

Tasting Highlights: Tuscany
Battling the Tuscan sun in the 2003 vintage

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The 2002 vintage was insipid in Tuscany and, unfortunately, vintage 2003 is not going to be a huge improvement. Although a handful of extraordinary wines were produced in '03, the vintage is extremely inconsistent in quality, producing just about everything from rich and plush reds to weak, alcoholic and acidic ones.

The vintage was apparently just too difficult for most Tuscan wine producers to handle. It was simply too hot for too long, and the majority of winemakers had no idea how to compensate for the extreme heat in their vineyards. "It was very, very difficult to make great wines in 2002 and 2003," admits Stefano Chioccioli, who is one of Tuscany's best consulting enologists. His impressive roster of wineries includes Tua Rita, Fanti, Tenimenti Luigi d'Alessandro and Antico Podere Gagliole. "I can't think of two vintages more different. They were extreme in opposite ways due to the weather in the summer."

The best wines from 2003 were made by the best consulting enologists in Tuscany. Their advice seemed essential for this particular year. For example, my top five wines were either produced by Chioccioli (Tua Rita Redigaffi and Tenimenti Luigi d'Alessandro Il Bosco) or Carlo Ferrini (Brancaia Ilatraia, Petrolo Galatrona and Sette Ponti Oreno). This isn't to say that a Tuscan estate couldn't make excellent wines in 2003 without the help of such enologists, but the results suggest that very few had the capacity to do so without them. My barrel tastings of other 2003s coming on to the market next year also bear this out.

Nevertheless, Chioccioli believes that any wine estate in Tuscany could have done well in 2003 if they worked well in their vineyards during the growing season. "It was all the work in the vineyard that made outstanding wines in 2003," explained Chioccioli, who emphasized that everything had to be done to combat the blistering heat and frying sunshine. "You had to cut back the grape crop in July and August. You had to not touch the leaf canopy of the vines [so the leaves would shade the grapes]. You had to arrange the grapes to fall on the east side of the vine [to reduce sun exposure]. And finally you had to not pick too early even if you were afraid of the potentially high alcohol."

Here are my top 2003s from this summer's blind tastings in my office in Tuscany.

Wine	Score	Price
BRANCAIA Maremma Toscana Ilatraia 2003	96	\$56
Gorgeous aromas of blackberries, raspberries and hints of tar follow through to a full-bodied palate, with supersilky tannins and a long, long finish. Classy red from Maremma. Rich yet subtle. Hard not to drink now. Cabernet Sauvignon, Sangiovese and Petit Verdot. Best after 2008. 350 cases imported. —J.S.		

FATTORIA PETROLO Toscana Galatrona 2003	96	\$85
Fantastic aromas of black olives, meat and berries with hints of violets. Complex. Full-bodied, velvety and long. Gorgeous and powerful Merlot. Blockbuster. This could be the wine of the vintage. Best after 2008. 150		

cases imported. —*J.S.*

SETTE PONTI Toscana Oreno 2003 95 \$95

Dense and powerful with grilled meat and currant aromas and flavors. Full-bodied, round and chewy. Big and rich. Massive and exciting. Breathtaking. More muscular than that excellent 2001. Sangiovese and Cabernet Sauvignon. Best after 2007. 1,650 cases imported. —*J.S.*

TUA RITA Toscana Redigaffi 2003 95 \$200

Intense aromas of raspberry sauce with vanilla cream. Full-bodied, soft and round with lots of fruit and a caressing, seductive texture on the finish. Big and juicy. Blockbuster. Merlot. Best after 2007. 150 cases imported. —*J.S.*

TENIMENTI LUIGI D'ALESSANDRO Syrah 94 \$50
Cortona Il Bosco 2003

Very powerful aromas of crushed black fruits, pepper and wet earth. Just a hint of roasted meat. Full-bodied, chewy and rich with a long, long finish. This is a fantastic Syrah. Like a great Hermitage. Best after 2008. 1,000 cases imported. —*J.S.*

CASANOVA DI NERI Toscana Pietradonice 2003 93 \$100

Gorgeous aromas of violets, blackberries and dark cherries follow through to a full-bodied palate, with velvety tannins and a long, flavorful finish. Balanced and rich. This has loads of character. And opulent style. Almost New World-like. Cabernet Sauvignon with a dash of Sangiovese. Best after 2006. 200 cases imported. —*J.S.*

FONTERUTOLI Toscana Siepi 2003 93 \$85

Extremely pretty blackberry and dark chocolate character with just a hint of spice. Full-bodied, with juicy tannins and a long finish. Soft and round. Very balanced and racy. Lots of structure. Merlot and Sangiovese. Best after 2008. 250 cases imported. —*J.S.*

SETTE PONTI Toscana Poggio al Lupo 2003 93 \$55

Lots of earthy, pruny and sweet tobacco character. Full-bodied, with chewy tannins. Violets and sweet fruits. Just a hint of cardamom on the finish. This is a stylish and multidimensional wine. Best after 2006. 600 cases imported. —*J.S.*

