

BOOK AND FILM REVIEWS

Susan Keevil, ed.: On Tuscany: From Brunello to Bolgheri, Wine Tales from the Heart of Italy

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This edited volume provides a compilation of articles about Tuscany, its history, its geography, legendary figures, and most importantly, its wines. The articles are divided into eight collections, each with 4–7 articles. The collections are thematic and cover aspects of Tuscany's geography, climate, geology, history, and oenology. Not surprisingly, the writing styles of the articles are diverse, having different authors with different expertise. The articles or the collections can be read in any order without having to worry that understanding will be compromised. But some of the articles' topics overlap, so there is inevitably some repetition.

Tuscany has already reached legendary status among travelers passionate about visiting the world's culturally rich regions, due in part to its wonderful climate, gentle but beautiful geography, and especially its rich history of art and architecture. So, it is appropriate that the volume opens with the romantic introduction by Curzio Malaparte, who describes Tuscany's spirit through the winds that blow over it. We learn that the "*libeccio* blows in from the sea. It is a sudden wind, churlish, violent, mad and thieving. It is a wind escaped from prison, making up for its long confinement, it plummets down hard on the waves, lifts them, gathers them, scatters them, pushes them, like frightened sheep, against white beaches, purple shoals, blackened piers" (page 17). This goes on for another three pages.

The volume's first collection contains historical notes, including some wine related ones. We learn that at the wedding of Lorenzo the Magnificent, most of the wine served from 300 barrels was white, "mostly Trebbiano and Vernaccia," the food and drink being "as modest and simple as befits a marriage" (page 24). How times have changed!

There is an undercurrent of modesty, and it is surprising to read that Tuscan reds come from humble origins, mostly due to the absence of regional standards which eventually appeared much later, in the 20th century. Until then, "if good wine ever came out," it was "by accident or lucky chance" (page 27). Some of the increase in quality was achieved by more careful curation of the vines and through the addition of nobler grapes or even wines from France.

The stories of innovation would be incomplete without attention given to the innovators themselves. For example, the Marchese Piero Antinori had the idea of making claret at Villa Antinori. “Antinori’s idea was perfect: lace your Chianti with Cabernet and bottle it in a Bordeaux bottle [...] That Cabernet was the secret agent in his Villa Antinori Riserva” (page 43). Following the thread of visionaries, we move from wine makers to wine critics, and encounter Luigi Veronelli, a philosopher and anarchist who designed in the middle of the 20th century a “structure for Italian wines [...] that would help it climb out of the morass in which it was trapped” (page 115). The latter was a system similar to the French AOC system which he had encountered in his travels.

As expected, there is ample space devoted to the history and evolution of Chianti, Montepulciano, and Sangiovese, the red stars of the region, but one also learns about the less famous grapes and wines produced in Tuscany. I enjoyed reading about the high hopes which were placed on the Canaiolo grape, mercilessly dashed by the phylloxera louse at the end of the 19th century and resurrected only in modern times. We also learn about white Chiantis and the Ciliegiolo grape (of which I knew nothing before).

The book devotes a collection of articles to the “makers and mavericks” of Tuscan wine, and this provides an enthralling read. This collection spans a large group of talented individuals, some of whom have had long family histories that are entwined with the history of Tuscany, such as the Frescobaldi family and others who have successfully chosen winemaking “as their preferred form of self-expression.”

Wine making requires, like any other artistic pursuit, a high tolerance for risk, lots of inspiration (and perspiration), and, above all, passion. In this reader’s mind, it is a cousin of architecture, since both combine artistry and science in surprising ways that can lead to pure joy.

The collection is compiled by Susan Keevil, who seems to share these sentiments, since she approaches the subject from a multitude of angles, each adding a useful layer of intrigue or information. This is a book that will give its reader considerable knowledge about Tuscan wines, as well as broad understanding of the cultural phenomenon they represent.