

OCTOBER 2008

FOOD ARTS

AT THE RESTAURANT AND HOTEL FOREFRONT



EUROPEAN : BURN UP
FLAVORS : THE TRACK

HEAT OF A TUSCAN SON

WINE REPORT A CANADIAN TRUCKING TITAN RETURNS TO HIS NATIVE ITALY TO REVEL IN AN ICONOCLASTIC APPROACH TO WINEMAKING. SHARRI WHITING DE MASI REPORTS.

The Italians figured it out years ago. With their unerring eye for beauty and taste for good things, they've been waxing poetic about Tuscany for centuries. Read this snippet of verse memorized by generations of Italian schoolchildren and see if you don't experience an irresistible urge to make a plane reservation:

*Lieta dell' aer tuo veste la luna
Di luce limpidissima i tuoi colli
Per vendemmia festanti.
E le convalli popolate di case e d'oliveti
Mille di fiori al ciel mandano incensi.*

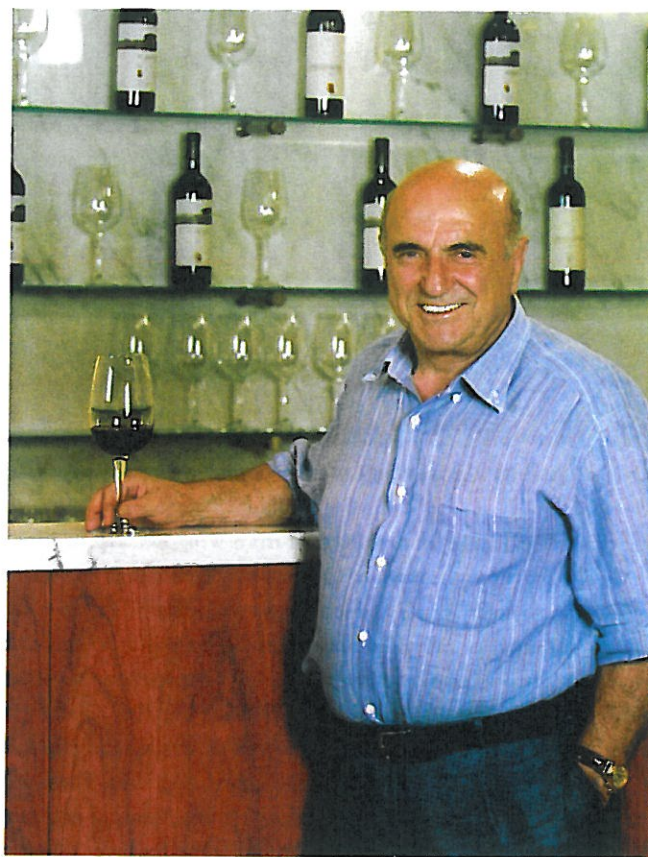
In your pleasant air, the moon dresses
Your hills with limpid light
Celebrating the harvest of the grapes.
And hillsides dotted with houses and olive groves
Send up to the sky the scents of thousands of flowers.
—Niccolò Ugo Foscolo, *I Sepolcri*, 1806

If you asked 10 people about their dreams, at least a few would envision owning a vineyard near Siena, with rows of vines stretching to the horizon and a villa suspended in time 400 years ago. If you checked on a hundred or a thousand of these dreamers five, 10, or 50 years later, probably only one would have had the tenacity to follow his passion. Pierluigi Tolaini, aka Louie, would be that one. His dream lit a fire in his belly, and the only way to douse it was with a Super Tuscan.

It would have been easier being a kid with no money in, say, Sicily, where it's a common condition, than growing up as a poor boy in Tuscany, where patrician families rule their domains from ancient villas surrounded by vineyards and vacation in Cortina d'Ampezzo, Sardinia, or Capri. Tolaini learned early what he wanted and that, at age 19, he would have to leave Lucca and Italy to get it.

Becoming an entrepreneur with a \$500,000,000 trucking business in Canada set the stage for the way Tolaini has handled the winery he always wanted. He started out in Manitoba, Canada, as an immigrant who didn't speak English, scraped together \$25,000 in savings over five years of sweat labor, and bet it on a truck, founding a transport business, TransX, which today takes his vehicles, many of them refrigerated, from Canada to Mexico and parts in between.

Finally, after almost 50 years of empire building, satisfying his dreams had become a habit for Tolaini, but he still didn't have that vineyard. In 1998, he bought property near Siena, high up in the hills, with spectacular views and a show-stopping villa, which



Pierluigi "Louie" Tolaini in the tasting room adjacent to the estate's barrel storage cellar.

would become Tolaini Estate, his winery and cantina.

The entrepreneurial Tolaini was never a traditionalist, and he isn't one now. The fact that his vintner neighbors were doing things the same way they've been done for centuries wasn't good enough for the outsider who looks at things with a fresh eye. For him, the world didn't begin and end on the borders of Chianti, or even Tuscany. So, he flouted the rules and went for a different idea about canopy management of vines. Grow them off the ground. Prune away excess leaves to allow the plants to focus on the fruit. Use the double Guyot, a system widely used in Bordeaux, rather than the Italian tendone trellis system. To some it's blasphemy, but it works for Tolaini and some other innovators in the area.

