



In the southern hills of Chianti Classico, husband and wife Marco Pallanti and Lorenza Sebasti (opposite) are working to restore the quality reputation of the once prestigious wine region. The *terroir*-driven reds from the high, stony vineyards of their Castello di Ama estate carry the banner.

Caring for Chianti

*Marco Pallanti and Lorenza Sebasti
have grown love, family and great wine
on a hilltop in Tuscany*

**by Mitch Frank
Photographs by Sandro Michahelles**



Marco Pallanti

has spent his entire 25-year career on one small piece of land in southern Chianti. Since he arrived at Castello di Ama in 1982, the winemaker has devoted his life to its vineyards, endeavoring to understand what the soil is trying to express. He has replaced every vine and experimented with grape varieties, spacing and trellising—long-term projects that have yielded magnificent results. He has crafted a beautiful super Tuscan Merlot named L'Apparita and a number of outstanding Chianti Classicos, including one of the first ever to earn 95 points on the *Wine Spectator* 100-point scale.

He has also found love. His wife and partner, Lorenza Sebasti, is Castello di Ama's general manager and a daughter in one of the families that jointly bought the property in the 1970s. The couple now owns Ama together.

But having mastered the property's 650 acres, Pallanti has pledged himself to protecting a larger piece of land—all 170,000 acres of Chianti Classico. Last year, the members of the appellation's *consorzio*, or wine consortium, elected him president. After decades of watching the reputation of its region grow weaker, the trade group has successfully won new authority from the Italian government and has worked hard to woo back the many producers who quit when the organization had little clout.

Pallanti hopes to once again make Chianti Classico Italy's most famous—and respected—wine. It won't be an easy task.

For centuries, Chianti was synonymous with good Italian wine. But by the 1980s, other regions had surpassed it in quality and prestige. And many of Chianti's best wines have been marketed as "super Tuscans," without the Chianti Classico DOCG.

How bad is the situation? In 2002, Giampaolo Motta, the owner of La Massa, told *Wine Spectator* that he was proud to sell his top wine, Giorgio Primo, as a Chianti Classico. "Why shouldn't Chianti Classico be considered one of the best wines in the world, just like great Bordeaux?" he said. But by 2004, he was bottling the wine as a super Tuscan, carrying the designation IGT (Indicazione Geografica Tipica). Adding insult to injury, the back label showed a black rooster, the symbol of the Chianti Classico *consorzio*, on a barbecue spit. "My dream was to make Chianti Classico," Motta says now. "But for 10 years I had to fight the market." The difficulty is selling a quality Chianti at the price that quality requires.

Is Chianti Classico simply a brand name that has lost its value? After devoting himself for a quarter of a century to his patch of soil, Pallanti is convinced of the special *terroir* of the wider appellation. And Lorenza thinks that his achievement at Ama proves what the region is capable of. "As president of the *consorzio*, Marco can offer his experience to others," she says. "After 25 years, Castello di Ama can be an example to Chianti Classico."

THE ROCKY SLOPES SURROUNDING the little village of Ama are ideal for vines, not cars. Pallanti makes that apparent as he drives a battered old Fiat 4x4 through the vineyards on a gray afternoon. Rain is pouring down the windshield, and the truck is struggling to climb a steep incline of the hill.

Halfway to the top, the wheels lose hold of the rocks underneath, and the Fiat starts lurching backward.

Pallanti, 52, has short gray hair, bright eyes and a boyish face. He presses on the brakes calmly, as though this happens all the time, shifts the vehicle into four-wheel drive and hits the gas. The groaning truck inches up the hill with slow determination.

Even through the rain-streaked windows, the view is gorgeous. Ama is a tiny hamlet—really just a small cluster of



When four Roman families bought Castello di Ama in 1972, the vineyards—like many in the region—were in disrepair.

buildings—located 15 miles northeast of Siena. It sits atop one of the higher outcroppings in Chianti, at almost 1,800 feet above sea level. The terrain drops off dramatically on all sides, and olive trees dot the high, level ground.

The soil in the vineyards, a mix of clay and limestone, is completely covered by piles of big stones. Pallanti points out the stones that are lighter in color—these are albarese, made of limestone—and the darker ones, almost black, called galestro, made of schist. Out of the estate's 650 total acres, 210 are under vine and another 100 planted with olive trees.

When Lorenza's family bought the property in 1972, it did not look as good. Many of Chianti Classico's vineyards were a mess at that time. In the years following World War II, Italy's government ended the sharecropping system, or *mezzadria*, that had dominated (and stymied) Italian agriculture for centuries. The country was undergoing an industrial revolution—an economic miracle spurred by the Marshall Plan—and millions of peasants left the Tuscan

countryside for the cities. Ama, then owned by absentee landlords in Siena, was left in neglect.

