

Ep 169: Everything you need to know about Super Tuscan wines



Janina Doyle 00:00:07 Welcome to Eat Sleep Wine Repeat, a podcast for all you wine lovers, who, if you're like me, just cannot get enough of the good stuff. I'm Janina Doyle, your host, Brand Ambassador, Wine Educator, and Sommelier. So, stick with me as we dive deeper into this ever evolving, wonderful world of wine. And wherever you are listening to this, cheers to you!

Hello, wine lovers, and welcome back to another episode where today, I have more than your average wine story. So, this is an Italian wine style I'm talking about, a category created from rebellion, but also innovation.

So, the short story takes us back to a group of daring winemakers deciding to break all the rules, create something totally new, planting French grapes in Italian soil. Eh, voila! Super Tuscan wines were born.

In the 1980s, these wines have taken the wine world by storm and they still are some of the most highly desirable wines in today's wine scene. So, by the end of this episode, you should hopefully feel more excitement when opening up a Super Tuscan knowing it is a wine that broke all tradition, represents innovation and is a perfect blend of history and modernity.

But before we dive into today's episode, I've got to give a huge shout out to the amazing sponsor [Wickhams Wine](http://www.wickhamwine.co.uk). Thanks to their support, I'm not burning the midnight oil every night trying to do this all by myself. So, show them a bit of love by popping across to their site online. It's www.wickhamwine.co.uk and you'll be rewarded with some liquid poetry and don't forget to use my code "EATSLEEP10" for 10% off your first order.

Alright, let's dive deeper into the fascinating individuals behind these remarkable Super Tuscan wines.

Janina Doyle 00:02:19 Before we look at who created the very first Super Tuscan wine, I think it's probably best that I explain what it actually is. So, this is going to take us back to the early 1970s – well actually to be honest, even before this.

We're in Tuscany, Italy. Hopefully, now you are already virtually imagining the rolling hills, the cypress trees, olive groves, and all the vineyards that are wrapped around medieval towns. Okay, if you're there, now I want you to take this image but move to the stunning coastal landscapes of the Maremma region which is along the coast of the Tyrrhenian Sea.

Now, this is in the southwest of Tuscany. This is where it all started. So, this wine style was crafted initially by very esteemed winemaking families, which I will get onto in a moment, as they wanted to break away from the traditional Italian DOC system.

DOC stands for Denominazione di Origine Controllata. And if a winemaker wants to release a wine under a DOC designation, they have to adhere to strict regulations governing various aspects of winemaking such as yields per hectare, the alcohol content, ageing in the winery and in this specific case, most importantly, the permitted grape varieties.

The point of a DOC wine is to represent the traditional styles, the characteristics of said respective region. So, you are respecting the unique terroir and the winemaking traditions of that place, which of course is great.

Janina Doyle 00:04:09 However, many a frustrated winemakers feel restricted in their ability to innovate and experiment with so many rules and wants to create wines with complete freedom. So, for creativity's sake, these winemakers accepted the risk of releasing their potentially super premium wine as just a table wine or a *Vino da Tavola*.

Now, just for a little bit more context, Chianti has always been one of the most well-known wine regions in Tuscany but in the past it was often focusing on yields and volume rather than quality. And so winemakers by law had to produce wines using red grapes, Sangiovese and Canaiolo, whether they wanted to or not. They were not allowed to produce a 100% Sangiovese wine. And in fact, you also had to include white grape varieties, Trebbiano, or, and Malvasia to the blend.

Realising that the current methods at the time were not conducive to crafting top tier wines, winemakers decided to think outside the box and embarked on this journey of experimentation with international grape varieties, planting grapes like Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot.

Now, when people began singing and shouting about these really remarkable wines, they realised there was a bit of a naming dilemma as you cannot fit these wines into the DOC guidelines. But really, you need to set them apart from the more ordinary wines designated as *Vino da Tavola*.

So, in the early 1980s, the term Super Tuscan was soon coined and so to explain what is a Super Tuscan because there isn't a set recipe. Typically this is a blended red wine using the indigenous Sangiovese grape with a Bordeaux influence, so using Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. However, you may find a 100% Sangiovese as these originally were never allowed in the Chianti DOC. And of course, other French varieties are used such as Syrah, Cabernet Franc.

Janina Doyle 00:06:37 Now, alongside the grapes, new French oak barrels are often used. And so, for the finest Super Tuscan, they tend to have this rich, full-bodied character with beautifully integrated tannins, they have this nuanced oak-driven spices and they have this ability to age for decades.

