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Super Tuscan producers size up Syrah

Michael Apstein, Special to The Chronicle
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(04-20) 04:00 PDT Montalcino, Italy -- It was the first time I've been stopped by customs officials going into Italy. At Rome's Leonardo di Vinci International Airport, the uniformed official looked up from his coffee and conversation with several co-workers as I pushed my luggage cart through the green -- nothing to declare -- channel.

"What's in the box," was my interpretation of his Italian as he pointed to the large brown cardboard carton next to my suitcase. "Vino di California," I replied in broken Italian. He rolled his eyes and waved me through. I'm sure he was thinking to himself, "Crazy American bringing wine -- California wine -- into my country."

But I had a plan. I had lugged a dozen bottles of California Syrah and reds from France's northern Rhone Valley to compare to their Tuscan counterparts. I wanted to determine whether Tuscan Syrah was unique and stylistically different.

Syrah is making its first foray into Tuscany -- causing a subtle shift in the signature of Super Tuscan wines, even appearing as a varietal wine. Super Tuscans originated in the late 1960s as a response to insipid wine made primarily from Sangiovese grapes, the mainstay of Chianti. Growers had failed to limit yields of Sangiovese and the resulting wines lacked concentration and flavor. To make matters worse, regulations required inclusion of white grapes like Trebbiano and Malvasia in the Chianti blend.

Breaking the rules

The Tuscan ego -- the sense that they are the most cosmopolitan and innovative of all Italians -- may explain why the Italian wine revolution started there. In what turned out to be a brilliant innovation, Piero Antinori jettisoned the traditional white grapes to buttress the indigenous Sangiovese with Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc, making the now legendary Super Tuscan Tignanello in the 1970s. (One of Antinori's relatives, Mario Incisa della Rocchetta, is credited with making the first Super Tuscan, the 1968 Sassicaia, a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot.) Although Cabernet adds substance and structure, filling out the wine, its drawback is that even a little bit in the blend can dominate the final wine, muting the individuality of Sangiovese.

The driving force behind the creation of Super Tuscan wines -- to make better wines without being constrained by antiquated regulations -- explains why, even today, there is no accepted definition for this category. Nearly any upscale Tuscan red wine -- except Chianti or Brunello -- qualifies. (Some writers even include white wines.) Wines made exclusively from Sangiovese were included under the Super Tuscan umbrella as producers realized that viticultural practices to limit yields, such as high density planting and severe pruning, resulted in fabulous wines made solely from that grape.

Originally these pricey wines could only be sold under the lowliest category of Italian wine,



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vino da tavola ("table wine"), because they failed to conform to rigid Denominazione di Origine Controllata (DOC) regulations.

Embarrassed to have their best wines relegated as ordinary, the Italian wine authorities created a new rung on the regulatory ladder -- Indicazione Geografica Tipica (analogous to France's vin de pays) -- with fewer rules to give winemakers far more flexibility. Though better and more expensive than the category would imply, many Super Tuscans are labeled IGT Toscana. Confusingly, inexpensive wines that fail to conform to DOC regulations also carry the IGT designation. For the consumer, the choice should be based on the producer's name and reputation, not a set of initials.

Now Syrah has crept into Super Tuscans. It has the potential advantage of filling out the wine without obliterating the more delicate qualities imparted by Sangiovese. Unlike Cabernet Sauvignon's potentially hard-edged tannins, those from Syrah -- at least Syrah grown in Tuscany -- meld well with Sangiovese. In Italy, Syrah is not unique to Tuscany, but is also popular in Sicily. (Some argue that the grape originated and took its name from the Sicilian town Syracuse.) The modern origins of Syrah in Tuscany are hard to pin down, but all of the current plantings come from Rhone Valley clones.

Tuscan soil suits Syrah

Lars Leicht, a spokesperson for Castello Banfi, one of the wineries to embrace the variety, believes Banfi introduced the grape to the region in the late 1970s as part of its extensive new plantings for the then-new Montalcino estate. Others credit Paolo di Marchi, ironically from Piedmont, a region the Tuscans view as parochial, when he planted and made a varietal wine from it on his estate in the Chianti Classico region. According to one producer, farmers planted Syrah in Tuscany in the 19th century for the same reason they planted Sangiovese: its ability to produce a large crop.

Syrah has an affinity for Tuscany's dense clay soil, which brings out the grape's perfume and produces smaller bunches of grapes with smaller berries, which translates into more concentrated wine. Maurizio Marmugi, Banfi's viticulturist, believes that soil has a greater impact on wine made from Syrah compared with wine made from Sangiovese grapes.

The dry Tuscan summer -- rarely does rain fall from June to September -- is the chief impediment to growing Syrah because it stresses the vine and actually inhibits ripening. Irrigation is permitted, but is an expensive undertaking. In Tuscany, Syrah, similar to Merlot, ripens earlier than Sangiovese or Cabernet Sauvignon, which means it is safely in the winery before autumn rains can spoil the crop.

Although exact numbers are unavailable, Syrah clearly remains a minor player in the region. Banfi, with 150 acres of Syrah, has more of it planted than anyone in Tuscany, but it still represents only 7 percent of its total vineyards. (For comparison, 700 of its 2,000 acres are planted to Sangiovese.)

