

Wine & Spirits

April 2009



Bassa Maremma: Pan-Mediterranean reds are the new wave along Tuscany's winemaking coast

Until last summer, my mental image of Tuscany was very thickly wooded: it was all cypresses and holm oaks and misty, cool, vertiginous vineyards. then I spent one of the quietest afternoons of my life on a deserted, driftwood-strewn beach in the heart of the Parco Regionale della Maremma, on the Mediterranean coast near Grosseto, and my perceptions of Tuscany -and Tuscan wine- were forever altered.

by David Lynch

The Tuscany of Chianti and Montalcino, with all of their blind corners and steep pitches, had flattened out and opened up into something that didn't really seem Tuscan anymore. And the wines I was enjoying most weren't your garden-variety super-Tuscans, either. They were more like super-Mediterraneans, looking to the southern Rhône, Bandol or even Priorat for inspiration, rather than Bordeaux. **Among the best were the plush, fragrant reds of Ampeleia—a property part-owned by Trentino's Elisabetta Foradori—where both estate wines incorporate substantial percentages of grenache, mourvèdre and other Mediterranean varieties.** Another standout was Aragone, from Joseph Bastianich's La Mozza estate, a sangiovese fleshed out with a kitchen-sink mix of syrah, grenache, alicante bouschet and unsung locals such as ciliegiolo and montepulciano. These wines aren't inky monoliths—they have a spicy Mediterranean brightness to them, particularly in their aromas, and they are very much the wave of the future in a place where sandy soils and withering heat can turn the ubiquitous-yet-fickle sangiovese to mush.

Perhaps no one in the whole of the Maremma is investing in the pan-Mediterranean concept more so than Ampeleia. Unlike most of the aforementioned estates, which are clustered to the south of Grosseto, Ampeleia is nestled in the volcanic hills of Roccatoderighi, a village at the northern end of the Bassa Maremma. Although Ampeleia's vineyards reach up to 1,650 feet and higher and are a good 18 miles from the sea, Foradori and her partners have set out to create an entirely new kind of Maremma wine: while the flagship wine is based on cabernet franc grown in Ampeleia's highest-elevation vineyards,

both Ampeleia and its less-expensive sibling, Kepos, incorporate grenache, mourvèdre, carignan, alicante bouschet and marsellane (a rare cross of grenache and cabernet sauvignon).

I got into the car and climbed up to Roccatoderighi to meet Marco Tait, the young, Alto Adige-born winemaker at Ampeleia.

We sat down to a component tasting of varietal wine samples to be used in the Ampeleia and Kepos blends, and I don't know whether it was Tait's youth, Ampeleia's stunning, out-of-the-way frontier location or sunstroke, but I felt like I was tasting the future of Maremma red wine: **the carignan was reliably inky and black; the grenache minty, herbal and loaded with red raspberry fruit; the mourvèdre all lilacs and lavender.**



Yes, there was some excellent, smoky, very Tuscan sangiovese there, too, but when I tasted all the components together—in the form of Ampeleia 2004 and Kepos 2006— I was tasting some Tuscan answer to...Châteauneuf -du-Pape? Montsant? These wines were familiar and foreign at the same time, completely different from what I'd come to know as super-Tuscans.

And that's precisely the point. This is a different Tuscany down here, and the wines are starting to show it.

