

Italy, Tuscany: 1971 Tignanello

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Some forty years have passed since the first bottle of Tignanello was released in 1974. Piero Antinori, the man who conceived of this landmark red blend published a coffee table biography of his wine to celebrate its birthday. In his book, *Tignanello 1971, A Tuscan Story*, he writes: "Great wine is the sum of a grapevine and an idea."

Piero Antinori had both, in generous supply, when he was charged with heading his family's wine company at the young age of 28. Thanks to a sudden burst of youthful inspiration, Antinori created a wine that would rewrite all the rules for vino Italiano and would bring his country to the enological world stage. The point cannot be exaggerated: Tignanello ushered Italy into the world of modern winemaking. It was nothing short of revolutionary.

Tignanello is a wine of significant cultural context. At the end of the 1960's when Piero Antinori took over the Antinori wine dynasty, Italy was in the midst of the dynamic post-World War II reconstruction years known as the Italian Economic Miracle. There was a sense of optimism, hope and a feeling that a new era had started. This prolonged period of economic growth meant that people could buy their first home, car and travel abroad. Industry and manufacturing would spur renewed infrastructure and public works. Sophisticated political discourse and social momentum would lead to enormously creative years for art, literature and cinema. The year 1966 would prove to be a personal turning point for Piero Antinori: He was called to head the family wine company, he got married and he saw the birth of his first daughter Albiera.



Despite these happy moments, affairs back at Antinori's wine business were not in order. Under Piero's father Niccolò Antinori, the company suffered a substantial quality crisis and the Antinori brand had taken a significant blow. The family name had become synonymous with the underwhelming red wines from the Chianti region packaged in hay-wrapped flasks. Piero instinctively knew that the family wine legacy would not survive if it remained tethered to those flasks. Furthermore, the year 1966 saw one of the worst natural tragedies to ever hit Florence, Antinori's hometown. On November

4, 1966 the banks of the Arno River broke and seven meters (22 feet) of water flooded the city, its churches and museums. The flood killed 101 people and destroyed millions of ancient books, manuscripts, historic documents, rare works of art, paintings and frescoes. The Italian Renaissance capital was weighed down by tragedy and despair. Half a world away, in 1966, Robert Mondavi founded the Robert Mondavi Winery with his sons Michael and Tim. That same year, Piero Antinori traveled to California to meet Robert Mondavi for the first time. He was inspired by the Californian vintner and quickly connected to his dream of creating quality wines from Oakville that could compete with the finest French wines. Piero Antinori credits Robert Mondavi with teaching him the kind of entrepreneurial fortitude that could only come from America.



Upon his return to Tuscany, Piero Antinori drove through the countryside of the Chianti Classico region immediately south of Florence. This is where his family has various vineyard holdings including a 319 estate and country manor called Tenuta Tignanello. The Antinori family would often retreat here for the summer. Piero Antinori recalls that during those years, the beautiful Tuscan countryside reflected a profound sense of decay and abandon. He calls it an "esthetic collapse." Because of the sudden dismembering of the sharecropping system that guided the Tuscan farming economy for centuries and damaged left by World War II bombings, the countryside and vineyards of Tuscany reflected "a sick landscape" as Piero recalls. Piero Antinori was motivated by a desire to change the fortune of his family's wine company but also that of his beloved Tuscany. He called upon the council of various friends who would ultimately conspire to create the landmark wine. These protagonists are: Winemaker Giacomo Tachis who executed Tignanello; Bordeaux professor Emile Peynaud who lent his expertise to Tignanello; Californian vintner Robert Mondavi who gave New World inspiration for Tignanello; and Italian wine writer Luigi Veronelli who articulated a philosophy for Tignanello. Tachis brought his expertise in agronomy and his intimate knowledge of Sangiovese. He spearheaded the massive vineyard renewal project at Tenuta Tignanello that would lead to the best quality Sangiovese grown in Tuscany. Peynaud would teach Antinori and his team the art of making age-worthy wines thanks to the use of oak barrique. He also insisted on removing any white grapes from the blend. Mondavi would represent a symbolic handshake between Tuscany and important international export markets. Veronelli, on the other hand, suggested that the wine be named after the Tenuta Tignanello in San Casciano in Val di Pesa (Chianti Classico) as a way of linking the wine to a sense of place, territory and geographic tipicity. These were all ground breaking ideas from leaders of wine innovation. Today, Piero Antinori calls out Marchesi Antinori Managing Director Renzo Cotarella as the custodian of the very important Tignanello legacy. Renzo Cotarella represents the future of the company along with his three

daughters Albiera, Allegra and Alessia.

