



Exclusive February 2013 Vertical Tasting of Castello di Ama's Chianti Classico Vigneto Bellavista

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Vertical Tasting of Castello di Ama's Chianti Classico Vigneto Bellavista

By [Ian D'Agata](#)

Ama is a Chianti estate whose wines, though expensive, rank among the best not just in Chianti but the world. Known today as Castello di Ama (I remember well when back in the '70s and '80s everyone referred to it with a more humble Fattoria di Ama), it has been around for some time; in fact, its existence has been documented back to 998 A.D.

Quality winemaking on the premises is a more recent event, as the real leap into wine stardom occurred only with the arrival of Lorenza Sebasti (one of Ama's owners) and winemaker Marco Pallanti. This now wife-and-husband team has been running Ama with talent and flair for more than 25 vintages. Until recently, Pallanti was also the acting President of the Chianti Classico Consortium.

The estate owns 90 hectares of vines averaging roughly 30 years of age, most of which are planted between 300 to 500 meters above sea level. Located in the hamlet of Lecchi, in Gaiole in Chianti, one of the three historic towns where Chianti was born (along with Radda in Chianti and Castellina in Chianti), Ama benefits from one of the true *grand cru* areas of all of Chianti Classico.

Perhaps the single most important contribution made by Sebasti and Pallanti over the years, not just to Ama but to Chianti Classico in general, has been the relentless promotion of Chianti Classico as a great wine in its own right. I remember the guffaws and smirks of those in attendance at a wine tasting in Rome in 1985 when Lorenza Sebasti said she strongly believed that Chianti had little to envy in the great wines of Bordeaux, Burgundy and Napa Valley. Bewildered looks and scornful comments were also plentiful when it came to the high prices Ama asked for its wines. "I have always felt sangiovese was one of the world's great grape varieties," Sebasti told me in a wine tasting many years ago, "but it was hampered, even diminished, by shoddy winemaking and a lack of ambition on the part of many producers. I believed it could and should have been so much more. For this reason, at Ama we did not produce a Supertuscan wine containing sangiovese, preferring to reserve all of our best sangiovese grapes for our Chianti Classico." (As a sign of the continuing progress and evolution of Ama's wines and understanding of its *terroir*, only recently did Ama finally begin to produce a sangiovese Supertuscan wine, called Haiku.)

Another contrarian view held by Sebasti and Pallanti, at least for those times, was that Chianti, despite the presence of large estates owned by noble families, actually had more in common with Burgundy than Bordeaux, because they feel that sangiovese has a lot more in common with pinot noir (site-sensitivity, a medium red color due to relatively low anthocyanin concentration, and a medium rather than full body) than it does with the cabernets and merlots of the world.

The desire to produce world-class Chianti and the idea that sangiovese could express site specificity as clearly as nebbiolo or pinot noir motivated Pallanti to carry out a zonation study of Ama's *terroir* (not a common practice in Italy's wine scene in the '80s), in order to identify single plots that might produce different and better sangiovese wines. With the information obtained through this study, and with the belief that sangiovese and pinot noir shared similar characteristics, the logical next step was to create a single-vineyard Chianti. Thus, beginning with the 1978 vintage (when the Chianti Classico Vigneto Bellavista was born), four different single-vineyard or *cru* bottlings were produced at Ama. The Bellavista was followed by the Vigneto San Lorenzo (first made in 1982), Vigneto La Casuccia (1985) and Vigneto Bertinga (1988).

While the regular Chianti is certainly an excellent wine (though in my view, with its sometimes generous dollop of merlot and aromas and flavors more reminiscent of pinot noir it's hardly a traditional Chianti), there is no doubt that the La Casuccia and Bellavista are two of Italy's best red wines. La Casuccia is roughly 90% sangiovese and 10% merlot, while Bellavista is typically 80% sangiovese and 20% malvasia nera, depending on the vintage. Earlier vintages also had a little canaiolo nero included in the blend, so beware the many inaccurate reports that blindly state that this wine is always 80% sangiovese and 20% malvasia nera.