“We bought the land for almost nothing,” says Lorenza, 42, who is petite, with short-cropped black hair and intense eyes. Her parents and three other families, all of them from Rome, purchased the property. “In the beginning, they just fell in love with the place,” she says. “And then they recognized that there was an opportunity to restart a great wine tradition.” With the help of a consultant, they built a brand new winery.

Marco grew up in Florence, where he studied agricultural engineering. The university did not offer an enology degree, so he traveled to Bordeaux, where the French professors laughed at Chianti, mocking that, at the time, the wines contained between 10 percent and 30 percent white grapes. “One professor said that to produce white wines you could use white or red grapes, for red wines you use red grapes, but only Italians believe you can make a red wine from white grapes,” he says.

While working in a lab back in Tuscany, Marco heard from a friend that a winery in southern Chianti was looking for a winemaker. He started right before the harvest in 1982. Lorenza began working at the winery six years later and became general manager in 1993. “When Lorenza came,” says Marco, “she believed in this project. She married the project, and later me too.”

Though they live in Florence, where their three children attend school, and make the long drive down most days for work, they have also made a home at the estate. In the summer months, the whole family moves to Ama.

Watching the couple as they talk, it’s easy to understand why

they form such a good partnership. Laid-back and intellectual, Marco attempts to explain their bond with the land, while Lorenza, who is warm but focused, is passionate about the work they have put into Ama. They seamlessly complete each other’s thoughts.

If the couple’s marriage is the foundation of Castello di Ama, Marco describes his winemaking as a conversation with the land. When he first arrived, in 1982, the quality of the grapes was good but uneven. By old Chianti custom, different grape varieties, including Trebbiano and Malvasia Bianca—the region’s two traditional white grapes—were all planted together. But the fruit ripened at different times, and some Sangiovese was planted in spots where it could not ripen properly. To avoid sacrificing the age of the plants, Pallanti began grafting new vines instead of replanting.

Over the next five years, he grafted 50,000 vines, completely changing the composition of the vineyards. He experimented with different trellising. He tried different varieties, including Chardonnay, Pinot Grigio, Pinot Noir, even Riesling. “In the ’80s, I had five different white wines on the market,” he says. “It was insane.”

For the reds, he says, “I was looking for a variety that could help Sangiovese.” The obvious choice in those years was Cabernet Sauvignon. “All the region at that time loved Cabernet because of Antinori’s Tignanello.” But Pallanti knew that in Bordeaux, the clay soil most similar to Ama’s was better for Merlot. Moreover, Cabernet and Sangiovese usually ripen at the same time, ordinarily in October, meaning that in a bad year both might be ruined. But Merlot ripens almost a month earlier and so might be good even in a poor year for Sangiovese. He grafted Merlot in 1983.

Pallanti harvested the fruit for the first time in 1985 and found



Since 2000, Marco and Lorenza have commissioned the annual installation of new art works at Castello di Ama. With children Norma, Gemma and Arturo, the couple stands reflected in Daniel Buren’s 75-foot-long wall of mirrors, which stretches across the hillside behind the house.



A cellar worker tops up oak barrels beneath the organic shapes of Chen Zhen's glass installation.

the quality better than expected. So instead of simply blending it with Sangiovese, he bottled a portion of the Merlot separately, naming the wine L'Apparita. It is a powerful Merlot, full-bodied and smoky. The 1997 and 1999 vintages each scored 93 points, and the most recent release, the 2004, earned 91 points. The rest of the Merlot goes into Ama's Chianti Classico, which also includes small amounts of Canaiolo and Malvasia Nera.

As for Sangiovese, that required more experimentation. The variety is notoriously difficult to grow and ripen, particularly at an altitude of 1,800 feet. "Sangiovese at this altitude is not like Cabernet or Merlot," says Pallanti. "It is more like Pinot Noir. It has less color, but more elegance and balance, and the acidity gives the wine freshness. But planted in bad places, it doesn't get ripe, and the tannins are aggressive. They taste like *carciofi*—artichokes."

Pallanti grafted in new Sangiovese clones and began vinifying all his parcels separately, trying to better understand the character of the grape in each spot. The results inspired him to release a single-vineyard wine from each of his best parcels: Bellavista, San Lorenzo, La Casuccia and Bertinga. The Bellavista, produced from the oldest vineyard at Ama, has been the most extraordinary of the wines, with

rich fruit, a clear layer of minerality and silky tannins. Both the 1997 and 2001 earned 95 points.

Despite the success of the single-vineyard wines, after almost 15 years in the vineyards Marco and Lorenza began to hear something new from the soil. Until 1996, all the Sangiovese that didn't go into these bottlings was used for the Chianti Classico, which they admit they treated almost as a second label. But they decided that the vines had matured and the quality of the fruit had improved.

