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Tradition Rebooted

Two winemakers are set on reclaiming Tuscany's winemaking glory by very different means *By Sarah Heller MW*

Tuscany has long been famous for its wines, but tradition is getting an overhaul

Wine is an arena in which novelty and tradition are engaged in a complex and never-ending act of switcheroo. I was struck by this recently in contemplating two members of Italy's wine elite—both Tuscan, both sangiovese—one of which could be characterised as an embodiment of newness, the other the culmination of centuries of tradition, the two unexpectedly simpatico in spirit. Never has Tuscany seen such a tranquil dichotomy.

NEW OLD / OLD NEW

Perhaps in reaction to an ever-more globalised world, recent popular

wine opinion has swung decisively towards tradition, granting even once-maligned but historical names like Chianti a shot at a return to grace. The “traditional” wine of the pair I considered (though ironically the newer project of the two) is the most ambitious yet of the Chianti Classico Gran Selezione. “Gran Selezione”—stipulating estate-grown fruit as well as a maturation time exceeding that of the former pinnacle, Riserva—is a classification aimed squarely at the collector market.

With its first vintage released in 2015, Il Caggio Ipsus is a tiny-production (3,600-bottle) estate

wine from the deep-rooted Mazzei family; one ancestor, Ser Lapo Mazzei, penned a 1398 document that is the earliest known reference to Chianti wine. Spearheaded by 25th-generation descendant Giovanni Mazzei, Ipsus surpasses even the trio of Gran Selezione wines produced by the Mazzei's historic Castello di Fonterutoli, in the family since 1435, and is priced less like something bearing the name “Chianti” and more like a top Super Tuscan.

Meanwhile, the pendulum swing towards tradition has left Super Tuscans, those hero wines of last century, in a tenuous position.

Having once convinced the world that Italy was as capable of greatness as France or California, they now bear the uncomfortable pall of “modernism” that sends today's discerning collector fleeing for more unpronounceable pastures.

The irony is that while some Super Tuscans were about bucking tradition, others were less so. Two distinct strains of this catchily named group evolved roughly simultaneously around the early 1970s, their only real commonality being their creators' distaste for bureaucracy. One cohort was made from international grapes on the previously disregarded Tuscan

coast; the other within traditional zones like Chianti Classico but with compositions disallowed by the appellations, either for including international grapes like cabernet and merlot; or, more absurdly, for excluding traditional grape varieties now largely conceded to be detrimental.

Thus 100 per cent sangiovese wines from within Chianti Classico like the iconic Le Pergole Torte were forced to bear the same newly created designation “IGT” (Indicazione Geografica Tipica, ostensibly lower on the totem pole than DOC and DOCG wines) as the Bordeaux blends of Bolgheri

until 1996, when Chianti Classico's DOCG laws began to permit wines of this type. Unfortunately for the official classification system, by that stage many IGT wines were dramatically outstripping their DOC and DOCG peers in price.

The hangover of this era is that some winemakers that could fit into the official appellation system today aren't interested. The second name I looked at, Bibi Graetz's cult wine Colore—along with its sibling, the larger-production Testamatta (120,000-150,000 bottles, compared to a tenth of that for Colore)—has never borne the Chianti moniker. Bibi Graetz's Vincenzo d'Andrea

IMAGE FRANCESCO LASTRUCCIGALLERY STOCK



Clockwise, from left: Bibi Graetz's vineyards in Lamole; Il Caggio Ipsus; Bibi Graetz Testamatta; Bibi Graetz Colore

says that when they started out in 2000, Chianti Classico was too uneven and too inexpensive. "We prefer to do our own path," he says, a stance that remains unchanged despite some "good moves" by the appellation, such as the Gran Selezione and the recent approval of subzone labelling ("UGAs") from 2021.

Their approach has worked well so far: after a mere two decades, Colore is one of Italy's most prestigious (and expensive) wines, rubbing shoulders with Masseto on La Place de Bordeaux, where it is still touted as an exemplary newcomer. More impressive still, it has managed this stratospheric rise through a traditionalist era despite wearing its newness on its sleeve. The labels for both Colore and Testamatta ("crazy head")—bristling technicolour fields of gestural abstraction courtesy of Bibi, a painter, and son of renowned Swiss-Israeli sculptor Gidon Graetz—are unorthodox enough in their regular form, but the 20th-edition bottles take it up a notch, the paintings pixelated into dot matrices 3D-printed directly onto the glass. Contrasted with the Ipsus label's sober engraving and rusty red capsule (a tribute to the vineyard's red stone walls), they look like bottles from another millennium.

However, appearances can be deceptive: Colore, though an IGT conceived in the era of the bombastic, internationalist Super Tuscan, has historically been a blend

of sangiovese and its traditional bedfellows canaiolo and colorino. It was a varietal sangiovese for the first time in 2019, when d'Andrea says canaiolo and colorino were simply not adding anything to what was already a perfect wine. Testamatta has always been 100 per cent sangiovese.

Meanwhile Mazzei is adamant that, since Ipsus fits within the Chianti Classico rules, "Why would I be out of the appellation?" To explain the absence of any DOCG on the front label, he says, "A wine should speak for its name first and whatever comes after is just where to position it." Mazzei also concedes that if the project had begun ten years earlier—the experimental precursors of what would become Ipsus were first made by Mazzei in 2006 when he bought the property from former Banfi winemaker Ezio Rivella—he might have opted for IGT. However, he considers himself the fortunate inheritor of Chianti Classico's "viticultural revolution", based in part on the "Chianti Classico 2000" project, which identified the best vine materials and cultivation systems for the region.

