



Under the TUSCAN sun

“My idea of heaven still is to drive the gravel farm roads of Umbria and Tuscany, very pleasantly lost,” wrote Frances Mayes. **Suneeta Sodhi Kanga** agrees with the author as she drives through Tuscany and samples the wines of one of the oldest wine-producing regions in the world

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TALY, this small country in the middle of the Mediterranean, contains a mind-boggling diversity of natural features, an immense coastline, three major mountain ranges, lots of foothills, and relatively little flat land.

Tuscany in the middle of Italy is one of the oldest wine-producing regions in the world. And in the middle of the Tuscan hills outside the village of Grassina, less than an hour's drive from Florence lies Ruffino's beautiful wine estate Tenuta Poggio Casciano (Poggio is the Tuscan word for a terraced hilltop which perfectly describes the terrain). Tuscany's mild Mediterranean climate, hillside vineyards and soils distinguish the character of its wines. An astounding 92% of Tuscany's terrain is either hills or mountain, with the Appennini Mountains separating Tuscany from Emilia-Romagna to the north, while smaller ranges line Tuscany's western and southern reaches.

I had the pleasure of visiting this beautiful

estate in July this year. Under the famed Tuscan sun I enjoyed an exciting Super Tuscan experience. At this estate, antiquity and modernity blend beautifully.

A 14th century villa with the classic Tuscan terra cotta and ochre exterior overlooks scenic vineyards and serves as Ruffino's main visitor centre. The lovely gardens and courtyard complete the visitor experience.

All Italian wines are assigned to one of four government-regulated classifications. No rules or quality standards apply to the *Vino da Tavola* (table wine) category other than requiring that the grapes be grown in Italy. The other three Italian Wine Classifications are IGT, DOC and DOCG. These categories

become increasingly strict in their regulation, with IGT being the most lenient to give winemakers flexibility and DOCG being the most controlled.

The IGT, *Indicazione Geografica Tipica* (typical geographical place) classification includes wines that are typical to a large geographic area (for example, Tuscany) by way of colour, grape varieties and/or wine type. Growers must apply for IGT status and wine labels must declare a specific region. IGT wines are subject to some production limitations, but no taste or quality tests are required.

What is a Super Tuscan? The term Super Tuscan applies to a group of Tuscan wines which are produced using grape varieties not unique or indigenous to Tuscany. Most often these wines are a blend of Tuscan varietals like Sangiovese with French grape types such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Syrah or Cabernet Franc.

Often, Super Tuscan use non-traditional winemaking techniques including aging the wine in small oak barrels. Most Super Tuscan are red, but there are some white Super Tuscan as well. Because these wines do not conform to Italy's traditional and rigid wine laws, they are not an officially recognised classification. So hence Super Tuscan are registered under the IGT status.

Since most of the vineyards are out of the way on scenic village roads, it is best to rent a car and drive yourself. We did exactly that. At the appointed hour we were met by the lovely Silvia Benini, Brand Ambassador of Ruffino wines. Silvia was most gracious and made us

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feel at home.

After refreshments we walked through the vineyards where the vines are 17 to 25 years old. Tuscany has been heaped with good fortune: mineral-laden soils, the cooling influence of the Mediterranean Sea, the dry summers that wine grapes favour and all those luscious, sun-drenched hills.

Innovation also finds a place here. I was most impressed with the organic way they get rid of a certain grape-chewing moth pest that lays its eggs on the grape leaf which can cause significant economic damage. So, what's the best way to counter this? The pheromone sexual confusion method! Small brown, plastic pipes—which look like a medicine capsules blister packaging—are hung in the grapevines every few metres. The devices emit synthetically created female moth pheromones into the air, creating a cloud of fragrance over the vineyard. The sex pheromones are an important factor in mating in moths. Once the female releases chemicals, it triggers the mate search and the male moths begin their upwind motion toward their potential partner. But with the devices all emitting female pheromones, they trick the males into a fruitless search for sex that ultimately pushes them away. Apparently this totally natural and organic manner of pest control has a success rate of 99.9%.

The wine production area was our next stop. We were led through a room full of fermentation tanks where all the wine making happens. The very impressive cool underground barrique tunnel was next. The blissful silence in the cellars laden with oak





barrels almost seemed to contribute to the sanctity of making perfect wines; a necessary ingredient to the art and science of making wine which is a religion and not just a ritual in Tuscany.

In hushed tones we learnt about the all-important ageing process of red wines. The ancient cellar is 1500 years old, the walls are two feet thick and mysterious; protecting the precious wines in its womb like a mother.

After we had experienced the terroir, visited the vineyards and walked through the ancient wine cellar tunnel we had built up quite an appetite and now looked forward to tasting some of the famed wines and food of Tuscany. It's no secret Italians are lovers of delicious food and great wine. Along with their love of gastronomy comes an innate sense of conviviality—especially around the lunch table. Italians treat friends like family and entertain with natural hospitality. We were treated to generous helpings of scrumptious local appetizers accompanied by a lovely Rosatello, a rose sparkling and Pinot Grigio, a local white varietal.

We then tasted their most representative Super Tuscan wines over a local homemade Tuscan lunch of handmade Tagliolini pasta and delicious rustic Chicken Caccitore. The preparations were so good that I actually kissed the sweet Italian matriarch cook!

