionally white pepper. Riservas are a selection of the best grapes, aged a minimum of 11 months in tank, vat or cask, with an additional three months in bottle before release.

“San Gimignano is ideal for Vernaccia because a layer of clay protects the marine sediments underneath,” explains Simone Santini, whose Tenuta Le Calcinie makes both a Vernaccia di San Gimignano and the single-vineyard Ai Sassi Riserva, which he blends with 5 percent to 8 percent Chardonnay. “There is also a special mesoclimate that’s dry and not too hot or cold,” he adds.

Santini points to a large rock studded with fossils, much like the Kimmeridgian clays of Chablis. These sediments mixed



LEFT TO RIGHT: AGENZIA SINTESI; ISTOCKPHOTO

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ITALY | VERNACCIA DI SAN GIMIGNANO

with clay are one of the region's soils; the other is a yellow *tufo* with oyster fossils.

Vernaccia di San Gimignano has been established for centuries, though it declined in the 18th century due to competition from distilled spirits, coffee and tea, and was dealt another blow by phylloxera. Its modern resurgence began in the 1960s, becoming one of Italy's first DOCs, in 1966. In 1993, it was elevated to DOCG.

Young Vernaccia does not exude much aroma. Regulations allow up to 15 percent of other non-aromatic grapes to be blended with Vernaccia. And though grapes like Moscato and Malvasia are forbidden in the blend, Riesling and Sauvignon Blanc are permitted up to an individual or combined 10 percent. Most Vernaccias are blended with Chardonnay, but top producers bottle 100 percent Vernaccia, preferring to reduce yields to enhance the grape's characteristics.

Santini advocates aging Vernaccia because, he says, "the aromas come in the tertiary stage." For Fagioli, Vernaccia exhibits some red wine characteristics. "Most winemakers think their Vernaccia should be like Germany," she chides, referring to light, fruity Rieslings. "This is the red of white wines. After all, we are in Tuscany."

For me, Montenidoli makes the most fascinating Vernaccias; its Carato has greater texture and complexity from fermentation and aging in *barriques*, with honey, lanolin, marzipan and buttery notes.

Regardless of style, a good Vernaccia has a textural component, sometimes accompanied by a tactile sensation that lends more body and substance than is found in many Italian whites. Historic and distinctive, it delivers both pleasure and value. In a region dominated by great red wines, Vernaccia di San Gimignano is a white worth seeking out.

—Bruce Sanderson

PRODUCERS TO KNOW

CAPELLA S. ANDREA

Flavia del Seta and her husband, Francesco Galgani, have run this estate, founded by her great-grandfather in 1959, since 2008. From 20 acres of vineyards, the couple makes three different 100 percent Vernaccia bottlings: Clara Stella is made in stainless steel for a fresh, fruity style; Rialto comes from 50-year-old vines and sees 10 hours of skin contact at pressing and a year in tank; Prima Luce is the *riserva* from Rialto vines, left in contact with the skins for three weeks in amphorae, then aged one year in amphorae and one year in neutral *barriques*.

Vernaccia di San Gimignano Clara Stella 2017	90	\$19
Vernaccia di San Gimignano Clara Stella 2016	90	\$19

CASTELLO MONTAÛTO

Castello Montaùto was purchased in 1988 by the Cecchi family, who planted a little more than half of the 203-acre estate to vines, mostly Vernaccia. Montaùto's Vernaccia is blended with 10 percent Chardonnay and fermented in stainless steel for a fresh yet balanced style that has the telltale



Simone Santini

salinity of Vernaccia di San Gimignano.

Vernaccia di San Gimignano 2017	90	\$17
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MONTENIDOLI

Elisabetta Fagioli has forged her own path in the rugged hills south of San Gimignano since 1965. On the lower slopes of her 494-acre estate, she grows Vernaccia in the old marine sedimentary soils specific to the San Gimignano area. She makes three different styles: Carato is a selection of the best grapes and free-run juice, aged 12 months in neutral French *barriques*, 12 months in cement and 24 months in bottle; Fiore is also made from free-run juice, but fermented and aged in stainless steel and released 12 to 16 months after harvest; Tradizionale is made from the pressing of Carato and Fiore grapes, fermented and aged in stainless steel and released 12 to 16 months after the harvest.

Vernaccia di San Gimignano Fiore 2016	89	\$30
Vernaccia di San Gimignano Carato 2012	88	\$40
Vernaccia di San Gimignano Tradizionale 2016	88	\$24

MORMORAIA

Milanese businessman Giuseppe Passoni and his wife, Franca, an executive with Burberry, purchased the 250-acre Mormoraia estate in 1980. It includes 74 acres of vines and 25 acres of olive trees. The first wine was bottled in 1993; since 2012, the vineyards have been farmed organically. Suavis is the entry-level Vernaccia, made in stainless steel. Ostrea, from 30-year-old vines, ferments in neutral *barriques*, aging on its lees for four to six months. There is also a *riserva* called Antalis that is fermented in large cask and aged one year in *barriques*.

Vernaccia di San Gimignano Suavis 2016	89	\$15
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◀ SIMONE SANTINI

Tenuta Le Calcinai consists of 30 acres of vineyards in two locations outside San Gimignano. Simone Santini farms organically, making two styles of Vernaccia. The *annata* is 100 percent Vernaccia, fermented and aged on the lees in stainless steel for about six months; the *riserva* is also all stainless steel, but has 5 percent to 8 percent Chardonnay from the Ai Sassi vineyard blended in and aged for two years on the lees before bottling.

Vernaccia di San Gimignano Tenuta Le Calcinai 2017	90	\$18
Vernaccia di San Gimignano Tenuta Le Calcinai Riserva 2015	90	\$30

SANBRO MICHAELLES