SANGIOVESE

What the occasionally head-spinning discussion above illustrates is that most great wines sit in the liminal space between tradition and innovation that produces our profoundest creations. It is only the human impulse to label that

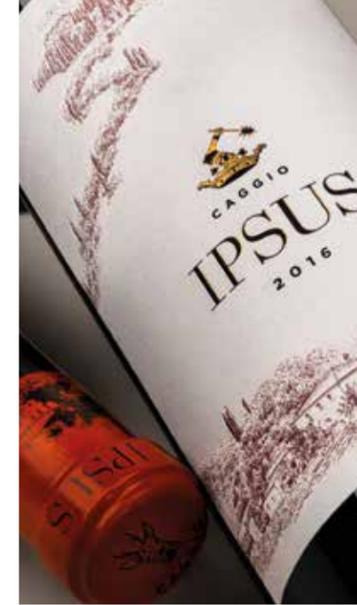


IMAGES EDUARDO DELILLE (COLORE, TESTAMATTA)

causes us to force things into one bucket or another. Consequently, the endpoints—while certainly not identical—are congruent, principally built on the energy, transparency and dynamism of sangiovese.

Arguably, the single greatest factor holding Tuscany's flagship variety back in this period of Burgundy-fuelled terroir obsession is the question of whether it is sufficiently site-expressive, a question both wineries feel they've definitively answered, though their approaches differ. Ipsus is the product of a single, enclosed, 6.5-hectare, terraced vineyard in the sleepy medieval hamlet of Caggio. Subdivided into six plots, it has 150 degrees of exposure from southeast to southwest and varied soils from clay schist to the region's characteristic alberese. The shift to organics, a process of "careful listening" Mazzei says took five years to achieve, and the introduction of their own *massale* selected vines in 2008, promises an even greater sense of identity in the coming vintages.

Colore and Testamatta, meanwhile, are blended from sites around Chianti Classico and Chianti (Vincigliata, site of the castle with the winery's original vines and Graetz's family home, lies outside the Classico DOCG), with each plot lovingly fermented in its own little open-top barrique. Two of their sites, a 600m altitude site in Lamole planted with 80-year-old bush vines, plus a relatively new acquisition in Montefiridolfi, are exceptionally rare examples of a historical system called *coltura promiscua*, their vines interplanted with olive trees, cereal grains and even cherry trees in the latter case. This ancient practice is in harmony with the Graetz ethos, which valorises old vines and traditional cultivation practices. D'Andrea says they have the largest collection of old vines in Tuscany, which they prize for their ability to produce naturally balanced grapes.



In my view, the key to the greatness of both wines is that their creators have found a way to step back and, as d'Andrea describes it, "close the cycle". Where the Colore of the early 2000s was a bold, heavily extracted wine—the product of incredibly low yields, concentration techniques and new oak—the new style aims for grace and effortlessness, requiring less intervention in both vineyard and winery. D'Andrea names 2009 as the turning point, surprising everyone with its affable drinkability.

Mazzei likewise describes a journey towards prioritising elegance, silkiness and lightness versus the "stereotype" of "big structure" sangiovese. Years of experimenting with oak led them to reject Bordeaux barrels in favour of Burgundy and Austrian oak tonneaux and 15-hectolitre vats to avoid masking sangiovese's inherent traits. Now he works with rotating oak fermenters with spontaneous fermentations as well as submerged-cap, no pump-over fermentations in stainless steel to gently extra flavours and aromas without pulling out too many harsh tannins. He also rejected long barrel ageing just for the sake of it, a practice he associates with Brunello, choosing instead to preserve some of the wines' freshness and fruit. I want to find the right balance," he says.

To call either wine

genuinely "light touch" is something of a conceit: Mazzei engages ten different coopers for his 6.5-hectare plot; Colore's fermentations are punched down or pumped over six to eight times a day before being decanted into new barriques for malolactic fermentation. However, they represent a great leap in sensitivity to their grapes' innate personality compared to the trophy wines of yore. Past and future seem very much at peace for the time being in Tuscany and the results are magnificent.

IL CAGGIO IPSUS 2016

Piercing bergamot, jasmine and violets sail in over thyme and tiny, tart cherries with just a hint of smoky blast furnace. The palate is sheer, lilted and lovely, with a pure wash of acidity interrupted only briefly by a grain or two of tight tannin that washes smoothly away once more. Refined, elegant, sublime.

BIBI GRAETZ COLORE 2019

Immensely perfumed with geranium, cyclamen and a medicinal cherry and cranberry note amplified by eucalyptus, sagebrush and tarragon. Graceful and wafting on the entry, it gains weight and density as it continues. Its consummately supple tannins are quite chewy on the back but never hard, encased in their fruit richness.

BIBI GRAETZ TESTAMATTA 2019

Overall it is darker in tone than Colore with riper, almost dried cherry fruit, leather and black tea. It continues very fresh, taut and almost saline on the palate, with a bit of warmth filling out the back, like a trapezoid that widens from the entry. From the start there is a compact, chalky tannin and blazing acidity electrifying the attack.

