

The Sangiovese Family

Charles Scicolone (November 05, 2007)



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Some thoughts after a Sangiovese seminar sponsored by Ruffino, a major Italian wine producing company that produces Chianti Classico and other Sangiovese-based wines

If I had to drink wine made from one grape variety for the rest of my life, it would be Sangiovese, the principal grape in wines like Chianti, Vino Nobile di Montepulciano, Morellino di Scansano, and Brunello di Montalcino. Almost all of the 20 regions of Italy produce Sangiovese and it is the most grown red grape in the entire country. Wines made with with this grape would be my number one choice because Sangiovese's good acidity and subtle fruit flavors match well with food. I only drink wine with food, like the Italians do, because the combination enhances the experience.

Recently, I attended a Sangiovese seminar sponsored by Ruffino, a major wine producing company that produces Chianti Classico and other Sangiovese-based wines. (Note that Chianti is a section of Tuscany that has eight wine producing zones. The largest zone is Chianti Classico. Chianti Rufina is the smallest zone. Do not mix up Chianti Rufina with Ruffino, the wine producer.) We started by tasting 5 wines:

- Chianti Classico Santadame 2005 from Ruffino which had fruity aromas and flavors of cherries and blackberries with a long finish. \$18

- Vino Nobile di Montepulciano Tenuta Ladola Nuova 2003 from Ruffino.

It had berry aromas, good acidity and a hint of strawberries in the aftertaste. \$22.

- Brunello di Montalcino Tenuta Greppone Mazzi 2001 from Ruffino. With aromas of blueberries and spices, this is a rich, full wine with a very long finish. 2001 was a great year for Brunello and this wine showed very well, though it still needs a few years to mature. \$60.



-The last two were Sangiovese wines from Washington State and from California. All I can say about these is that when buying sangiovese, stick to Tuscany, Umbria, or Emilia-Romagna.

After this introduction, we tasted another 5 wines based on sub-varieties (clones) of Sangiovese. The experts who introduced these wines explained why some clones are better for making Chianti, while others are more suited to Brunello. All of the experts mentioned how difficult Sangiovese is to grow. The winemakers choose their clones depending on the type of wine they want to make.

The highlight of the seminar was the opportunity to taste the Ruffino Riserva Duca Ora in 5 vintages: 1977, 1985, 1988, 1990, 1995, and 1999. They were outstanding because of their mature subtle, mellow flavors.

It is interesting to note that these older wines were made with a traditional method that is now forbidden in Chianti Classico: adding a small percentage of white grapes to the blend. They were also made by the traditional governo method, meaning that 10% of the grapes are dried before they are pressed. To my knowledge, only one producer continues to make wine with the governo method.

Today almost every wine producer will tell you that Chianti Classico made with white grapes and with the governo method does not age well. In my opinion, the explanation is very simple: it is much easier to make wine without using white grapes and without the governo method. Modern methods that enhance color and concentration as well as aging wines in the small French barrels called barriques to give them an oaky, vanilla flavor, makes it much easier to vinify Sangiovese. This, they also believe, makes the wine easier to sell.

Three years ago a friend opened a bottle of Ruffino Riserva Duca Ora with our dinner. He asked the guests to taste and then guess the age of the wine. 1990 or 1985 or 1982 were guessed, but we were all wrong. The wine was from the 1947 vintage and at 57 years old it was drinking perfectly!

If you can find any of these older wines, buy them and let's have dinner together.

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A wine educator, he is the wine director of New York's "I Trulli Restaurant" (122 East, 27th St.), and writes for many publications. Together with his wife, food writer Michele Scicolone, Charles is the author of "Pizza: Easy Recipes for Great Homemade Pizzas, Focaccia, and Calzones" (Random House, 2007).



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