Beatrice Bonacossi, whose family owns Tenuta di Capezzana in Carmignano near Florence, is enthusiastic about Syrah, which her father planted as an experiment in the early 1990s. They replaced Cabernet Franc with Syrah in their Super Tuscan, Ghiaie della Furba, and are gradually increasing the amount in the blend, up to about 30 percent, because they believe it adds spice and complexity. In 2004, to honor the 1,200th anniversary of the winery, they made a 100 percent Syrah.

Although many other producers throughout Tuscany -- Angelo Gaja in Maremma in the west, Antinori and Alessandro Luigi in Cortona in the east, Fontodi and Isole e Olena in Chianti Classico, and Banfi in the south near Montalcino -- are experimenting with Syrah, not everyone has embraced it. Despite regulations that allow up to 25 percent of "other red varieties," including Syrah, in the blend of many Tuscan wines, such as Chianti, few producers seem to be using Syrah in this manner. (The 2003 Da Vinci Chianti, a wine in Gallo's portfolio, had 5 percent Syrah in the blend.)

Microclimate effects

Laura Bianchi, whose family owns Castello di Monsanto, one of the iconic properties in the

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Chianti Classico area, thinks it is very difficult to produce good Syrah where they are located. They have four rows of it, but are not happy with the results. The microclimate and soil just down the road at Paolo de Marchi's estate, Isole e Olena, must be different because he was one of the early advocates of the variety. Alessandro Lunardi, the U.S. market director for Tenuta dell'Ornellaia, one of the most sought-after Super Tuscans, believes that Syrah has potential as a component of a blend, though they have no intention of using it.

Unlike the customs officials, the staff at the Enoteca le Logge in Montalcino viewed the contents of my cardboard carton -- 2003 Sonoma Coast Vineyards Syrah and 2003 Beckmen Vineyards Santa Ynez Valley Syrah, plus a 2001 Guigal Cote Rotie and others -- with great interest as they wrapped the bottles in aluminum foil for our blind tasting. Roberto Cipresso, winemaker at his estate in Montalcino, La Fiorita, and consultant to other estates in Montalcino and Argentina, and Yoshiaki Miyajima, a certified sommelier and hospitality manager at Castello Banfi, joined several other American wine writers and myself.

The tasting showed Tuscany's potential for the varietal. Not as fruit-forward as California Syrah, they still had plummy flavors as expected from Syrah grown in warmer climates -- as opposed to the peppery element often found in Syrah from the cooler climes, such as the northern Rhone -- balanced by the lively acidity inherent in Italian wines. In the blends, Syrah added an alluring -- and exotic -- edge.

Don't expect Tuscan winemakers to replace all their Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot with Syrah, but it's likely we will be seeing more Syrah in the Super Tuscans and Chianti of the future.

Tasting notes

2004 Ca'Marcanda Promis (\$42) Angelo Gaja uses Syrah -- about one third of the blend -- to fill out the Merlot and Sangiovese in this entry-level wine from his Maremma estate. It works because it adds fullness and richness without overwhelming the typical bright cherry flavors and earthy components that Sangiovese and Merlot deliver. It's a wonderfully harmonious blend. Its supple tannins mean you can enjoy this wine without further aging.

2000 Tenuta di Capezzana Ghiaie della Furba (\$45) Capezzana is perhaps the leading producer in Carmignano, an area just west of Florence where blending Sangiovese and Cabernet Sauvignon has been the tradition and was codified into the regulations when the DOC was established in 1975. Although this is not a DOC wine, this Super-Tuscan blend of 60 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, 30 percent Merlot and 10 percent Syrah has a more "international" signature than Capezzana's Carmignano, but still retains Tuscan verve, earthiness and character. Its length and finesse -- given its powerful fruit flavors -- are remarkable.

2003 Castello Banfi Colvecchio Sant'Antimo Syrah (\$36) Pipe irrigation spared Syrah, unlike Sangiovese, from the drought of the 2003 growing season and helps explain the balance in this wine. More plummy than peppery, as expected, it also delivers an alluring meaty component surrounded by supple tannins and uplifting acidity that clearly identifies its Tuscan origin. California winemakers should take note of this great Syrah.

2003 Castello Banfi Summus Sant'Antimo (\$66) The rationale for using Syrah expressed by Paolo Benassi, one of Banfi's winemakers, makes as much sense as all of the logical explanations: "In Tuscany we blend everything, we love to blend." The proportion of Syrah in this Super Tuscan blend varies from 15 to 20 percent year to year. In 2003, it was 20 percent with the remainder split evenly between Cabernet Sauvignon and Sangiovese. This big -- but beautifully balanced wine -- conveys a multitude of thick black fruit flavors, cherry-like acidity and engaging hints of cocoa or chocolate.

2003 D'Alessandro Il Bosco Cortona Syrah (\$50) This 100 percent Syrah from Cortona exemplifies the powerfully plummy side of that grape in part because of the vintage. In every prior year of Il Bosco that I have tasted, its finesse coupled with power has stood out. The exotic leathery component supported by moderate tannins and ripe dense black fruit flavors suggests it will evolve nicely. Approach it now only if you like boisterous wine.

-- M.A.

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