



BURT WOLF

TRAVELS & TRADITIONS

A TUSCAN HARVEST, ITALY

About 3,000 years ago, a people known as the Etruscans migrated from Eastern Europe to central Italy and set up a federation of 12 city states. Today, their old neighborhood is known as Tuscany, and its cities are some of the most famous in Italy. Florence, Pisa and Siena are Tuscan cities.

The Etruscans had a highly developed society. Great art and architecture. They also had a strong fleet that traded with the Syrians and the Greeks. They traded in Africa and in Spain. Etruscan tin and copper went out; ivory, precious jewels and textiles came in. But by the beginning of the third century the Roman legions had become so strong that they were able to crush the Etruscans and eventually incorporated all of Etruscan society into the Roman Empire.

The great cultural traditions of the Etruscans remained in place. It was the citizens of Tuscany who triggered the rebirth of art and architecture that we call the Renaissance. Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Botticelli, Raphael---everybody who was anybody in the Renaissance was working in Tuscany. Tuscany is still home to artists and writers who find inspiration in the magnificent landscape and the unusual light.

During the 9th century, the Tuscan hill town of Siena became a major stopping point on the road between Paris and Rome. By the beginning of the 12th century it was a bustling city, producing some of the best wool in Italy, developing a clothing industry and exploiting a small silver mine.



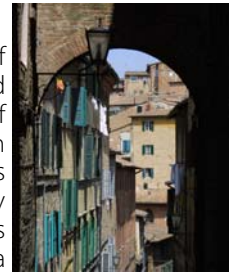
By the end of the 12th century Siena was a commercial and financial center and her growing economic success began to challenge the city of Florence which was only 30 miles to the north. An emotional competition developed between the two cities which eventually led to the Battle of Montaperti in 1260.

Siena won the battle and entered a period of extraordinary power---power which rested in the hands of a small group of influential families. One way the families showed their new-found wealth and influence was the construction of magnificent fortified palaces.

The city's location on the road to Rome gave it a commercial advantage but it also made it a resting place for pilgrims. If you were on your way to the Vatican from virtually any part of Europe you made a

stop in Siena.

The city began building a series of outstanding churches, towers and public squares. And since most of the modern construction has taken place outside the old city, Siena's character remains relatively unspoiled. Narrow winding streets and ancient buildings gives Siena a distinctly medieval feeling.



During the past 3,000 years dozens of different ethnic groups have immigrated to the peninsula that is presently called Italy.

And each immigration made a contribution to the cooking of the land but there were three groups that set the foundation which eventually became what we now call Italian cooking.

The three groups were the Greeks, the Saracens, and the Etruscans. The Greeks arrived over 2,000 years ago and set the base for all southern cooking. The Saracens popped in around 700 A.D. and superimposed a whole bunch of ideas on top of the Greek base. The Greeks and the Saracens were the primary influences on the cooking of the south. The north was controlled by the Etruscans and the center of the area which they controlled eventually became known as Tuscany.

When it comes to food, Siena has all of the traditional dishes of Tuscany, but its greatest strength is in its sweets. The Saracens brought sugar to Italy and about ten minutes later, Siena had a sweet tooth.

Its most famous sweet is *Panforte*, which means "strong bread." Panforte is a medieval spiced bread made from candied orange peel, lemons, almonds, hazelnuts, sugar and honey. It is made by a number of bakeries in Siena and shipped to Italian communities throughout the world.



Perhaps the most famous baker of Panforte is Nannini, who also has a number of retail shops throughout the town. Wherever there is an Italian community, there is Panforte. And right next to the Panforte you will often find *Ricciarelli*, little cookies that are made from almonds, egg whites and sugar.

THE WINES OF TUSCANY

Starting in the year 1000, Europe saw an enormous increase in its population. And people started moving into the cities. The hot towns were Milan, Venice and

DOC

Denominazione di Origine Controllata:

An Italian quality assurance label for food products and wines. It is modeled after the French AOC. Instituted in 1963, it was overhauled in 1992 for compliance with the equivalent EU law on Protected Designations of Origin, which came into effect that year.

source: Wikipedia.org

Florence. And as more and more people moved into the cities, the merchants became wealthier and wealthier. Suddenly there was a large group of people interested in buying good stuff and at the top of their shopping list was wine.



