



THE HEART OF

Italy

An insider's guide to the land,
the people and the great wines

BY JAMES SUCKLING

Stefano and Paolo Mearini run a small bar and wine shop called the Charleston on the outskirts of the Tuscan town of Arezzo. They are watching, from front-row seats, a true renaissance in Tuscany's wine industry. ■ "It's crazy," says Stefano, 38, who began working at his family's enoteca in 1985. "We can't stay here in our shop and still keep on top of things. We have to be out in the vineyards, tasting and meeting producers to know what is going on. There's a new wine coming onto the market almost every day." ■ The shop is only 20 minutes from my house, so I often stop by to see what's new and talk about the wine scene. The Mearinis always seem to have something new to try. Just five years ago, the brothers mainly sold coffee, sandwiches and homemade ice cream. Wine was only a side-line, with most of their bottles coming from nearby vineyards. Today, they have everything from great-name bottlings (Solaia and Sassicaia) to tiny production cult wines (Tua Rita Redigaffi and Salicutti Brunello di Montalcino). The Charleston has become one of Tuscany's top wine stores, and its customers come from all over the world. ■ "Our selection of wines is incredible," marvels Stefano. "Six or

Opposite: Tuscany's vineyards, such as these near Montalcino, are an integral part of the region's idyllic landscape, its rich history and, more recently, the source of some of the world's most exciting new wines. Above: The Mearini family—Stefano, Paolo, Marisa and Lucio (from left)—are in the thick of Tuscany's winemaking revival, dividing their time between fieldtrips to scout out interesting new bottlings and running their 5,000-label wine shop in Arezzo.

LETTERS

Red and Chocolate

While reading "Wine and Chocolate" (cover, Oct. 31), I find nary a mention of serious red wine matched with chocolate. Am I the only guy who rations the last quarter of the bottle to pair that fruit-laden Cabernet with a flourless chocolate torte in raspberry sauce? I have tried the sweeter wines, and they do absolutely nothing for me. Upon thoughtful reflection, I have decided that either I have hit upon one of the great new pairings of the 21st century, or my taste buds are irreparably flawed and misguided. What do you think?

Michael Mangum
Raleigh, N.C.

Harvey Steiman responds: I also like to drink the last few drops of a rich, fruit-centered dry red wine with a dense chocolate dessert, but the dessert cannot be sweet. Anything sweeter than bittersweet chocolate makes the wine taste thin. One reason I omitted that from the report on wine and chocolate is that Jacques Torres' desserts were on the sweet side, which makes them tough on dry wines. And, in fact, the drier wines did not fare well with them. I also think it makes little sense to open a bottle of red just to drink a few sips with the dessert, so to suggest specific wines for the dessert, they had to be sweet.

A Mark of Distinction

Recently, I purchased a case of 2000 Graham Vintage Port. I opened the case and found that each bottle has a white mark below the front label. It appears to be a paint or some type of marker. I'm perplexed as to why it's there.

"Am I the only guy who rations the last quarter of the bottle to pair that fruit-laden Cabernet with a flourless chocolate torte in raspberry sauce?"—MICHAEL MANGUM, RALEIGH, N.C.

Would you please let me know what it might be? The marks on the bottles seem to be identical.

Wilbur Jellison
Egg Harbor, N.J.

James Suckling responds: The mark helps you keep each bottle in the same position in your cellar, so the sediment will collect in a single place and make decanting easier and cleaner.

San Francisco Dreaming

I just wanted to thank you for the comprehensive article on San Francisco (cover, June 15). We just returned from an overnight stay in San Francisco where we dined gloriously at Jeanty at Jack's on Sacramento Street after pouring over your article and deciding on the bistro for dinner. Not only was the history of the building colorful but, most important, the food, staff and wine were all outstanding.

Peter & Karin Haidorfer
New York

Just Like Family

The Sept. 15 issue ("Great Wines of Tuscany") was tucked away in my suitcase on a recent trip to Italy. My husband and I, along with another couple, not only enjoy wine but continue to learn as much as possible. In reading "The Heart of Italy," by James Suckling, we thought an adventure in search of wine in Tuscany would be a worthwhile endeavor. As we drove from Florence on our way south to Positano, we diverted from the *autostrada* to Arezzo in search of the Charleston wine shop, mentioned in Suckling's article.

The Mearini family welcomed us with open arms. We were whisked across the street to their storage area and given a fabulous tour of an unbelievable wine cellar and collection. We were educated about their favorites, about vintages we should try, and about what we should take home with us that we couldn't find in the States.



The Mearini family—Stefano, Paolo, Marisa and Lucio (from left)—of the Charleston wine shop in Arezzo, Italy.

After the purchase of many cases of wine and a few tastings, we departed with a bottle to go. When we asked for plastic cups to allow us to have a drink later, the Mearinis provided us with a new box of stemware. The selection of wines was incredible, and the experience will not be forgotten.

Marie Milie Jones
Pittsburgh

You Say "Tomato"

I was thrilled to acquire some new information on one of my favorite foods in Sam Gugino's article "America's Nut" (Oct. 15). As a native Georgian, I grew up eating pecan pie, sugar-covered pecans and sweet potato-pecan casserole, all courtesy of my now-78-year-old Granny. She is still active, and picks her pecans on hands and knees. Feel free to stop by for a delicious treat. I am certain that after one visit you will tell her that she can pronounce "pee-cans" anyway she likes.

Melanie Clancey Buch
Atlanta

Corrections

In "Ralph Steadman's Deep Drink" (Nov. 15), the correct birthplace of the artist is Wallasey, Cheshire, England.

On page 175 in "New Directions in South Africa" (Nov. 15), Albie Koch and Mike Dobrovic are winemakers.

Questions and Comments

If you have a comment on a story, an opposing view on a column or a question about buying, cellaring or enjoying wine, we would like to hear from you.

Please keep your letters brief and be sure to include your name, address and telephone number (not for publication). Write to us at Letters, Wine Spectator, 387 Park Ave. South, New York, NY 10016; send a fax to (212) 684-5424; or send e-mail to letters@winespectator.com.