

Decanter

Producer profile

Col d'Orcia

The first thing to do was pull up the tobacco and wheat; after that it was years of studying Sangiovese. All that work has paid off, says Kerin O'Keefe, and Col d'Orcia continues to set ever higher standards in Montalcino

COL D'ORCIA BELIEVES in Sangiovese. Unlike most of the other large companies in Brunello (it's the third-largest Brunello house in terms of area under vine), it opposed the consorzio's 2008 and 2011 proposals to allow grapes other than Sangiovese into Brunello and Rosso, and owner Francesco Marone Cinzano spoke his mind publicly. Col d'Orcia has invested in massive research into every aspect of grape-growing, including decades of work on Sangiovese. And even if all producers today like to say that winemaking begins in the vineyard, Col d'Orcia has always based its winemaking philosophy around starting with the healthiest grapes possible. It's now on course to become the largest organic winery in the whole of Tuscany.

Col d'Orcia can trace its Brunello-making roots back to the first decades of the 20th century. At that time it was part of a single estate, Fattoria di Sant'Angelo in Colle, spread out below the hamlet of Sant'Angelo in Colle, 15km south of Montalcino. Until the 1950s this estate also incorporated the historic Il Poggione vineyards. Documents show that the fattoria, owned by the Franceschi family, presented several vintages of its Brunello at Siena's first wine fair in 1933, back when only a handful of estates made Brunello and half a century before outside investors would swoop upon Montalcino to cash in on the Brunello boom.

In 1958, two Franceschi brothers inherited Fattoria di Sant'Angelo in Colle, and in the grand tradition of Tuscan scions, promptly decided they could not work together. They divided their large property into Col d'Orcia (which means Hill above

Right: Poggio al Vento was one of the region's first single-vineyard Brunellos, heralding a bright future for the estate

Orcia, the name of the local river) and Il Poggione. Fifteen years later, Count Alberto Marone Cinzano, whose family had been involved in Piedmont's vermouth and sparkling wine industries for centuries, purchased Col d'Orcia.

A new broom

When Marone Cinzano arrived, Montalcino was a depressed rural area, and, as well as grapes, the property was still growing tobacco, wheat and other crops. He immediately began pulling these out to plant more vineyards and, in 1975, he hired a full-time agronomist, Giuliano Dragoni, to follow the vineyards. Two years later, he hired an estate manager, Edoardo Virano, still there and now the managing director.

Marone Cinzano made a number of innovations that were avant-garde for the time. Perhaps his most significant contribution to Montalcino was underscoring the importance of specific vineyards and choosing the right areas to plant Sangiovese.

Col d'Orcia's most celebrated wine, Poggio al Vento, demonstrates this. First released in 1982, this single-vineyard Brunello riserva comes from vines at 350m above sea level with south-southwest exposures. It's made only in excellent vintages, and only about 20,000-25,000 bottles are produced. Marone Cinzano replanted the vineyard in 1974 with cuttings from existing vines; and although a vine density of 3,000 plants per hectare (ha) is low

'Perhaps one of Francesco Marone Cinzano's most significant contributions to Montalcino was choosing the right areas to plant Sangiovese'



by today's standards, the advanced age of the vines, over 35 years, generates concentrated flavours and aromas, while calcareous, well-draining soil lends structure. 'We always noticed that the best grapes came from Poggio al Vento, and before 1982, grapes from this vineyard went into our Brunello Riserva,' says Francesco Marone Cinzano, son of Alberto.

In 1988, better to understand Sangiovese, the firm began working with the University of Florence's

Roberto Bandinelli, a pioneer in Sangiovese clonal research. That same year it also began working with consultant oenologist and Sangiovese specialist Maurizio Castelli further to improve quality. In 1984 Col d'Orcia became one of the first wineries in Montalcino to plant Cabernet Sauvignon, which went into the varietal 'SuperTuscan' Olmaia. Released in 1991, Olmaia's debut 1989 vintage garnered critical acclaim.

Above: in their quest for quality, Francesco Marone Cinzano, left, and managing director, Eduardo Virano have trialled new clones and training systems, and kept faith with large casks

Col d'Orcia: a timeline

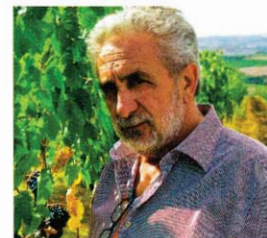
1933

Fattoria di Sant'Angelo in Colle presents several vintages of its Brunello at Siena's first wine exhibition



1973

Count Alberto Marone Cinzano buys Col d'Orcia



1958

The Franceschi family divides its Fattoria di Sant'Angelo in Colle estate into two parts, one of which becomes Col d'Orcia



1975

Agronomist Giuliano Dragoni joins

Col d'Orcia at a glance

Founded 1958

Size of estate 540ha

Area under vine

140ha, 101ha of which are planted with Sangiovese for Brunello

Annual production

600,000–700,000

bottles, of which

200,000–250,000

are Brunello

Flagship wine:

Poggio al Vento Brunello Riserva – 25,000 bottles, produced, only in the best years

Other key wines

as well as Brunello and Rosso di Montalcino, look for Banditella and Olmaia

'Large casks are fundamental to producing long-lived Brunellos, as barriques accelerate the ageing process' **Francesco Marone Cinzano**

Francesco took over in 1991. 'The first thing I did was build new vinification and ageing cellars, updated with the best technology and equipped to handle double the capacity, since I had already planned on expanding production,' he says. Over the next decade, vineyards were increased from 70ha to 140ha, with 101ha growing Brunello. Francesco also stepped up the research and development started by his father. 'In the 1970s and 1980s there was little academic research into Sangiovese or its cultivation, and there were many inadequate clones and outdated vineyard management techniques across Tuscany and even here in Montalcino,' he says. In 2003 he planted a trial vineyard with nearly extinct Tuscan grape varieties.

