

The Fantastic Four of Tuscan Merlot



© Masseto | One of Italy's great wines, Masseto is easily the most recognizable of the four Merlots.

In Tuscany, Merlot is taking center stage as the following four wines go to show.

By Tom Hyland | Posted Monday, 15-Nov-2021

It may surprise you, but in Italy, where indigenous varietals such as [Nebbiolo](#), [Sangiovese](#) and [Aglianico](#) are the source of some of the country's greatest red wines, [Merlot](#) carries a reputation that is arguably as impressive as these other selections.

Excellent versions such as the [Brandolini Vistorta](#) in [Friuli](#) or [Pàtrimo](#) from [Feudi di San Gregorio](#) in [Campania](#) display notable complexity and breeding. But the most remarkable examples of [Italian](#) Merlot, wines that offer power and impeccable structure, originate from one region, [Tuscany](#), where a handful of producers have fashioned some of the country's most iconic and in-demand wines.

For this article, we will examine four of these wines: Masseto from Ornellaia, Messorio from Le Macchiole, L'Apparita from Castello di Ama and Volta from Bertinga. The first two wines are from vineyards near the sea in Bolgheri, while the latter two are from inland plantings in the [Chianti Classico](#) zone. While each wine displays certain winemaking philosophies, they all have in common a remarkable intensity and complexity along with outstanding cellar potential.

Masseto

The most famous of this quartet of wines is [Masseto](#), arguably the most sought-after wine in all of Italy. The wine is a product of [Ornellaia](#), one of Bolgheri's most famous estates; for years the wine was made there, but in 2019, a separate winery was built specifically for the production of Masseto, as well as [Massetino](#), a more approachable, but no less accomplished version of Merlot.

Masseto is sourced from a single vineyard at Ornellaia; Axel Heinz, estate director who supervises the entire production of Ornellaia and Masseto, recalls the unusual beginnings of this wine. "It was not planned from the beginning to make a wine called Masseto. The idea was to introduce Merlot as a partner variety to [Cabernet Sauvignon](#) in the initial project of Ornellaia. And so there was no other intention beside finding a potentially good site for Merlot, with remarkably little science behind it, but a lot of intuition. There was this hill that had been a clay cave back years past ... it was blue clay, so it was a very simple idea to say, OK blue clay, that rings a bell. They say that this plot with blue clay should be a good site for Merlot, so let's plant Merlot."

The first production of Masseto was in 1986; Heinz notes that as the wine left a "strong impression" on the proprietors and him, they bottled a trial version, with the first commercial example made from the 1987 vintage. The vineyard is currently 11 hectares, with the oldest vines planted 35 years ago, making this vineyard "fairly old vineyard by Bolgheri standards," as Heinz comments.

I asked Heinz how the seaside location of this vineyard affects the character of Merlot. "It has pretty much the same effect as it has everywhere in Bolgheri," he remarks. "It's those winds that come in, and most of the vineyard of Masseto is, for Bolgheri, relatively high elevation, around 100, 130 meters above sea level. So they fully benefit from those breezes coming from the sea that always keep the microclimate less heat loaded and always give a little bit of freshness."

What does Heinz think about the aging potential of Masseto? "In terms of life span I would quite safely say in almost every vintage, 20, 25, 30 years without any problem. The question is do you want to keep any vintage for so long? Some vintages give you a very early satisfying drinking pleasure, so sometimes it's great to drink a Masseto when it's only five years old. Then there are these vintages that require 8, 10, 15 years in the cellar before they really develop."

Finally, did the original proprietors of Ornellaia believe that Masseto would become such an iconic wine? "My guess is that they clearly sensed that the wine coming from that vineyard had the potential to become an icon. Whether they would succeed or not, or whether we would succeed, nobody knows. But at least I think there was a clear understanding that the vineyard site had the potential to become something really iconic because it was capable of producing a truly distinctive wine, that's for sure."

Messorio

At [Le Macchiole](#) in Bolgheri, proprietor Cinzia Merli has been producing [Messorio](#) since the 1994 vintage; 100 percent Merlot, this is in keeping with her winemaking philosophy at the estate. "We decided that our top wines would be monovarietal wines, so we use [Cabernet Franc](#) 100 percent ([Paleo](#)), [Syrah](#) 100 percent ([Scrio](#)) and Merlot 100 percent. We did that to try and represent the area through a single variety. It's like taking a picture – a variety in a specific vintage in the Bolgheri area.

"It's not easy because usually you don't have many chances to change the final result in every vintage using different varieties to adjust the final results. But the wines are more precise, the wines have more focus. We love this kind of style."

Merli currently produces Messorio from two vineyards at two separate locations in Bolgheri; with the older vines being planted in 1994. The soils are clay, but as she notes "it's not compact, but loose, as the water reaches deep in the soil. These are the perfect conditions to produce a Merlot with great complexity."

Merli comments that typical aging potential for Messorio is "20 years minimum. It's much better than when we first started. We tasted some old vintages a few months ago ... I am always surprised at how this wine could age so well." The original Merlot vineyards planted in 1983 do not exist anymore, and now with the current plantings, Merli believes the wine "will change in the final result, as there will be more finesse."

Commenting on the excellence of Merlot in [Bolgheri](#), Merli has this to say; "Here Merlot is really spectacular because it's easy to understand and you can have a great complexity, and you can age the wine for a long time without a problem; so I think this is great."