Treading Grapes

Walking through the vineyards of Tuscany

Rosemary George

Setting the Scene

I HAVE NEVER FORGOTTEN MY first glimpse of the Tuscan countryside. It was over thirty years ago and I was on a train travelling from Florence to Perugia to attend Italian classes at the Università per Stranieri. A new course was beginning and the train was filled with students and their luggage. I was squeezed between another body and a rucksack in the corridor. It was hot and airless and, to say the least, uncomfortable. Then suddenly the Tuscan landscape unfolded before my eyes and I was instantly enthralled. This was the scenery of Renaissance paintings, the backdrop to countless Madonnas. There were cypress and olive trees, vineyards and woods, a timeless patchwork on hillsides that seemed not to have changed for centuries. It was breathtakingly beautiful and I quickly forgot the discomfort of the train.

That memory has remained with me, and with it a love of all things Tuscan - the wine, the food, the infinite variety of the countryside, the enchanting hilltop towns and villages and the historical centres of larger cities - all reinforced by friendships stemming from that month in Perugia, and developed over the ensuing years by numerous visits to the vineyards for research for my earlier book on Chianti. This second book has provided a wonderful opportunity to explore the byways of Tuscany in greater depth, and on foot, which is quite the best way to savour a landscape, allowing time to stand and stare, to observe the variations from one area to another, from one season to another. The book is the fruits of nine research and walking trips, between Easter 2002 and June 2003, with my husband as companion, encountering Tuscany in a variety of seasons (but avoiding the height of summer) and during the course of two quite contrasting vintages. Summer 2002 will be remembered as one of the wettest ever, while 2003 hit record temperatures with a succession of days over 40°C; neither are conditions that vines and grapes relish, with each posing a different set of problems for the winemaker. We, however, enjoyed some wonderful spring weather, autumn sunshine and crisp clear days in November and February, and in the course of just over 300 miles walked only once in the rain. Altogether we visited some two hundred wine growers, most of whom feature in these pages, with an apology to those who were omitted, for reasons of space rather than as a reflection on the quality of their wine. I attempted to see everybody who is anybody in each area, but the choice of estates was also determined by our walking routes, which in some instances led us off the beaten track to smaller, less well-known estates.

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It all began in Florence on Easter Sunday 2002, with the annual celebration of the Scoppio del Carro, which translates literally as the explosion of the carriage. An eighteenth-century gilded cart is dragged into the cathedral square by sturdy white oxen. In most years this entails a lengthy and splendid procession through the centre of the city. Sadly, in 2002 the American Secretary of State had issued warnings against terrorist attacks in major Italian cities, in particular Florence and Venice, and a decision had been taken to cancel the procession. The carabinieri were out in force, meticulously checking everyone entering the square. Nonetheless the mood was festive, and the Piazza del Duomo never fails to inspire: the pattern and colour of the marble walls of the cathedral itself, crowned with Brunelleschi's breathtaking dome, and the Baptistery's fabulous gilded bronze doors. The square was packed with people, but thanks to the local knowledge of our Florentine friends we managed to find a spot where we had a view of the cart. To my mind, it looked more like a miniature pagoda, in ornate dark blue and red, festooned with fireworks. We waited and chatted, enjoying the gentle animation and anticipation. Shortly after the appointed hour a mechanical dove flew out of the cathedral door and ignited the fireworks. There were catherine wheels spinning amidst a multitude of brilliant sparks, creating an effect of coloured rain defying gravity. Clouds of gunpowder billowed around the carriage with explosions galore. The noise was deafening and I could not help thinking that if terrorists had chosen to strike, their activities might have initially passed unnoticed amidst the ear-piercing bangs. The display lasted for about a quarter of hour and was deemed a great success by our friends. 'Much better than last year,' said Renato, maybe as a gesture of defiance to the terrorist threats. But, more importantly, Tuscans believe that a particularly successful display foretells a fine harvest, for although the ceremony is ostensibly a celebration of the resurrection, it also has its roots in pagan fertility rites. Unfortunately, the prophecy of a good harvest was not borne out, as Tuscany was to have its worst vintage for ten years, with a wet August and unseasonable rain at the harvest. But at Easter everyone was optimistic.

We waited while the dead fireworks were removed from the cart, an intricate process involving one man inside the cart and two more perched precariously on a mini-crane above it. Then the massive oxen, garlanded with colourful spring flowers and with red ribbons decorating their tails, purposefully pulled the cart away until next year. We adjourned for coffee in a nearby café, pausing to admire the windows of tempting Easter confectionery. And then it was time for lunch, an Easter pie, or torta pasqualina, with spinach, ricotta and eggs. It was delicious.

That first trip centred on Chianti and in particular Chianti Classico. Chianti is the name that everyone knows. On first encounter, it is a friendly and unassuming wine, but on better acquaintance you begin to realize that it has hidden depths and many facets to its character. It is produced over a large part of central Tuscany, with various sub-zones surrounding Chianti Classico, the historic heart of the area, in the

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hills between Florence and Siena. The region has benefited from the enormous transformation over the last ten or twenty years and now produces an ever-growing number of wines with depth and complexity. The tarnished reputation of the 1970s and early 1980s is now a thing of the past, as new landowners with innovative ideas arrived in the wake of the dismantling of the mezzadria system and made an impact with their subsequent widespread improvements in vineyard and cellar. Sassicaia from Bolgheri, which was then a little-known area of Tuscany, provided the initial example, quickly followed by Antinori's Tignanello, a wine with Tuscan flavours but designed for the international market, as it combined the Sangiovese of Tuscany with Cabernet Sauvignon, the grape variety of Bordeaux, which has spread to most of the New World as well as to many other vineyards in the Old World. The success of Tignanello surprised even Antinori, and so many others have followed the example that in many corners of Tuscany Cabernet Sauvignon now features alongside the traditional grape variety of the region, namely Sangiovese.

As well as Chianti and Chianti Classico, there are the other Denominazioni di Origine Controllata e Garantita, or DOCGs, such as the historical wines of Brunello di Montalcino and Vino Nobile di Montepulciano. We spent a happy week or more in each hilltop town, visiting wine cellars and exploring the vineyards. Carmignano is a more recently recognized DOCG, but with a long tradition of including Cabernet Sauvignon in its wine. Pomino, too, has a historical association with French grape varieties, while Vernaccia di San Gimignano remains an island of white wine in a sea of Chianti.

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