Next, Tolaini poked the wine god in the eye by bringing a French wine consultant to central Italy. Tolaini's good business sense, a usual trumped his sense of protecting the status quo. The advice from Michel Rolland about the Bordeaux style of growing and producing bore fruit, and Tolaini's Duesanti 2003 (renamed Valdisant



Montebello (Tolaini's house) at the Tolaini Estate winery overlooks the Montebello vineyards.

in 2007) pulled a highly competitive 91 from *Wine Spectator* in 2006.

We drove over to the town of Castelnuovo Berardenga one warm summer day to meet Tolaini and see if he's the dedicated guy they say he is or just another rich dilettante throwing money at a bunch of grapevines. His \$30,000,000 investment has been spent on the kind of people and equipment, structures and properties that show he is serious about making good wine. Two vineyards, the Montebello and the San Giovanni, cover 160 acres of the estate's 267 acres. These are among the prettiest vineyards around; and though Mama always said that beauty isn't everything, Italians would argue that pleasing the eye is as important as pleasing the palate.

Who is Pierluigi Tolaini? He seems to be the amalgamation of his experiences—he knows what it's like to be both poor and rich, he's built something very big from nothing, thrusting him from the world of manual labor to a sophisticated universe built on layer upon layer of service. And, yet, comfortable as he may be with the rich and famous, he is equally as comfortable standing in the heat between rows of vines, talking to some of his crew of male and female pruners, exchanging views with the young Italian with a degree in enology whom he has tapped as second in command. Driving from one field to another, he stops and greets his employees by name, making sure they know the part they play in making this well-oiled machine continue to run. Surely, he remembers those old days in Lucca when he talks to them.

Ever the tinkerer and believer in the value of comfortable productivity, Tolaini designed, built, and patented a kind of side-saddle tractor for pruning and harvesting densely planted fields of grapes. Surely, in his next life, he will be the patron saint of agricultural workers, because with this little machine, bending over to handpick and

prune is history. Can a mass-marketed Louie-trak be far behind?

And Tolaini's wine? After walking those rolling acres of grape and olives, we wandered through the impressively restored villa that serves as the *barriccaia* (cellar), where up to 1,200 *barriques* can be stored, and the adjacent cantina, where private groups of wine lovers often come to taste. Driving to another part of the estate we pulled up to Montebello, the renovated stone farmhouse that Tolaini uses as home. As Carmella Nisi, Tolaini's house manager bustled in the kitchen with the *mozzarella di bufala*, homemade *matriciana* sauce, and *insalata*, he uncorked a bottle of Valdisanti 2004, one of the best of the Indicazione Geografica Tipica denominated wines popular among Tuscan winemakers who aren't interested in producing Denominazione di Origine Controllata o Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita.

Aged for 18 months in new French oak barrels, Valdisanti (formerly Duesanti) is a mixture of 75 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, 1 percent Merlot, and 10 percent Cabernet Franc from the estate's vineyards. The label design features a chalice and serpent taken from a 16th century painting by Manetti, found in the church bordering Montebello. The highly rated 2003 was introduced late in 2007 at a private dinner in New York City honoring Tolaini's Tuscan neighbor, Andrea Bocelli, and his *Vivere* TV special and CD, and Grammy-winning songwriter David Foster.

Tolaini also produces *Al Passo*, a blend of Sangiovese and Merlot, and the winery's signature *Picconero*, a blend of Merlot and Cabernet Franc. Named for the small circular forest that tops the tallest hill on the Tolaini Estate, with magical views of the countryside and the towers of Siena, *Al Passo* is the exclusive Italian house red poured at **The Four Seasons** restaurant in New York City. As befits a wine only produced in exceptional years, the Tolaini *Picconero* Tuscany IGT Italy 2004 was introduced in style in late 2007 at a dinner following the New York City screening of Robert Redford and Tom Cruise's film, *Lions for Lambs*.

Tolaini is making a lot of wine. He's gone from a few thousand bottles the first year to an overall total of 400,000 bottles, many of which are sold through his wholly owned distributor, Banville and Jones, in New York. This is a guy who thinks big—he says he is shooting for half a million bottles within the next few years. But then, he's never been a boutique kind of person—he builds things, with the endless vision that comes naturally to a successful entrepreneur.

Tolaini, of course, is not the only person who found his way to winemaking after years doing something else. Francis Ford Coppola in California comes to mind, as do Tuscan winemaker Salvatore Ferragamo, of the shoe family, who produces *Il Borro* wines, and Glynn Cohen, a native Zimbabwean living in South Africa, who turned Mangiacane, former home of the Machiavelli family, into a showcase winery and villa hotel. They may all be interlopers in some people's minds, but why shouldn't those who have become successful in other ways arrive to shake up the wine industry now and then?

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