In my opinion, the top star here is the Vigneto Bellavista, the oldest cru wine made at Ama: it speaks more of Chianti's *terroir* than does La Casuccia, whose merlot presence can dominate in many vintages. On the contrary, Bellavista benefits from the magical synergy that happens between sangiovese and malvasia nera (something that is also true of canaiolo nero and sangiovese.) This is because neither canaiolo nero nor malvasia nera overwhelms the delicate aromas and flavors of sangiovese but rather complement them, something that rarely happens, despite what you may read or hear elsewhere, with the more brutal, forceful cabernets and merlot. In contrast to canaiolo nero, malvasia nera adds an aromatic, spicy/herbal note to sangiovese. Malvasia nera's synergy with sangiovese is also exemplified by two other truly great Tuscan wines, Castellare's I Sodi di San Niccolò and Capannelle's Solare.

The Bellavista vineyard consists of roughly 23 hectares (or about 56 acres), with southeast and southwest exposures. The soil is the poor, friable *galestro* typical of Chianti Classico, where the best sangiovese are made, and the vines were planted between 1967 and 1975 at an altitude ranging from 456 meters above sea level (in the Campinuovi area) to 530 meters (in the Bellaria portion.) The winemaking has not changed a great deal over the years, though with the 1982 vintage small oak barrels were introduced, and gradually the very large traditional oak casks were phased out.

As for the wine, the Vigneto Bellavista is a standout Chianti Classico, amazingly elegant and perfumed in the better vintages, but not made every year. Its silky tannins and its very pure aromas and flavors, which in some vintages bear more than a passing resemblance to pinot noir (witness the standout 1988), make it an often compelling and distinctive Chianti Classico. Besides the presence of the malvasia nera, Bellavista is also characterized by the high acidity and refinement that come from the higher altitude at which the grapes grow--not to mention the much cooler microclimate than that of most other Chiantis.

When all is said and done, the extent to which Sebaste and Pallanti have succeeded in fulfilling their vision for the Chianti Classico of Ama is borne out by the high prices and critical acclaim achieved by their wines all over the world. The wines for this report came from my personal cellar and were tasted in November of 2012 in Rome; I also had the opportunity to taste most of the same vintages on two occasions in Rome in 2011, from samples provided by the estate. Marco Pallanti was present at the first tasting, and I thank him for providing background data on the estate and the wines. My scores and tasting notes are from the 2012 tasting, although results were quite similar in all three tastings. In my notes, I have pointed out a few instances where I found noticeable differences between the various bottles tasted. Readers may notice that the range of scores for these wines is rather small; to some extent, this is due to Ama's uncanny ability to excel in lesser vintages.

Stephen Tanzer's INTERNATIONAL WINE CELLAR



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Castello di Ama

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2006 Castello di Ama Chianti Classico Vigneto Bellavista

94(+?)

(a blend of 80% sangiovese and 20% malvasia nera; 5 grams per liter total acidity; 3.52 pH; 28.5 g/l dry extract; 13.1% alcohol; aged 14 months in 40% new oak): Good full ruby-red. Captivating aromas of strawberry, raspberry, dark plum, flowers and incense, with an energizing blood orange note emerging with aeration. Quite supple, even creamy, in the middle palate, with pure red berry, floral and mineral flavors framed by harmonious acidity. Finishes round, seamless and very long, with silky, fine-grained tannins and plenty of freshness. This outstanding, very refined Chianti offers a recognizable bay leaf nuance typical of malvasia nera. One of the best wines from Ama in the new century, this 2006 ought to be at its best between 2018 and 2028.

2004 Castello di Ama Chianti Classico Vigneto Bellavista

92(+?)