LOHSA Maremma Toscana Mandrone di Lohsa 2003 92 \$50

Gorgeous wine with violet, berry and cherry character. Full-bodied, with chewy tannins and a long, long finish. Love it. Chewy. Muscular. Cabernet Sauvignon, Alicante and Petit Verdot. Best after 2007. 100 cases imported. —*J.S.*

FATTORIA LE PUPILLE Toscana Saffredi 2003 92 \$104

Aromas of wild fruits, flowers and light raisin. Full-bodied with a Port-like

character. Silky and long. Stylish and decadent. I like it a lot. Exotic wine. Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Alicante. Best after 2008. 400 cases imported. —*J.S.*

CASTELLO DEI RAMPOLLA Toscana Sammarco 2003 92 \$105

Decadent and powerful with lots of berry, licorice and cedar aromas and flavors. Full and rich with lots of sweet fruit and a silky, caressing palate. Gorgeous. I like this better than d'Alceo. Best after 2007. 325 cases imported. —*J.S.*

SETTE PONTI Toscana Crognolo 2003 92 \$35

Bright and fruity aromas of plums, berries, currants and milk chocolate. Full-bodied, with soft tannins and a long, caressing finish. Loads of fruit and freshness here. Beauty. Always excellent. Same level as the excellent 2001. Best after 2007. 4,000 cases imported. —*J.S.*

TUA RITA Toscana Giusto di Notri 2003 92 \$80

This is very jammy on the nose but impressive with lots of raspberry and blackberry aromas. Full-bodied, soft and round with loads of opulent fruit. Lots of vanilla on the finish. Thick and caressing. Flamboyant red here. Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Cabernet Franc. Best after 2006. 400 cases imported. —*J.S.*

FATTORIA DI BASCIANO Colli della Toscana Centrale I Pini 2003 91 \$23

Full-blown jam aromas. Full-bodied, rich and round with loads of ripe fruit and a spicy character. Round and caressing. Flamboyant wine. Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Syrah. This is always excellent value. Best after 2008. 500 cases imported. —*J.S.*

BRANCAIA Toscana Il Blu 2003 91 \$56

Blackberries, currants and berries with hints of minerals. Full-bodied, and chewy with lots of character. Chewy and rich. Give this time. I like the 2002 better. Sangiovese, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon. Best after 2008. 1,000 cases imported. —*J.S.*

TENUTA DI GHIZZANO Toscana Nambrot 2003 91 \$50

Subtle aromas of blackberries, flowers, berries and perfume follow through to a full-bodied palate with lots of pretty berry character and a long, long finish. All in finesse. Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Petit Verdot. Best after 2008. 150 cases imported. —*J.S.*

MAZZEI Maremma Toscana Tenuta Belguardo 2003 91 \$65

Wonderful aromas of concentrated blackberry, toasted oak and dark chocolate. Full-bodied, with loads of berry and cherry character. Lots of vanilla. Long. Big and juicy wine. Very close to the 2002. Cabernet Sauvignon and Sangiovese. Best after 2008. 400 cases imported. —*J.S.*

CASTELLO DI AMA Chianti Classico 2003 90 \$38

Intensely fruity nose with crushed raspberries and plums. Full-bodied, with loads of fruit and velvety tannins. This is exceptional for the vintage. Ama sets the mark for quality Chianti Classico. Best after 2005. 12,000 cases made. —*J.S.*

PODERE LA CAPPELLA Chianti Classico 2003 90 NA

Beautiful for the vintage with clean and focused strawberry, raspberry and floral aromas. Full-bodied, with velvety tannins and a delicious fruity finish. Gorgeous. One of the best Chianti Classicos going in this vintage. Best after 2005. 80 cases imported. —*J.S.*

LE CORTI Chianti Classico Don Tommaso 2003 90 \$45

Intense aromas of plums and blackberries here. Slightly meaty. Full-bodied, with a compacted palate and a velvety, chewy mouthfeel. Impressive. Outstanding. Best after 2005. 700 cases imported. —*J.S.*

PODERE IL PALAZZINO Chianti Classico Argenina 2003 90 NA

Aromas of meat, blackberries and cedar. Full-bodied, with a soft and juicy tannin structure. Long, soft and delicious. Excellent. Drink now. 800 cases imported. —*J.S.*

PODERE IL PALAZZINO Chianti Classico Grosso Sanese 2003 90 NA

Some earthy and spicy character follows through to a medium-bodied palate with soft tannins and a medium finish. Soft and juicy. Drink now. 400 cases imported. —*J.S.*

PODERE IL PALAZZINO Chianti Classico La Pieve 2003 90 NA

Blackberries and violets on the nose. Full-bodied, with superfine tannins and a long, long finish. This is gorgeous. Long, generous yet classy. Drink now through 2010. 700 cases imported. —*J.S.*

POGGERINO Chianti Classico 2003 90 \$21

Dried cherry and blackberry with hints of flowers. Full-bodied, with lovely orange and dark fruits on the palate, with a chewy finish. Best after 2005. 700 cases imported. —*J.S.*