Painstaking research

Besides clonal research, the estate collaborates with Professor Attilio Scienza at the University of Milan on choosing the best spots for new vineyards and the best rootstocks for particular terrains. For years it has also been at the forefront of experimentation with training systems and vine density.

After Bandinelli's team had studied the vineyards, Col d'Orcia selected two clones from the Poggio al Vento vineyard. In 1997 it replanted several vineyards with these and saw a noticeable rise in quality. The clones were registered in 2011, making them accessible to all.

Col d'Orcia's winemaking team, led by Maurizio Castelli and winemaker Antonino Tranchida, who succeeded Pablo Harri in 2009, combine modern technology with time-honoured traditions. Picking is by hand and grapes are selected on a sorting table; the steel fermenting tanks are short and squat rather than tall and narrow, for greater skin

O'Keefe's five to try



Poggio al Vento Brunello di Montalcino

Riserva 2004 19pts/20 (96/100pts)

£90 **Vini Italiani, Wimbledon Wine Cellars**

The firm's flagship. Intense bouquet of violet, earth, truffle, pipe tobacco and leather. Rich cherry, spice and black tea palate. Impressive structure boasts firm but ripe tannins and vibrant acidity, creating a compelling combination of complexity and elegance. Will age beautifully. **Drink** 2014–2034 **Alc** 14.5%

Brunello di Montalcino 2007 18 (93)

£35 **I Camisa**

Enticing aromas of underbrush and wild cherry with hints of pine and eucalyptus. Succulent ripe cherry and spice flavours with chewy tannins and surprising freshness. **Drink** 2013–2017 **Alc** 14.5%

Rosso di Montalcino 2010 16.75 (89)

£17.95–£18.99 (2009) **I Camisa, Speck Deli,**

Wimbledon Wine Cellars

Classic fragrance of young Sangiovese: berry, cherry, citrus and underbrush, all of which carry over to the palate along with spicy notes. Succulent fruit but tannic structure. **Drink** 2013–2014 **Alc** 14.5%

Banditella Rosso di Montalcino 2010 16.5 (88)

£23.99–£25.50 (2009) **I Camisa, Speck Deli,**

Wimbledon Wine Cellars

International barrique-aged style. Espresso notes muffle delicate cherry and minerals. Sleek structure. **Drink** 2013–2015 **Alc** 14%

Olmaia Sant'Antimo Cabernet 2009

16.5 (88)

£44.99 (2005) **Wimbledon Wine Cellars**

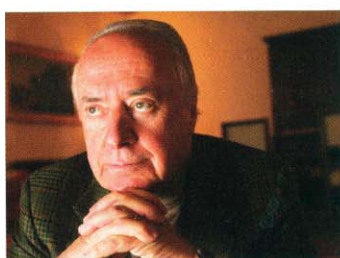
First vintage after replanting. Aged in new barriques, this is loaded with coffee, espresso and wood sensations. Bell pepper and chocolate on the palate with soft, smooth tannins. Should improve as vines mature. **Drink** 2013–2016 **Alc** 14%



For details of all UK stockists, see p85

1977

Edoardo Virano becomes estate manager



1984

Col d'Orcia is one of the first in Montalcino to plant Cabernet Sauvignon



1982

First vintage of Poggio al Vento Brunello Riserva, one of the first single-vineyard Brunellos



1988

Start of Sangiovese clonal research with Dr Bandinelli, University of Florence's Sangiovese specialist. Maurizio Castelli (pictured) starts work ➤



Photographs: Clay McLachlan/claypix.com(3)

Above: Val d'Orcia is a World Heritage site, and Col d'Orcia will soon be certified organic, in keeping with the area

contact and optimal extraction of both colour and polyphenols. The straight Rosso, Brunello and Riserva are aged in large Slavonian and French casks. 'Brunello and Rosso are wines that by custom are consumed with meals,' says Francesco. 'So it makes sense to age these wines in large neutral casks that don't impart obvious wood sensations.

'Brunello is also a wine prized for its impressive ageing potential, and large casks are fundamental to producing long-lived Brunellos, as barriques accelerate the ageing process,' he explains. On the other hand, Olmaia and the single-vineyard Rosso di Montalcino, Banditella, are aged in barriques, to satisfy those palates more accustomed to a more evident wood influence.

One of Col d'Orcia's most admirable qualities is that it is always striving to outdo itself; no small feat seeing that it is already highly acclaimed. Case in point: in 2010, the firm started the lengthy process of converting to organic viticulture. 'Val d'Orcia is a World Heritage site. It seems right to protect this area with organic farming,' says Francesco. 'To be honest, we've adhered to organic methods for years, in part thanks to our ideal growing conditions, and being surrounded by woods that offer biodiversity. It just seemed time to make it official.' Certification should arrive in 2013. Then Col d'Orcia will be Tuscany's biggest organic winery, and the benchmark for the region's other large estates will have been set a little higher. **D**

Kerin O'Keefe is author of Brunello di Montalcino – Understanding and Appreciating One of Italy's Greatest Wines (University of California Press).

Col d'Orcia: a timeline (continued...)



1991

Francesco Marone Cinzano is in charge. A new cellar is built and area under vine rises. Olmaia, a Cabernet Sauvignon 'SuperTuscan', is released

1997

Sangiovese clones selected from the estate trials are used for planting new vineyards



2011

Registration of two Sangiovese clones from the Poggio al Vento vineyard



2010

Start of conversion to organic methods

2013

Organic certification is due in August