(80% sangiovese and 20% malvasia nera; 4.9 g/l total acidity; 3.59 pH; 30.3 g/l dry extract; 13% alcohol; spent 14 months in 40% new oak): Good bright red. Very ripe black cherry complicated by minerals, dark chocolate and spices on the nose; I wanted a bit more freshness. Supple on entry, then richer but less refined than the 2006 in the middle, with a chocolatey ripeness to the creamy black and red fruit flavors. There's a delicacy to the mid-palate but the finish features substantial ripe tannins that will require patience. A very big, almost fat style of Chianti from Ama: as good as this wine is, I find the 2004 Bellavista to be a little too ripe and chunky for my taste. Hopefully, time in the cellar will help this Bellavista develop more finesse and style. Should be at its best between 2016 and 2024.

2001 Castello di Ama Chianti Classico Vigneto Bellavista

90(+?)

(a blend of 80% sangiovese and 20% malvasia nera; 4.8 g/l total acidity; 3.55 pH; 27.9 g/l dry extract; 12.9% alcohol): Bright, full red; less dark than either the 2006 or 2004. Pure, perfumed aromas of blueberry, violet and herbs. Dense, sweet and juicy, with a creamy, fine-grained texture to the complex, ripe flavors of red and black fruits, tomato paste and exotic dried herbs. Quite rich and just this side shy of chunky, but with enough energy to remain light and lively despite its size, this sexy wine finishes with supple tannins, vanillin oak and excellent length. Thanks to its especially marked aromatic herb character from the malvasia nera, this '01 is quite different than other Bellavista vintages. A very good year, the 2001 growing season was affected by springtime hail and snow at Easter, which reduced yields by as much as 35%. This spent 14 months in 70% new oak, but the extra oak really doesn't show.

1997 Castello di Ama Chianti Classico Vigneto Bellavista

93

(a blend of 90% sangiovese and 10% malvasia nera; 5.6 g/l total acidity; 3.48 pH; 26.9 g/l dry extract; 12.6% alcohol): Bright medium-dark ruby. Expressive aromas of raspberry, chocolate and nutty oak are lifted by flowers and minerals. Bright and easygoing but very concentrated too, showing terrific palate-staining intensity to the flavors of dark berries, ripe red cherry and cocoa powder. This powerful wine comes across as balanced and very accessible thanks to its creamy, soft mouthfeel. Finishes ripely tannic and long. Thanks to its excellent acidity and balance, this is one of the top dozen 1997 Tuscan wines--a truly successful effort in an overrated vintage of which I am generally not a fan (but it was a much more successful vintage in Chianti Classico than in Montalcino, for example.) However, I should caution readers that this tasting note was on a magnum; from standard 750 ml. bottles the wine is clearly more evolved. This spent 14 months in 75% new oak; from a separate set of lab data, I also have 30.8 g/l as its dry extract value.

1995 Castello di Ama Chianti Classico Vigneto Bellavista

89?

(a blend of 87% sangiovese, 10% malvasia nera and 3% canaiolo nero; 5.9 g/l total acidity; 3.32 pH; 26.1 g/l dry extract; 12.8% alcohol; aged for 13 months in 60% new oak): Medium-deep red. Strong notes of underbrush, dried spices and flowers on the nose camouflage delicate red cherry and blackcurrant fruit aromas. Richer and sweeter in the mouth, with fruitier, nicely focused dark plum and red cherry flavors and sweet, silky tannins. And yet this wine seems to be evolving rapidly and may already be past its peak. Finishes only moderately long, and with a vegetal streak that makes me think the tannins did not achieve optimal physiological maturity. Pallanti told me the grapes were slightly dehydrated on the vine at the time of harvest (on October 20), and that this may account for the green note.

1993 Castello di Ama Chianti Classico Vigneto Bellavista

92

(a blend of 88% sangiovese, 10% malvasia nera and 2% canaiolo nero; 5.9 g/l total acidity; 3.23 pH; 26 g/l dry extract; 12.4% alcohol): Good medium-dark red. Pure if slightly austere aromas of blueberry, graphite and crushed stone. Then sweeter and more expansive on the palate, with a tangy, penetrating quality to the red and dark berry flavors. Not a hugely concentrated wine, but shows the nicely integrated lively acidity and delicate but focused personality typical of the best 1993 Chiantis. This is delicious to drink now: I love its purity, gracefulness and mineral

qualities. This is really what great Chianti Classico is all about. Very well done, considerable that 1993 was not a particularly memorable or age-worthy vintage.