By the early 1300's each resident of Florence was on average knocking off a gallon of wine per week. Much of that wine came from the nearby vineyards in Tuscany and the word *Chianti* was already being used to describe the land

between Florence and Siena.

For most of its history, Italy was made up of small independent states. Each had its own approach to business with separate currencies, weights and measures. That, plus a mind boggling system of import and export duties made it impossible for Italy to develop an international or even a national market for its wines. And the quality of the wine remained uneven at best.

But during the middle of the 19th century things began to change. The city states became a single nation. Well, at least in theory. The wine producers of Tuscany introduced quality standards and soon developed an international reputation.

The most important of the traditional grape varieties in Tuscany is the "*Sangiovese*". The word comes from a Roman phrase that means the blood of Jupiter, but Sangiovese was probably cultivated by the ancient Etruscans well before the Romans arrived. Today, the most common Sangiovese clone in Tuscany is Sangiovese Grosso, which in turn has its own clone in the area of



Montalcino known as "Brunello."

Today, the wines of Italy are regulated by a governmental system known as DOC. The DOC laws try to ensure that the wine was made from the authorized type of grape, that it was grown in the appropriate area and that it contains the right amount of alcohol. There is even a tighter control called a DOCG, which has stricter limitations and attempts to insure an even higher quality. Finally, there's a designation called IGT. It's a government controlled mark that indicates that the wine is in the style of the region.



While all these government regulations are designed to improve the quality of Italian wine, they do not necessarily guarantee that the end result will be more enjoyable to drink than a bottle without these designations.

During the 1970s, Italian winemakers were more interested in quantity than quality. They hit the bottom of the barrel.

But during the 1980s, a new generation of winemakers were coming into their own and they wanted to make wines that would be respected throughout the world.

They planted grape varieties that were traditional to France like Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Merlot. The winemakers concentrated on the quality of the grapes. And they blended the wine that came from the Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Merlot with the



wine that came from the Sangiovese.

The old giant Slavonian oak tanks that were used for hundreds of years in Italy were replaced by smaller French oak barrels. Winemakers took the best of the traditional Tuscan techniques for winemaking

and added the things they had learned from wine-makers all over the world. The results were a series of wines known as the "Super-Tuscans". World class wines at world class prices.

TOLAINI

Today, one of the new and most forward looking producers of wine in Tuscany is Pierluigi Tolaini, who likes to be called Louie. His vineyard is in the south-west corner of the most important grape growing area in Tuscany.

When he was 19 Pierluigi immigrated to Canada. He got a job working as a laborer on oil rigs. Soon he bought a truck to haul water to the rigs, then a little trucking company, and today he has



A Tuscan Harvest, Italy

the largest trucking company in Canada.

Albert Einstein once said that imagination was more important than knowledge. When Louie decided to start a vineyard his winemaking knowledge was almost non-existent, but his imagination was in top form and he kept imagining new ways to do things.

He noticed that bending down to work on the vines exhausted his crews so he invented a tractor that makes their life easier and their work faster. He also produced a special container that protected the grapes from damage as they were moved from the vineyards to the winery. It also made them easier to move.



When the grapes come in from the fields they go onto a selection table. Any grapes that are not perfect are taken out. Then the stems are removed and they go onto a second selection table. The entire Tolaini family are involved in the sorting of the grapes and they are compulsive about using only the best, and that is just one of their many compulsions. The grapes are kept whole which prevents the juices from interacting with the air and that gives the wine a much better flavor. The grapes continue their journey into a row of oak fermenting tanks.



The key process in making wine is called fermentation. There is a natural yeast on the outside of the grape. When that yeast comes in contact with the sugar in the grape juice it turns it into carbon dioxide gas which escapes into the air and alcohol which mixes with the juice. The more sugar in the grape, the more alcohol in the wine.

The winemaker decides when there has been enough fermentation, at which point the wine goes into oak barrels to age.