Now, the most iconic Super Tuscan, well, they frequently command prices in the hundreds and hundreds of pounds per bottle. However, you can find slightly more affordable options. So, I have a few for you because we all deserve, no matter our budget, to be able to try some of these.

If you have £18 to spend, more or less, I'm not sure if you can find a better wine than this. If you think you can, please let me know because I want to try it too. And this is from the winery Querciabella and they have a wine called Mongrana.

Now it's a blend of Sangiovese with Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. And if you don't know about Querciabella, they are one of Tuscany's top wineries and they make some incredible Chianti classicos, so, a great one to go to.

Now, if you are happy to maybe spend £26 - £27, you can get Le Volte Tenuta dell'Ornellaia, which is the third wine of Ornellaia. But we are going to get onto Ornellaia in a bit, so no more stories here.

And then as a third option, if you have a little bit more in your budget, at about £40, you can get the Ca'Marcanda Promis, which is a blend of Merlot, Syrah and Sangiovese.

Now this is the Tuscan venture from Angelo Gaja, who many of you may have heard or recognised the name is widely regarded as one of the most influential figures in Italian wine. Like, seriously. Gaja's Barbaresco, his wine's there, they are celebrated globally and the Ca'Marcanda estate, not as well known, but is situated in Maremma, it's Gaja's challenge to himself basically to work with more international varieties.

And I have visited that estate, my God, actually the winery is built underneath grass. It's incredible. You definitely have to go to the Maremma region and visit them. But this is a fantastic Super Tuscan wine to try. I guess that's a pretty good introduction to what a super Tuscan wine is. Now let's go to who created the very first one.

Janina Doyle 00:09:30 So, the beginning of this story, and without a doubt, one of the pioneering forces behind Super Tuscan wines is Marchese Mario Incisa della Rocchetta, who moved to Bolgheri in Tuscany in the 1940s.

You might recognise the Rocchetta name. This is a very noble family from the Piedmont region. And in fact, they even got a mention only a few episodes ago, episode 166, when I was talking with Braida Winery. So, go check that out if you missed that episode.

Now, growing up, he has memories of, imagine this, tasting Claret in Barrique with his grandfather, as we all do, right? But he really developed a real love for Bordeaux varieties. Now being in Bolgheri on the coast, the only grapes typically planted at this time were the local Sangiovese grapes and quality was not great.

However, conveniently for him, he was family friends with Mouton Rothschild, so a second growth classified winery at that time in Bordeaux. Although since 1973 they were promoted to first growth status, now putting them as one of the top five chateaux of Bordeaux.

And so, he spoke with Mouton Rothschild, spent time in Bordeaux and learned everything he could from them. So bringing those ideas back to his estate named Tenuta San Guido, he began planting slightly further away from the sandy soils on the coast and on a plot with stony soils and with much higher altitude and he planted Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc.

Janina Doyle 00:11:20 Now he named his vineyard Sassicaia, which, fun fact, translates to the area of many stones. And he began bottling his very first vintage from 1945. However, after several years, he was still not happy with it and he realised he needed a little bit more of an experienced oenologist to help.

Now conveniently, the Antinori family were his cousins. So working out for him! The winemaking history with the Antinori family dates back to 1385. They are one of the oldest family owned companies in the world. And to top that off, at the time, their oenologist was Giacomo Tachis, who, if you want to look him up, is considered by many the winemaker to have led the rebirth of Italian fine wine. He's now dubbed the father of Super Tuscan wines.

So, with Giacomo on board, Mario Incisa modernised his winemaking process and he refined the wine. The first vintage with Giacomo's help was the 1968. And up until this point, the wine had just been enjoyed by family and friends. And with the help of Mario Incisa's nephew, Piero Antinori, who turned up in 1972 to help market this wine to the world, it was the 1968 that became the very first commercial vintage.

The 1972 was entered into a great Claret blind tasting competition with Decanter magazine and against 33 other wines from 11 countries, it won. But then the 1985 vintage brought about even more attention with a 100 point review from Robert Parker.

Now the wine, as we know it today, is an 85% Cabernet Sauvignon and a 15% Cabernet Franc. So, following on from Sassicaia, it is no surprise that the Antinori's with Giacomo Tachis of course, were at about the same time working on their own Super Tuscan.

