

Foreigners have been attracted to the Tuscan countryside for years. RICHARD BAUDAINS finds a few who have come and been bitten by the wine bug

Meet the neighbours

Englishman buys abandoned farm in Chianti': not exactly a stop-press headline. After all, foreigners have been buying up property in Tuscany ever since those who had to try to make a living from the land left in droves during the late 1960s and early 1970s. And many of the new residents have been tempted to have a bash at winemaking.

Read 'Foreign owner breaks 90-point barrier in Parker with first vintage', however, and you're bound to sit up and take notice. It is remarkable to see how many of the buzz wines of the moment in Chianti are made on estates owned by non-Italians. And it is even more remarkable how quickly many of the latest generation of immigrants-owners have made it to the top. Perhaps most remarkable of all, though, is that many of today's high flyers arrived in Tuscany with no intention of making wine.

Bruno Widmer

Bruno Widmer fell in love with Tuscany while visiting friends at their estate near Castellina. When the farm next door to where they stayed came up for sale he bought it. He was too busy to handle the winemaking and there were no cellars at the property anyway, so he struck a deal with the Mazzei family at Fonterutoli who made the wine for him. But he got the bug. At the first opportunity he bought another property where he could build his own winery and where his daughter Barbara, fresh out of oenology school, set up residence with two big dogs to make her first vintage in 1999.



Barbara Widmer is winemaker at the Brancaia estate near Castellina, bought by her father

Brancaia (Castellina)

Owner: Bruno Widmer

Winemaker: Barbara Widmer (consultant: Carlo Ferrini)

Vineyard area: 18ha (16 in production)

Annual production: 80,000 bottles

First vintage: 1982 (in partnership with Fonterutoli); 1998 (independent)

Under the wing of Fonterutoli, Brancaia established a reputation as one of the region's leading small producers. Now independent and set to grow, the estate has new vineyards coming into production, a brand new, ultra-modern winery and an energetic new winemaker in Barbara Widmer. She makes two wines, both called Brancaia: a modern, grapey Chianti Classico and an IGT. Since 1998 the Super-Tuscan, one of the first and most successful Sangiovese-Merlot blends from the Carlo Ferrini stable, has also included a drop of Cabernet Sauvignon. The style of this wine is decidedly international-Tuscan; big on aroma and mouthfeel, fruit driven, fleshy and attractively oaked.