After about two years the wine from different barrels are blended together and bottled. New bottles are placed onto the bottling line. They're washed and dried and filled with wine. Then the air above the wine is pulled out of the bottle. The cork goes in. The bottle is capped and sealed and labeled. At that point some wines are ready for shipment.

But others continue to gently age in the bottle for another two years. Right after I turned 50 I decided that gentle aging was extremely important.




The history of Tuscan wine has always been about deciding which grape varieties to plant, and how to grow them. Cabernet and Merlot are traditional French grape varieties but when they are planted in Tuscany, like so many long term residents of the area, they develop a

WHERE TO EAT

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distinct Tuscan accent.

The consulting wine maker at Tolaini is Michel Rolland, who is one of the world's leading authorities on the subject.



Michel began work in a lab as an enologist. Winemakers would often ask for his advice on their wines. And nowadays he is out of the lab and is an advisor for the entire winemaking process: from the vineyard to the cellar, aging, bottling and sometimes even the drinking. His simple advice "Good grapes are absolutely necessary to make good wine. There is no good winemaker. It is mostly good grapes."

Pierluigi's daughter Lia and her sister founded one of the most successful private wine retailers, she also helps her father and she owns a national wine importing company called Banville and Jones. And she even makes her own wine at her winery Donna Laura.

SUNDAY FAMILY MEAL

The harvest is always celebrated with a great meal --- often it's a family feast on the Sunday after the harvest has been completed.

The idea of having a holy day once a week goes back for thousands of years. It was an Old Testament tradition that was adopted by Christian and Islamic cultures. After spending six days creating the earth and the heavens God rested on the seventh and advised his people that they should do the same. In western societies, Sunday is usually a day of rest, but it can also be a feast day when family and friends come together for a special meal.

The foods that are served at an important family meal must be different from those foods that are considered "everyday" foods. Very often the recipes revolve around something that's considered a family heirloom. Today, the Tolaini's are preparing for a big deal meal. And all of the dishes are traditionally Tuscan.

The great cooks of Tuscany are devoted to a rustic approach to food. They claim that they are merely adapting and refining traditional farm recipes. But since the farm cooks produce some of the world's finest bread, oil, beans, cheese and mushrooms, they've got a lot to work with.

Bruscetta is made with fresh tomato, garlic, stale bread, and superb olive oil. Another type of bruscetta is made with fresh herbs, specially basil, parsley, garlic and also some anchovy. Two very important ingredients in Tuscan cooking are olive oil and stale bread.



Bifstek-a-la-Farentina is the best part of the Canina cow which is locally grown in this particular area. It is cooked ten minutes on each side with some rosemary, garlic and a touch of olive oil. That's the best piece of steak you're going to have in this particular part of the world.

In Tuscany you will find some wonderful sausages. The Tolaini's are preparing pork sausages grilled very simply with a touch of olive oil, some sage on top and some peppernacino.



A wonderful soup, is made with faro, olive oil, potato and mushrooms.

People coming together to prepare for a meal can be as important as coming together to eat. It puts them in a relaxed and informal space. And it lets everyone make a contribution to the meal.

A special meal served at home, always contains symbols of togetherness and separation.

Single placemats may be the norm for weekday meals, but a special meal always gets one big tablecloth. On that tablecloth, which holds everything and everyone together on one field, there are individual place settings, individual dishes, individual glasses, knives, forks and spoons---individual but clearly part of a group.

The family table reinforces the idea of being together in a group, but at the same time it can separate. It gives everyone an opportunity to show that they are a unique individual within the family.

The sharing of wine at a family table is a symbolic act. Since ancient times wine has been presented separately from other food and drink. Even when everything else comes to the table as a single serving, the wine comes in a bottle or a decanter, and it's divided in front of the

family, reminding everyone of their common starting point.

Since many of the members of the Tolaini family are involved in the wine business it is a particularly important part of the meal.

The family meal puts young children in a situation that makes it easier for them to understand how language is used. They see people ask for things and get them. The children begin to understand the raw power of a phrase like, "Grandpa, can I please have another cookie?"

The meal started in late afternoon when the sun was strong. It ended as the sun was setting. A reminder of how fast time passes and how important it is to enjoy the warmth of the occasion.



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