

Vigorello: Tasting 50 years of a Tuscan wine pioneer

Vigorello has existed in different guises since its inception in the 1960s and is a veritable piece of Tuscany wine history, says Aldo Fiordelli, who tastes vintages back to 1969 - including top years like 1985 and 2001.



Aldo Fiordelli
October 5, 2021



Credit: San Felice

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San Felice is a pristine corner of **Tuscany**, between Castelnuovo Berardenga and Gaiole in Chianti, overlooked since the 1970s when the draw of industrialisation caused a mass movement of young people to the surrounding cities.

At that time this *borgo* was just a country hamlet populated by retirees who met there, seated in front of the old café, passing time chatting, playing cards and drinking cheap red wine bottled in *fiasco*.

Chianti Classico was already weaving its path to success, increasing its popularity in the export market as an everyday, easy drinking wine mostly sold in the typical 1.5-litre bottles wrapped in straw.

The rules of the DOC at the time still allowed for the inclusion of white grapes blended with red. Baron Bettino Ricasoli invented his historical recipe by introducing Malvasia and Trebbiano to soften **Sangiovese** in the blend of Gallo Nero. The climate was different decades ago, too; namely colder and wetter.

In the vineyards, viticulture was geared towards quantity over quality. Vines produced almost three kilos of fruit each, compared to today's average of one to 1.5kg.



San Felice estate covers an area of more than 650 hectares in the municipality of Castelnuovo Berardenga, at an altitude of about 400 metres above sea level.

Sangiovese's aggressive acidity was too high to achieve balanced reds. Moreover, destemming was not practiced, the must was fermented and aged in big chestnut vessels and so the wine needed a lot of time to become drinkable.

In 1968, the farmer Enzo Morganti, father of the well-known natural wine producer Giovanna Morganti (Podere Le Bonce), proposed a 100% Sangiovese.

He came from the Lilliano estate and worked with talented winemaker Giulio Gambelli, a legend behind celebrated labels such as Monteverdine, Soldera, Poggio di Sotto and others.

Morganti's goal was to demonstrate the potential for quality across the various Chianti Classico villages. 'That's why **Cabernet Sauvignon** and **Merlot** arrived,' says Leonardo Bellaccini, winemaker and production manager of Agricola San Felice.

Evolution of the Vigorello wines

Whether one considers the original gamble won or lost, there are 50 vintages that demonstrate the results of the venture.

For the first 10 years, Vigorello was made with 100% Sangiovese. Since 1979, 10% of Cabernet Sauvignon was blended with Sangiovese and the first oak barrels were introduced.



San Felice grapes

In 1982, while opening the new winery, the destemming machine and 60 new French oak barrels came into operation. In 1984, the barrel numbers increased to 120 and from 1990 the ageing process was carried out completely in barrels – with 50% new oak in the best vintages, getting away from the big casks of the wine's first decade.

In 1997, the percentage of Cabernet Sauvignon rose to 40% and in 2001 15% of Merlot was introduced, at the expense of Sangiovese, alongside shorter macerations.

In effect, this trend towards a **Bordeaux** blend continued and in the 2006 vintage Vigorello had Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot in almost equal proportions, alongside a splash of Petit Verdot.

Use of international grape varieties peaked at around this point and in 2011 the estate decided 'to give back to the wine its Tuscan blood', notes Leonardo Bellaccini.

Agricola San Felice had previously launched an experimental vitarium, where hundreds of grape varieties native to Tuscany have been cultivated and studied for more than 30 years – partly to determine what contribution they can make to the estate, and partly to prevent them from fading into oblivion.

The project was accompanied by a scientific study of indigenous varieties in partnership with the universities of Florence and Pisa. Among the results was the rediscovery of Pugnello, a late-maturing red grape with thick skin that is rich in

colour, medium in size and with ripe tannins even when young and achieving low yields.



Vigorello 2011

'It produces 50q/ha when abundant,' says Bellaccini. Pugnello has been the 'Tuscan blood' of the Vigorello blend since 2011. As for Sangiovese, 'we have been faithful to Chianti Classico appellation and so our top Sangiovese is used to produce Riserva', adds Bellaccini.

