

Modern Tuscan Classics



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These letters are usually written from London, or from Dorset, where my wife and I are expecting a crop this year from the first three hectares of a probable ten, where Chardonnay, Pinot Meunier and Pinot Noir vines acquired from Pépinières Guillaume, suppliers to Louis Roederer, Bollinger and Pol Roger to name but a few, are planted on pure Kimmeridgian chalk soil with the aim to produce sparkling wine. This is the exception, since it comes from deepest Tuscany, the Fattoria Nittardi estate near to Castellina in Chianti, two thirds of the way from Florence to Siena.

In the 12th century, what is now known as Nittardi was once a fortified tower named Nectar Dei, which presumes a wine production of some quality. In the early 16th century, the spacious estate was the property of the great Michelangelo Buonarroti. In 1983 it was purchased by German Peter Femfert, whose main profession consists of running Die Galerie, Frankfurt's leading modern art gallery, and his Venetian wife, Stefania. Starting with the 1981 vintage which was left in the cellar for them to bottle, the labels of Chianti Classico Casanuova di Nittardi have been designed by Peter's artist friends and, going further than Baron Philippe de Rothschild at Mouton, he asks that they design the wrapping paper as well! The 2008 carries a design of a snail alert on a bunch of Sangiovese grapes by the famous German author Günther Grass, while in 2005, while Baronne Philippine de Rothschild chose Britain's Prince Charles, the Femfert choice was Yoko Ono.

From the very start, Nittardi was fortunate enough to hire Dr. Carlo Ferrini, the viticulturist and enologist who has done so much to bring Chianti Classico to where it is today, and whose many consultancies include Brolio, Fonterutoli, Fontodi and Brancaia (see below), both in Chianti and increasingly in the Maremma. The Femfert-Ferrini philosophy is for wines with good colour, deep vineyard fruit, rounded tannins and a fresh finish. Tasting a range of Riserva vintages back to 1985, it was this freshness that shone through, the 1997 and 2004 still having many years in front of them. Yet the

recently bottled 2009 Classico is bursting with energy and ready to go.

Having painstakingly expanded the vineyards from the run-down four hectares he purchased to an immaculately kept 15, Peter Femfert began to look, like so many prominent Chianti producers, for land to plant in the Maremma. Ten years ago the first vines went in under Carlo Ferrini's guidance, Tannat, Petit Verdot, Cabernet Franc, and Alicante Bouschet being added to the classic Sangiovese, Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah that thrive in this hot, coastal region of Tuscany. Two IGT Toscana wines are made, an entry level Ad Astra and the flagship Nectar Dei. The 2005 Nectar Dei, only the second vintage, was the only Maremma wine out of 186 to be awarded 5 stars in a Decanter tasting some years back, and the 2008 has been selected by Singapore Airlines for their First Class cabins.

Peter Femfert is not the only foreigner to be making superb wine around Castellina in Chianti. In 1981, Brigitte and Bruno Widmer fell in love with an abandoned wine estate—1985 is accepted as the turning point in the region's fortunes—near to the famous Castello di Fonterutoli owned since the 1400s by the Mazzei family, named Brancaia. Thirty years later, the very modern-labelled Brancaia Chianti Classico comes from 25 hectares overseen by their daughter Barbara Widmer and Carlo Ferrini, the former being one of Tuscany's finest winemakers. The flagship wine is Il Blu, an IGT Toscana with 45% Merlot and 5% Cabernet blended with the Sangiovese. From their 40 hectares in the Maremma comes the brilliant Ilatria, a Bordeaux blend with 40% Petit Verdot.

Finally, the youngsters of the three, German-American Jennifer Schmelzer and her winemaker brother Michael, tend 15 hectares at Montebanardi in nearby Panzano. Their Retromarcia Classico 2009 shows clean and clear earthy flavours, while their Sa'etta Riserva 2007, from the region's rockiest sandstone-quartz vineyard, has great elegance and length.

Nittardi, Brancaia and Montebanardi produce modern classics. ■■