The Super Tuscan Modus IGT 2013 is Ruffino's contemporary way of expressing Tuscany with a blend of three noble grape varieties.

First introduced in 1997, Modus routinely garners exceptional acclaim from the top wine critics worldwide.

Sangiovese is the core of Modus, providing refined texture along with cherry and red berry aromas. The Merlot offers smoothness enriched by blackberry fruit and delicate notes of mint, while the Cabernet Sauvignon lends structure, and also unites all three grape types with its elegance.

Modus' label features a compass that artfully represents the meticulous balance of all the elements that come together to give this wine its distinctive character: vines, sun, fruit, soil, dedication and the passage of time. Modus' structure on the palate promises that this wine can be aged for many years.

Alauda IGT 2013, the other Super Tuscan that we tasted, is a unique wine because Cabernet Franc is the heart of the blend, an unusual choice in Tuscany where Sangiovese is considered the signature grape. This Super Tuscan wine represents the pinnacle of Ruffino's artisan approach to winemaking. The Cabernet Franc comes from a number of French Loire Valley clones that were planted in carefully selected areas. It is carefully blended with Merlot to give the wine softness and structure. And, with a nod to tradition, the rare native Tuscan varietal Colourino is used to round out the blend. Alauda, which means 'skylark' in Italian is only made in exceptional vintage years and is a contemporary expression of Tuscany.

We also tasted their typical salt less bread dipped in the high quality extra virgin Laudemio olive oil which is also produced by Ruffino. According to Sylvia, this is the favourite afternoon snack of the local children when they get back from school.

The above mentioned very satisfying meal was followed by a strawberry Panna cotta dessert and Vin Santo Serelle DOC 2012—the sweet 'holy

wine'. Sylvia told us that it is a tradition in Tuscany to dip the accompanying crisp almond biscotti, called Cantuccini di Prato into the glass of the Vin Santo—manners be darned. The locals would do this even in front of the Queen!

The Tuscans end their meals with Grappa, which is somewhat like a brandy. Grappa Invecchiata Riserva Ducale Oro is an aged grappa (invecchiata means 'aged' in Italian) that Ruffino produces. Grappa is made from distilling the pomace—grape skins, pulp, seeds and stem left over after winemaking. The tradition of making grappa is based on the belief in Italy that everything harvested from the land should be used as completely as possible. The pomace used to make this grappa comes from Ruffino's Riserva Ducale Oro, the renowned Chianti Classico Riserva made by Ruffino since 1947. Also, the grappa is aged in the same oak barrels used to store Riserva Ducale Oro over many years.

All good things must come to an end as did our trip. Sylvia gave me a beautiful coffee table



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book on Tuscan food recipes while seeing us off. A real treasure! I realised on my way back that I had been to paradise.

I had experienced an amazing symphony being played to each of my senses. Splendid scenic surroundings, wealth of learning, fantastic wines, gourmet cuisine, perfect grace and warm hospitality. It is all these ingredients when packaged in an elegant bottle is what goes into making a Tuscan wine from Ruffino.

BEST TIME TO VISIT TUSCANY

For all those who are tempted to experience all of the above and more, I strongly recommend this trip to paradise. Tours of wineries are available throughout Tuscany, allowing wine lovers to learn how their favourite wines are made and aged by the passionate producers, not to mention taste the delicious wines and stock up on unique bottles to take home.

The Tuscan wine people are very friendly and love sharing their knowledge of wines.



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AND TIME**



They appreciate your visiting Tuscany and are open to visits on appointment. Please note that appointments for winery visits need to be made in advance as most appointments are private one-on-one experiences.

The ideal months to visit are from April to September. Please keep in mind that there are no tours on Sundays and August is vacation time for the Italians. Most wineries will be shut then and oh yes, please be very comfortable in your clothes and shoes to enable you to enjoy the long walks and the hot Tuscan sun.

Today, Ruffino is part of Constellation Brands, a leading worldwide wine company. The Ruffino wines are solely imported and distributed in India by Sula Selections, the import arm of Sula and are available at all leading hotels, restaurants and select retail outlets across the country.

WINES AVAILABLE IN INDIA

Ruffino Chianti D.O.C.G.

Chianti D.O.C.G. occupies a special place in the history of

Ruffino. When Ilario and Leopoldo Ruffino founded the winery in 1877, the first wine they produced was Chianti. And it was the reputation of this wine that launched Ruffino's success. In fact, before World War I Ruffino was the only Chianti exported from Italy to the U.S., making it an ambassador to wine lovers around the world. In keeping with tradition, it features a distinct Florentine bottle reminiscent of the fiasco, the straw-dressed flask in which Chianti was originally bottled.

Ducale Chianti Classico Riserva D.O.C.G.

Ducale means 'duke' in Italian. It has been named in honour of the Duke of Aosta who braved a journey over the Alps to taste the Ruffino wines that he had heard so much about. He was so impressed by the wine that in 1890 he appointed Ruffino as the official supplier to the Italian royal family. This fabled Ruffino wine was first released in 1927. The blend is 80% Sangiovese along with 20% Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon. The wine undergoes secondary malolactic fermentation to enhance its velvety texture, then ages for 24 months in oak, stainless steel and concrete vats. Riserva Ducale spends an additional three months in the bottle before release. ☑