1991 Castello di Ama Chianti Classico Vigneto Bellavista

88

(a blend of 80% sangiovese, 10% malvasia nera and 10% canaiolo nero; 5.6 g/l total acidity; pH; 29 g/l dry extract; 13% alcohol): Good medium red with a pale rim. Racy aromas of spicy red berries, mint and rhubarb on the delicate nose. Juicy, pure red berry and underbrush flavors are harmonious but a little short on the back. Fairly fresh and vinous Chianti with a gentle texture, but lacks a little character in the middle palate. Still, I like this wine's classic, refined finish and freshness. The 1991 vintage was a very difficult one, with a bout of springtime hail that required much work in the vineyards and attention at the harvest. I'd drink this up now as I cannot see it improving further.

1990 Castello di Ama Chianti Classico Vigneto Bellavista

95

(80% sangiovese and 20% malvasia nera; 13.5% alcohol): Good fresh dark red with a hint of amber at the rim. Captivating aromas of strawberry, raspberry syrup, dried flowers, underbrush, mocha and tar, with hints of blood orange and incense emerging as the wine opens in the glass. Quite deep and creamy, with musky red berry, earth and sweet spice flavors kept light and lively by harmonious acids. Very round and seamless wine with a silky, lush, very long finish featuring plenty of structure and grip.

1988 Castello di Ama Chianti Classico Vigneto Bellavista

97

(a blend of 85% sangiovese, 10% malvasia nera and 5% canaiolo nero; 5.3 g/l total acidity; 3.39 pH; 28.1 g/l dry extract; 12.7% alcohol): Bright dark ruby-red to the rim. Highly nuanced aromas of blackberry, blackcurrant, violet, truffle, aromatic herbs and iron. Boasts compelling sweetness to its dark berry and delicately smoky plum flavors, displaying superb inner-mouth perfume and an utterly seamless texture. Finishes remarkably long and suave, with subtle, fine-grained tannins and wonderfully pure, floral, finishing flavors that coat every inch of the palate. This amazingly perfumed Chianti Classico had me thinking of some truly memorable red Burgundies of the past. Simply put, it's one of the ten greatest Chianti Classicos I have tasted in the last 30 years. I have tried this wine seven times in the last four years, and from magnum it's amazingly youthful, promising to evolve positively for another two or three decades. My score reflects the wine tasted from magnum on two different occasions with very similar results. Exceptional stuff.

1986 Castello di Ama Chianti Classico Vigneto Bellavista

93

(a blend of 85% sangiovese, 10% malvasia nera and 5% canaiolo nero; 5.5 g/l total acidity; 3.41 pH; 29.3 g/l dry extract; 13% alcohol): Light bright, youthful red to the rim. Enticing, racy aromas of red currant, tea leaf, tar and coffee. Big and broad on the palate, with open-knit yet still-precise flavors of red berries and minerals complicated by a whiff of underbrush. Displays seductive floral tones on the long finish and puts on considerable weight in the glass. From a not-so-famous vintage that was perhaps slightly underestimated originally, this is an excellent 1986 Chianti Classico. I should note that Italian wine insiders know that the wines of Ama can be superb in off-vintages, rising to the top when most others fail. This '86 is a clear example of why many of us seek to buy less famous vintages of these wines.

1982 Castello di Ama Chianti Classico Vigneto Bellavista

96

Deep, bright red. Knockout tangy nose combines *framboise*, red cherry, minerals, mocha and sweet spices. Still powerful but suave on entry, then slightly less lush but intense in the middle, showing sharply defined red cherry, blackcurrant jelly and balsamic underbrush notes. The slowly mounting finish features still-gripping fruit, very ripe tannins, a powerful mineral spine and persistent hints of game and tar. A great wine, and yet another example of the magnificence of the 1982 vintage in Chianti Classico. Anybody fortunate enough to find a well-kept bottle of this wine (preferably from magnum) should enjoy it soon as there's more to lose than gain by holding it.