Piero Antinori was experimenting with different grape varieties from their very best vineyard in the heart of Chianti Classico region called Tignanello. And all this was again a way to produce something special due to the current reputation and the, well, I was going to say quality, the lack of quality of these wines that were coming out of the area.

Janina Doyle 00:14:14 Now again, a little bit of French influence. Legendary Bordeaux oenologist Émile Peynaud gave suggestions to Piero to remove all of the white grapes from the blend, something that as you know, in Chianti was a requirement under the DOC regulations. Also, he recommended to try ageing the wine in some new oak, so specifically the Bordeaux barriques, rather than the large old barrels currently being used.

And it was the very first Sangiovese to be aged ever in Barriques. And then anyway, the final ingredients to make Tignanello the Super Tuscan that we know of today, it was adding in Cabernet Sauvignon and then later on, after several more vintages and tweaks, a small amount of Cabernet Franc also to the Sangiovese blend.

So, the typical blend that we know of today is about 80% Sangiovese, 15% Cabernet Sauvignon and 5% Cabernet Franc. So, the very first vintage was 1971, so a few years after Sassicaia and it was released and brought to the world in 1974. In fact, Wine Spectator called Tignanello the most influential wine in the history of Italy.

Janina Doyle 00:15:38 Now, as if that wasn't enough, the icon which is Solaia was created in 1978. I hope you're all making note of these dates! This was actually created almost by accident, apparently. The harvest of 1978 gave Piero Antinori high yields of this incredible taste in Cabernet Sauvignon and far more than what they needed for the Tignanello.

And then, after him producing and playing around with this wine, the next year also gave great fruit and so the Solaia continued. So, right now, it's basically a mirror image of Tignanello. So, about 75% Cabernet Sauvignon, 15% Sangiovese with about 5% Cabernet Franc.

Now, whilst Sassicaia was produced before Tignanello, there is this nuanced difference in their history that leads to the distinction that Tignanello is the first Super Tuscan. So, all over the internet you're going to see it written that the first Super Tuscan is Tignanello and I often get asked about this as well, Sassicaia indeed predates Tignanello by a few years.

However, Sassicaia was not initially intended for commercial sale, but rather for personal consumption by the family and friends, whereas Tignanello, on the other hand, was conceived and produced with a very clear intention of challenging the traditional Italian wine classification system right from the outset.

So, Tignanello made a bold statement. While Sassicaia was very innovative, it wasn't initially conceived as a commercial wine to challenge the regulations. Therefore, Tignanello is often credited as the first deliberate Super Tuscan even though Sassicaia came first.

Janina Doyle 00:17:37 Now, to finish with a few other iconic Super Tuscan wines that cannot be missed from the story and still sticking with the Antinori family. Piero Antinori's brother Lodovico decided to do his own thing and created Ornellaia Estate on a property neighbouring the Sassicaia Estate in Tuscany's Maremma Coast in 1981. And the first vintage there was the 1985.

Now Ornellaia is a 50-60% Cabernet Sauvignon blend with about 20-25% Merlot and 15% Cabernet Franc. And sometimes there's a touch of Petit Verdot in there as well. The good news is, because these wines are not cheap, the Estate now has a second wine and also a third one. So the second wine is called Le Serre Nuove dell'Ornellaia and it utilises the same grape varieties as the primary blend but it sources its fruit from younger vines.

Typically this wine boasts a higher concentration of Merlot though. Meanwhile, Ornellaia's third wine, Le Volte dell'Ornellaia, which I mentioned at the beginning of the episode, incorporates Sangiovese with the international varieties of Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon.

Janina Doyle 00:19:00 Now, we can't all be drinking red wine all the time, so lucky for us, they produce an Ornellaia Bianco, which is a Sauvignon Blanc with Viognier, and if you've got a sweet tooth, they even have a sweet late harvest wine made from Petit Manseng.

So, since its inception, Ornellaia has attracted super renowned figures to its production. It seems everybody has wanted to get their hands on this property. So, Robert Mondavi from California initially acquired a minority stake in the estate. And that was in 1999. And then took over full ownership in 2001.

However, from 2002 to 2005, Mondavi collaborated with the Frescobaldi family in co-owning the property. And now it's the Frescobaldi's who, by the way, boast just over 700 years of winemaking heritage and since 2005 they've acquired Ornellaia outright. Then if that wasn't enough you also have Michel Rolland, the famous flying winemaker and consultant who has been working as their consultant since 1991.

