

SUPER-TUSCANS

This issue's question is: "What is a Super-Tuscan?" Is it

- A. A really, really strong person from central Italy;
- B. A mythological warrior from the seventh century; or,
- C. A recently discovered strain of drug-resistant virus.

Well, I certainly hope you answered correctly – D. None of the above. Simply put, Super-Tuscans are red wines made in Tuscany that ignore the centuries old tradition of using primarily the Sangiovese grapes that are indigenous to the region, and instead include adding locally grown international grape varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, or Syrah. Also, the wines are aged for longer periods in small batches in oak barrels rather than large vats.

The humble beginnings of Super-Tuscan movement were just after WWII, when the Marchese Mario Incissa della Rocchetta planted the French varietals Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc at his estate in Bolgheri, a small town WSW of Siena, and began making Sassicaia. However, because his wines did not meet the stringent requirements of the Chianti DOC, they had to be labeled as the pedestrian "Vino da Tavola" or "Table Wine." It was 20 years before the blends were recognized as great wines. Sassicaia was released commercially in 1968, and in 1975 winemakers at the renowned Antinori released Tignanello and the Super-Tuscans exploded onto the scene.

Today, almost every Tuscan estate produces at least one Super-Tuscan and there is a formidable parade of Super-Tuscans with enigmatic names on wine shop shelves. For purposes of discussion, however, almost all Super-Tuscans can be assigned to one of four categories: 100 percent Sangiovese wines, Sangiovese blends, Merlot-based wines, and Cabernet Sauvignon-based wines. While producers have great flexibility in the names they give to their Super-Tuscan wines, it is rare that they don't name the wine after some ancestor or family member, some personal whimsy, or some geographic feature of the estate or vineyard.

At first, their scarcity, as well as their exclusion from the "good-old-boys" club of the DOC and DOCG, created a sensation, and the wines commanded astronomical prices; and many of the premier examples are still priced at \$100 a bottle or more. But as more wineries began adding Super-Tuscan blends to their repertoire, the prices became more reasonable, if you consider wines in the \$30-\$50 range "reasonable." There are a few wines calling themselves Super-

Tuscans that sell for under \$10, but in my opinion they are not representative of the high-quality of the better examples any more than a \$3 bottle of California Cab can compare to the upper-tier varietals on the market.

Also, a new official wine designation category called IGT (for Indicazione Geografica Tipica, roughly translated as “Indication of Geographic Type”) was introduced in the 1980s that permitted more expansive interpretations of the regional Tuscan label. While the revised, more flexible Chianti designation gives considerable latitude to producers, most Super-Tuscan producers today use the IGT designation, which permits them considerable flexibility and bestows more prestige than the Vino da Tavola designation. Producers also have considerable latitude with regard to what information can be included on the label and what names they can assign to their IGT wines.

Cent' anni,
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