"The quality of all the wine made it wrong to call it a simple Chianti—a second wine," says Lorenza. "Commercially we were very satisfied with the single-vineyard approach, but we recognized what the vineyards were telling us and translated it into the bottle."

In outstanding vintages, they still bottle the Bellavista and the Cassucia separately, but the Chianti Classico is now the estate's flagship wine. Selling a Chianti Classico at a higher price point than most of their neighbors has not always been easy, but Marco and Lorenza have not compromised their standards or changed the wine to an IGT.

Pallanti's methods in the winery have not changed as much over the years. All the fruit is hand-harvested, hand-sorted, crushed and loaded into stainless-steel tanks. Pallanti uses ambient yeasts, and as the reds ferment for one to two weeks, he allows the temperature to rise slowly to 89° F degrees, pumping over the wine to aerate the must and extract flavor and color from the skins. Then he lets the wine sit with the must for two more weeks of maceration. The Chianti is aged in 20 percent to 30 percent new oak, with the rest of the barrels one to three years old.

SITTING DOWN TO LUNCH in the dining room of the 17th-century house in the center

of Ama that they call home, Marco and Lorenza munch on bread dipped in the estate's olive oil and discuss their efforts to give back to the land that has given them so much.

Outside the window, on a terrace behind the house, is one example of this endeavor—a 75-foot-long, 6-foot-high wall of mirrors. In 2000, Marco and Lorenza started the Castello di Ama for Contemporary Art project. Every year they have commissioned a modern artist from a different nation to come to Ama to design an installation. The piece must somehow integrate with the landscape or architecture of Ama itself, blending the modern and historic. Marco feels strongly that the Chianti countryside contains so much history and beauty, that it is his and Lorenza's job to add more.

French artist Daniel Buren built the wall of mirrors in 2001, placing a picture window-sized opening every few feet to allow people to look out onto the vineyards. In 2003, South African artist Kendell Geers placed neon letters spelling NOITULOVER—"revolution" spelled backward—on the far wall of an ancient stone cellar underneath the house that is used as a barrel room. As with the other installations, these works contrast with the surroundings and yet somehow blend in.



Kendell Geers' red neon signage—"revolution" in reverse—shines across the barrels in an old stone cellar beneath the house.

Recent Red Wine Releases From Castello di Ama

For complete reviews, see www.winespectator.com.

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
Toscana L'Apparita 2004 Shows plum and chocolate character, with hints of cedar and light toasty oak. Full-bodied, with a long finish.	91	\$150
Toscana L'Apparita 2001 Has a beautiful nose of chocolate, cappuccino and berry. Full-bodied, with a fruity finish. A refined Merlot.	92	\$150
Chianti Classico Bellavista 2004 Offers lots of blackberry and dark chocolate, with hints of coffee. Full-bodied, with a long, flavorful finish.	92	\$150
Chianti Classico Bellavista 2001 Aromas of lilac, berry and cherry follow through to a full-bodied palate. This has finesse, yet it's powerful.	95	\$150
Chianti Classico La Casuccia 2004 Shows blackberry and cigar box, with hints of raspberry. Full-bodied, with a medium finish.	89	\$150
Chianti Classico La Casuccia 2001 Aromas of pressed flowers, ripe fruit, plum and strawberry. Full-bodied and concentrated, yet refined and racy.	93	\$150
Chianti Classico 2004 Medium- to full-bodied, offering lots of bright fruit, with berry and mineral character.	88	\$NA
Chianti Classico 2003 Has an intensely fruity nose, with crushed raspberry and plum. Full-bodied, with loads of fruit.	90	\$38
Chianti Classico 2001 Displays blackberry, dried cherry and violet on the nose. Full-bodied, with a long finish.	90	\$40

Giving back to Chianti also led Marco to run for president of the Chianti Classico *consorzio*, taking the reins of the organization that conducts scientific research and marketing campaigns for the entire appellation. Pallanti seems a surprising candidate for the job. After all, Castello di Ama quit the organization in 1993 and only rejoined two years ago.

The first group of its kind in Italy, the Consorzio del Vino Chianti Classico was established in 1924 by wine producers in the communes of Castellina, Radda, Greve and Gaiole, the areas that Grand Duke Cosimo III de' Medici designated as the Chianti wine zone in 1716. By the early 20th century, Chianti had become a valuable name, and wineries in other parts of Tuscany were labeling their wines Chianti. The role of the *consorzio* was to protect the region's identity and reputation.

It didn't work. In 1932, the Italian government expanded the territory of the Chianti appellation, creating seven subzones—stretching from north of Florence to south of Siena—where producers could call their Sangiovese-based wines "Chianti." The name was too good not to let other parts of Tuscany in on the action. By 1967, the original communes only made up 10 percent of what was called Chianti on wine labels. Those producers' one allowance was that their wines could carry the special designation "Chianti Classico."