In a brash move of legendary moxie and outstanding intuition, Piero Antinori would opt to purposely declassify Tignanello to vino da tavola status (reserved primarily for plonk and bulk wine) down from the more prestigious Chianti DOC appellation as had been designed by Bettino Ricasoli. These were the years of counter culture and rebellion against the status quo.

Because it broke all the rules, Tignanello immediately became a vinous icon of its time. In his book, Piero Antinori writes: "Tignanello is the offspring of Chianti Classico that has changed everything."



Specifically, what Tignanello changed is how Tuscan wine would be made from this moment forward. In the past, Chianti Classico was mostly Sangiovese blended with white grapes such as Malvasia and Trebbiano to soften some of the tannic astringency and sharp acidity of the unruly Tuscan red grape. International grapes such as Cabernet Sauvignon were not recommended nor were they permitted in appellation wines. The blending formula resulted in easy-drinking, ruby-colored reds that could not age or travel. Tignanello would always be based on Sangiovese, the most noble of Tuscany's red grapes. But the material on hand was not up to the standards that Antinori wanted. He set out to create what he has since called "redeemed Sangiovese."

Team Tignanello set out first to renew the vineyards. Tenuta Tignanello (formally known as the Santa Cristina vineyard) totals 319 hectares, of which 127 hectares are planted to vines. The property extends from 350 to 450 meters above sea level that is ideal for Sangiovese. The slopes are south facing and the soils are comprised of marls, shale and limestone. Much of it is poor, thin gravel from the Alberese stone. The light-colored stone reflects a white light that evens out cluster ripening. Thick layers of clay not far from the surface also distinguish the Tignanello vineyard. This means rain water can drain easily through the gravel topsoil but the moisture is locked into the soil near the root system of the vines to keep them hydrated during the hottest summer months.

Over the course of time, Tignanello was replanted three times. The first time was at the beginning of the 20th Century during sharecropping. It was replanted again in the mid-20th Century under Piero Antinori when he set out to make Tignanello. This effort took five years to complete but during this time, 35 distinct selections of Sangiovese were identified. It was replanted once again in the 1990s under extreme quality controls. Niccolò Antinori (Piero's father) had sourced Cabernet grapes from a friend in Trentino, northern Italy. The vines were in poor shape and it was impossible to know the origin of this genetic material. The Cabernet was replanted as well. By the late 1960's the Tignanello vineyard had reached its current

configuration: 80 percent Sangiovese, 15 percent Cabernet Sauvignon and five percent Cabernet Franc. This has remained, more or less, the blending formula for the wine. Depending on the vintage conditions, the Cabernet Sauvignon element can be modified from 15 to 25 percent.



In 1970, an experimental wine was produced called Chianti Classico Riserva Vigneto Tignanello based on Sangiovese with four to six percent white grapes (Malvasia and Trebbiano). After that attempt, Piero Antinori decided that his revolutionary Tignanello would be made with the addition of Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc. He opted for barrique aging (instead of traditional oak casks) to ensure the longevity and stability of the wine. He crafted a wine that offered finesse, smoothness, integrated acidity and well managed tannins.

The 1971 vintage would be Tignanello's first and the wine was released commercially in 1974. That first year saw 130,000 bottles produced but today's production numbers reach 350,000. Bottle number 1 was gifted to Florentine restaurateur Giorgio Pinchiorri who enthusiastically purchased the first cases.

Now, Tignanello celebrates its 40th birthday. To mark the event Piero Antinori published the book that I have cited in this article. In September 2015, the Antinori family staged a topping-off and recorking ceremony for the 188 bottles of 1971 Tignanello that remained in Antinori's historic cellars. I was able to attend this recorking event and will post a video in the next few weeks at www.erobertparker.com.



Among the bottles that were topped off was the first bottle ever produced: The elusive numero uno. The label is darkened by smoke from an accidental fire in Pinchiorri's cellar. But you can still read the signatures dated 1974 when Piero Antinori celebrated the wine's release. During the recorking ceremony, a tiny bit of that wine was poured into a glass and I had the opportunity to smell its bouquet (sipping the wine would be obviously out of the question). After we admired its perfumes, the precious wine was poured back into bottle number 1 and given a new cork. No one will have that opportunity until the next recorking ceremony 40 years from now.

—Monica Lerner