Poggio Rosso Chianti Classico remains the top wine of the San Felice estate, slightly overshadowing the price and reputation of Vigorello. So, commercially speaking, one might argue that the original bet was not wholly won.

But in terms of quality, across these 50 vintages of Vitorello, extraordinary wines like 1969, 1985, 1990 and 2001 prove the great insight of San Felice.

The 1969 vintage is an emotional bottle, not only because its longevity demonstrates Sangiovese's ability to age in the Chianti Classico region but also because it's an outstanding old wine.

The 1985, one of the best vintages ever in Tuscany, was the greatest wine of this tasting flight. The 1990, the first vintage of Bellaccini, is another gem of stunning modernism.

The 2001, the last including Sangiovese in this vertical tasting, is still young and I would keep it longer.

Regardless of the original gamble, if there is one wine that fiercely represents the evolution of winemaking in Italy – from the excess of experimentation to the full understanding of territorial expression – then it is this SuperTuscan.

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San Felice, Vigorello, Toscana, Tuscany, Italy, 1969

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The evolution of this 1969 is complete. Cherry jam, boiled chestnut, wild fennel and tobacco than dried prune aromas and flavours plus rust draw the multilayered profile of the wine. The body is almost full, expressing weight and density, with silky embroidered tannins and refreshing acidit...

Points 95



San Felice, Vigorello, Toscana, Tuscany, Italy, 1975

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This bottle never left the cellar at San Felice and the conservation has been perfect. Despite the lack of technology, destemming machine and small barrels, Enzo Morganti did a great job with this wine. At that time...

Points 93



San Felice, Vigorello, Toscana, Tuscany, Italy, 1985

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In Tuscany the celebrated 1985 vintage was extremely cold during the winter as well as hot (for that time) during the summer. The new...

Points 98

San Felice, Vigorello, Toscana, Tuscany, Italy, 1988

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Compared to 1990 this 1988 is considerably leaner, but not less enjoyable for those who love old wines. The nose is evolved and multifaceted with dried cherry, tobacco, feathered game and a mineral depth of lead pencil. Cherry and leathery flavours introduce a leaner body (one degree...

Points 94



San Felice, Vigorello, Toscana, Tuscany, Italy, 1990

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The 1990 was the first vintage made by Leonardo Bellaccini, winemaker at San Felice who began at the estate in 1984. Chapeau! Bright garnet in the glass, the wine is intense and multifaceted with black pepper,...

Points 96



San Felice, Vigorello, Toscana, Tuscany, Italy, 1997

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The celebrated 1997 vintage was overestimated in Chianti Classico however this Vigorello shines with integrity and complexity. It was one of the...

Points 93





San Felice, Vigorello, Toscana, Tuscany, Italy, 2001

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The 2001 vintage was the last (in this flight) with Sangiovese in the blend (45%). The 15% of Merlot was harvested from six-year-old vineyards. The vintage was characterised by the spring frost which resulted in a significant reduction of yields. The wine is enticing, unfolds in the glas...

Points 95



San Felice, Vigorello, Toscana, Tuscany, Italy, 2007

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In the warm vintages such as 2007 international grape varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Petit Verdot help in the blend, even if indigenous ones could increase the freshness. This 2007 is restrained,...

Points 91



San Felice, Vigorello, Toscana, Tuscany, Italy, 2010

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The 2010 vintage was regular, with rainfall at the right time and an ideal ripening period, according to Leonardo Bellaccini, winemaker at San Felic...

Points 93

San Felice, Vigorello, Toscana, Tuscany, Italy, 2015

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Another warm vintage but here the Cabernet Sauvignon from sandy soils is remarkable. The grape should be very ripe to produce a Vigorello more elegant than powerful at the end. This is the first vintage where a 'Tuscan blood' grape was added using Pugnitello within the blend....

Points 94



San Felice, Vigorello, Toscana, Tuscany, Italy, 2017

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The patchwork of San Felice soils, within the Castelnuovo Berardenga municipality, usually allows the estate to achieve consistent wines even in difficult vintages. This part of Chianti Classico is marginal, having m...

Points 89



San Felice, Vigorello, Toscana, Tuscany, Italy, 2018

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The 35% of Pugnitello - a thick-skinned grape planted in Alberese chalky soil - gives this vintage a bracing character, while Cabernet...

Points 93

