

# THE WINE SPECTATOR

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### Italy's International Style



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The winery owner proudly showed a visitor the manicured grounds, glassed-in reception center, rows of stainless steel tanks holding the raw material for Champagne cuvées and small French oak barrels in which Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Cabernet Sauvignon are aged. All it lacked was a public tasting room to fit comfortably into any one of several wine areas in California.

Only this wasn't California. The winery is nestled in the gently rolling hills of Erbusco, in the Franciacorta region of Italy. Wine experts who can pinpoint Barbaresco or Montalcino on a map without blinking twice are hard-pressed to find Erbusco, an hour's drive east of Milan. But the winery is Ca' del Bosco, fast making an international reputation for its dry Champagne-style sparkling wines, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Cabernet wines.

anything is possible in Italy.

Certainly, it is possible to put together a tasting of Italian Cabernets to impress anyone familiar with Bordeaux — Gaja's Darmagi, Maculan's Breganze di Breganze, Caparzo's Ca' del Pazzo, Incisa della Rocchetta's Sassicaia and Antinori's Solaia come to mind. These wines, and others, have received quite a bit of attention from an international wine community thirsty for something new to promote.

What seems to have been lost in the shuffle is the striking improvement to be found in many of Italy's traditional wines, including Chianti, Brunello di Montalcino, Barolo, Barbaresco, even Soave and Valpolicella, the latter normally thought of as cheap, thin, industrial bellywash. Wines that used to come to market oxidized or damaged by other winemaking aberrations now arrive live with character.

Anyway, as it often does, is at best, was once a fresher — if you drank the vintage in Tuscany. Indeed producers, who the better wines from the countries, realized could produce the of fruit flavor and

zione di Origine Controllata (DOC) regulations. Frustrated by a law that required them to modify the noble character of the Sangiovese grape with minimum percentages of Canaiolo and white grapes (Trebbiano and Malvasia), Tuscan vintners started experimenting with 100-percent Sangiovese wines. Many aged the wines in small French oak barrels to provide roundness and a different tannin structure.

Not incidentally, these experimental wines often fetched higher prices than the traditional wines. As a result, wines with names such as Tignanello, Flaccianello, Sangiovese and Coltassala created an atmosphere in which Italian wines were taken more seriously.

Those who were accustomed to the "old" style rebelled against a trend that seemed destined to quash the traditional wines that they knew. But as many of the Chiantis of the 1985 and 1986 vintage have proven, the new style offers more, not less. The better wines are rich in the distinctive fruit aromas and flavors only the Sangiovese grape can provide.

The same thing is happening in other regions of Italy. As more wine-makers focus on those elements that all the finest wines of the world have in common — concentration, balance, grace and harmony — the traditional wines are finding a more appreciative international audience. □

Ca' del Bosco represents the new world of Italian wine. From a region known before only for its rustic, undistinguished *rosso*, *bianco* and *rosato* comes now the Maurizio Zanella signature wine, a Cabernet blend experts often mistake for a fine Pomerol; a Chardonnay to rival Burgundy, California and Australia; and Pinero, a Pinot Noir frighteningly close in character and style to the Côte de Nuits. Tasting these wines, it is easy to form the impression that