Janina Doyle 00:20:14 And then to finish off we have Masseto. Now despite being produced and marketed independently from Ornellaia, Masseto stands out as arguably the estate's most coveted wine. So, crafted solely from Merlot grapes, this is the wine I always bring up when someone says that Merlot doesn't have that same potential as Cabernet Sauvignon.

The first vintage was bottled in 1986 and was actually called Merlot dell'Ornellaia. However, the first commercial vintage followed in 1987. Called Massetto, 100% Merlot as I mentioned. And the iconic vintage of 2001 got 100 points from Robert Parker. Again, that massively put this wine on the map.

Now you can get their second wine, which has only been going since 2017. And it's called Masetino, which at around £300 a bottle, it's not exactly a steal, but if you want to taste a little bit of Masseto's brilliance without the £900 price tag. Well, you know, this allows you to dip your toes into that world.

Janina Doyle 00:21:45 So to finish off, it's worth looking at the effect that Super Tuscans have had and how they have shaped Tuscany. And certainly for one thing, these winemakers now no longer have to release their wines as Vino da Tavola.

Nowadays, Super Tuscans can in fact be released under IGT, DOC or in fact even DOCG status. Bolgheri secured its own DOC status in 1983 but, more importantly, in 1994, the rules were revised to allow the use of the red grape varieties grown in that area. But even more impressively, in 2013, Sassicaia was granted its own distinctive DOC designation. So, DOC Bolgheri Sassicaia. That says something.

It's also worth noting. I guess this is kind of another fun fact. Bolgheri's short history as well, considering that historically it was a swamp land and only drained in the 1930s. But it's those alluvial soils that have worked wonders for Bordeaux varieties. So in fact, the gravelly soils that it has are very similar to Graves in Bordeaux.

Now back to the regulation part, again. In 1992, very importantly, the Toscana IGT, so Indicazione Geografica Tipica was created to allow in this more creative way making styles using French grapes, and it's definitely worth mentioning that by the 1980s, the pressure was really being felt in the Chianti region to produce higher quality wine.

And so, in 1984, Chianti DOC actually became a DOCG and the rules began to change. So, most importantly, Sangiovese now could be 75-90% of the blend, whereas before it was only 50-75%. They allowed up to 10% of the international varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, so that is saying something. And they also lowered the usage of white grapes. Thank goodness!

But then, from 1996, they made it possible to make a 100% Sangiovese. And finally, in 2006, the usage of white grapes in Chianti was banned. So, all this has certainly been an attempt to be able to attract back the three main Super Tuscans who produced their wines within Chianti and could in fact label their wines 'Chianti Classico DOCG' if they wanted to.

So, I'm talking about Tignanello of course, but also the incredible Cepparello from Isole e Olena and Flaccianello della Pieve from Fontodi. But interestingly enough, all three of these wines have chosen to continue releasing their wines under IGT classification.

There are hundreds of these wines originally created in rebellion but now simply produced as examples of a winemaker's personal passion and expression. So, I hope enough names have been dropped in this episode to help you in your explorations. So next time you are looking for a wine adventure, maybe you may want to reach for a Super Tuscan and get ready to be wowed.

Janina Doyle 00:25:25 So the Académie de Vin library published a book called Marchese Antinori. It's all about this incredible wine dynasty responsible for Tignanello, Solaia, and then many other incredible wines that are not super Tuscan such as Cervaro della Sala. That is one of my favourite Chardonnays.

And there are loads of beautiful quotes that have been taken from this book and taken from the Antinori family. And so, one of them is simply:

“Making wine is an act of love.”

I just think that's so beautiful. I totally echo that. Making wine is just like spreading love. It's all about pouring your heart into something, staying committed, and looking for more ways to add that necessary spice. So, if you are only drinking wine and not making it, share a good wine with a beautiful person this week. Shine your light bright and continue to enjoy the spice of life.

Next week, I have drink columnist from the Metro, Rob Buckhaven, shedding light on another leading light in the international wine world and that is Torres. So, as their ex brand ambassador, he travelled around Catalonia and so next week's focus is on pre-phylloxera varieties of Spain and the new regulations, changes and positive focuses that are happening in DO Cava and DO Priorat.

As always, do not forget to like this episode. If you're enjoying it, just subscribe and press the bell to make sure you never miss one and please take two minutes to write a review and especially if you're listening on Apple Podcasts as this makes this episode more visible for other wine lovers. Now wishing you a tasty wine week ahead. And until next Monday, wine lovers, cheers to you.