The distinction meant nothing to most consumers, for whom Chianti was any Italian red wine that came in a straw-covered bottle. And increasingly, that wine was not very good, even the wine from Chianti Classico. With the end of *mezzadria* and the attendant flight of Tuscan farmworkers to the cities, Chianti Classico's vineyards were neglected. Absentee Tuscan owners like Ama's sold their property for whatever they could get, often to Italians from other regions who had newfound wealth but little wine experience. The few poor farmers who had stayed on their land joined cooperatives for economic security.

New vines needed to go into the ground. Between 1967 and 1972, with government help, Chianti Classico replanted more than 17,000 acres. The government urged owners to plant in low density, with vine rows spaced wide apart to allow for modern tractors. It also endorsed certain clones, chosen for producing high yields, not quality wines. The top selection was Rauscedo 10, now known to give high yields, low sugars, high acidity and few polyphenolic compounds.

The industrial boom that had emptied the countryside, however, also created an Italian middle class that wanted good wine to drink. Yet by the time Tuscany began to produce quality wines again, Chianti Classico's reputation was in tatters. Many of the good new producers labeled their wines without a DOCG, first as *vino da tavola*, and after 1992 as IGT. New regions, such as Montalcino and Bolgheri, were on the upswing. Quality producers in the historic Chianti region, such as Castello di Ama, left the *consorzio* because it could offer them little.

So why did Marco and Lorenza rejoin? They say it's because the black rooster finally grew some teeth. In 2003, the Italian government passed a law putting the organization in charge of overseeing all wineries producing Chianti Classico. For the first time, the producers were responsible for making sure quality was upheld. And every winery making Chianti Classico, regardless of whether it belongs to the *consorzio* or not, must put the black rooster on its bottle.

Now that the organization has muscle, more than 95 percent of Chianti Classico producers belong. "I said to Lorenza," says Marco, "we have to go back to the *consorzio* and help. This is the last opportunity to save this appellation. I quit the *consorzio* once, but I never quit Chianti."

But reestablishing the identity of the appellation will not be easy. Today, Chianti Classico evokes more a brand than a sense of place. When a consumer buys a bottle of Brunello, they can rest assured

those teeth. Whether that means passing and enforcing stricter production rules, or creating rankings along the lines of the classified-growths of Bordeaux or the designated vineyards of Burgundy, quality must be self-evident to consumers.

Pallanti says the organization is tightening regulations on yields, but even more crucial is enforcing the rules already on the books. As for rankings, "We're all well-aware that we must tackle this challenge in the near future, so that we can give consumers a means of distinguishing among Chianti Classicos. Given that our growing area is largely hilly, I would lean toward a Burgundy-style vineyard classification."

Pallanti remains convinced that the land, the steep hills covered in vines, oaks and olive trees, is up to the job. "We have the land to produce unique wine," he says. "But we have to believe. When the producers ran into problems in the past, they chose to make



At lunch with their family and workers, Marco and Lorenza (at center) have established a world-class winery at Castello di Ama and made a home there in the process.

that while every wine offers subtle differences, they will taste the underlying flavor that defines Montalcino as a special *terroir*. A Brunello is identifiable. Too many wines from Chianti do not deliver that.

As president of the *consorzio*, Pallanti represents the interests of a diverse group of producers, from small wineries like Castellare, which produces 10,000 cases of Chianti a year from 53 acres, to the Castelli del Grevepesa cooperative, which produces more than 200,000 cases a year from 2,470 acres. Larger producers have more voting power in the *consorzio*.

"There is a lot of different quality in Chianti Classico—it's like a big umbrella," says enologist Stefano Chioccioli, consultant for wineries such as Tua Rita. "Some are artisanal, some are industrial. The consumer tastes both and doesn't understand the difference because both say Chianti Classico."

For Pallanti, the hard work is to raise quality standards and challenge the *consorzio*'s members to make wines that truly taste of a distinct place. It is time to prove that the black rooster can use

commercial wines. But that wine will be impossible to sell when the sea of New World wines—cheaper-to-produce wines—arrives. We have to make unique wine, or we are finished."

Lorenza and Marco believe that Ama is an example of what Chianti Classico can produce. And they are willing to work hard to give back to the land, to make sure their children can one day make distinctive wine there as well.

"I want him to teach our son," says Lorenza, speaking of Marco and 10-year-old Arturo. "Arturo loves this place. Every moment he wants to be here."

With lunch over and the rain stopped, Marco gets up from the table for a walk through the vineyards. He'll leave for London in a few days for a series of tastings to promote the *consorzio*'s members. But for now, he's on his little patch of land. The organization's Web site proudly proclaims, "It's the land that makes the difference." After 25 years on this estate, Pallanti knows that. His next challenge is proving it. □