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Vigorello: The Evolution of a Super Tuscan

San Felice's dual focus kept its super Tuscan strong while respecting the Chianti Classico tradition and changing regulations; a vertical tasting of Vigorello back to 1969 reveals classic quality over decades of transformation



The barrel room at San Felice winery in Tuscany (Courtesy of San Felice)



By Bruce Sanderson

May 7, 2021

Chianti Classico in the 1960s hadn't changed a whole lot for a few centuries. Land management and agricultural activities were based on the sharecropping system and, as far as wine was concerned, the focus was on quantity, not quality.

That was the situation Enzo Morgante found when he arrived at [San Felice](#) [https://www.winespectator.com/wine/search/submitted/Y/search_by/exact/text_search_flag], a small hamlet in the Castelnuove Berardenga commune of Chianti Classico, in 1967. Despite the fact that the Sangiovese vines were planted in wide rows interspersed with olive trees, Morgante believed in the potential of the grape variety.

He began replanting the vineyards, as did many leading estates in the Chianti Classico region. In 1968, Morgante introduced a wine from 100 percent Sangiovese called [Vigorello](#) [https://www.winespectator.com/wine/search?submitted=Y&page=1&winery=Vigorello&text_search_flag=wine_plus_vintage&search_by=a]. At that time, Chianti Classico was a blend, including white grapes; a pure Sangiovese wasn't sanctioned by the DOC regulations (Chianti Classico officially became a subzone of Chianti in 1967). Despite the fact that Vigorello was labeled as a *vino da tavola* (table wine), the lowest denomination, it was the winery's most expensive wine.

Vigorello was the first super Tuscan from the Chianti Classico area. Antinori's [Tignanello](#) [https://www.winespectator.com/wine/search?submitted=Y&page=1&winery=Tignanello&text_search_flag=wine_plus_vintage&search_by=a] would debut in 1971, with roughly 3 to 5 percent Malvasia Nera and Canaiolo rounding out the Sangiovese in the first version. Montevertine's [Le Pergole Torte](#) [https://www.winespectator.com/wine/search?submitted=Y&page=1&winery=Le%20Pergole%20Torte&text_search_flag=wine_plus_vintage], also 100 percent Sangiovese, was almost a decade away, the inaugural vintage being 1977.

San Felice recently offered an exclusive tasting charting the evolution of Vigorello throughout its 50-year history. All the older vintages, from 1969 (only a few bottles of the debut 1968 remain) through 1997, were recorked. The 1969, 1975, 1977, 1985 and 1990 were decanted 30 minutes prior to tasting.

The **San Felice Vino da Tavola Tuscany Vigorello 1969** is clearly a mature wine, with oloroso Sherry, woody, mushroom and leather flavors, it's still enjoyable, supple in texture and balanced (88 points, non-blind).

The **1975** reveals vestiges of sweet cherry and plum fruit, along with balsamic elements of eucalyptus, woods and spice. It is slimmer than the '69, complex and long (92 points, non-blind).

Lean, savory and sharp, displaying tobacco and savory, wild herb notes, the **1977** is marked by the acidity (84 points, non-blind).

As the replanting progressed with Cabernet Sauvignon in 1974, San Felice added Cabernet Sauvignon to the blend; the Vigorello 1979 contained 10 percent.

Morgante planted Sangiovese at the Vigna del Mugelli vineyard in 1979, and by the 1985 vintage, these young Sangiovese vines were incorporated into the Vigorello blend; the percentage of Cabernet Sauvignon was also increased to 15. This was also the first vintage to be aged entirely in *barrisques*, 30 percent of which were new French oak. All the previous vintages were aged either in large oak casks or *botte*.

The late harvest in **1985** yielded a small production of concentrated, excellent wines according to San Felice production manager Leonardo Bellacini. It features a gorgeous bouquet of black currant and cherry, with hints of iron and spice on the lingering finish. Very firm, concentrated and vigorous, it has plenty of life (95 points, non-blind).

"1985 was the first time we had a hot vintage, but it was hot at the end of the season," Bellacini recalls. It also marked the final year legendary consultant Giulio Gambelli was part of the team responsible for the blend. "He was the only guy I know that could taste the wines and recognize the vineyard," says Bellacini.

With the 1988 and 1990 vintages, the blend changed again. Twenty percent Cabernet Sauvignon graced the **1988**, an elegant style evoking black cherry, licorice, tobacco and coffee flavors (90 points, non-blind). For the **1990**, a new source of Sangiovese—from older vines and better clones in the Capanno di Gosto vineyard—offered lower yields due to a spring frost, and the quality of the grapes allowed the team to reduce the Sangiovese component to 70 percent, while the Cabernet Sauvignon proportion grew to 30 percent. Sweet, ripe black currant and plum notes ply the velvety texture, and this is fresh and complex (96 points, non-blind).

By the 1997 harvest, "a beautiful, beautiful vintage," according to Bellacini, the blend was 60/40 Sangiovese/Cabernet Sauvignon. The **1997 San Felice Toscana Vigorello** was my favorite of the group, with its stunning bouquet of black currant, black cherry, plum, coffee and licorice. Vibrant and harmonious, it still has fine grip and a long finish (97 points, non-blind).

The **2001** vintage incorporated 15 percent Merlot planted in 1995 into the blend, at the expense of Sangiovese, which was reduced to 45 percent. Bellacini describes 2001 as a cold, late-harvest vintage. Though more austere, it offers rich, plummy fruit offset by vivid acidity (93 points, non-blind).

By contrast, the warm 2007 summer resulted in an opulent Vigorello. It also marked the second Vigorello without Sangiovese: By 2006, San Felice decided to use its best

Sangiovese for its Chianti Classico, Chianti Classico Il Grigio Riserva and Chianti Classico Poggio Rosso Riserva. It had already embarked on trials that would eventually become the Gran Selezione with the 2010 vintage.

The **2007 Vigorello** blend was 50 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, 45 percent Merlot and, for the first time, a dash of Petit Verdot (5 percent). This gave it a more pronounced black currant flavor, accented by violet, licorice, iron and tobacco (93 points, non-blind). This would remain the blend for the next few vintages, including the **2010**, a tense, linear Vigorello, firm, yet refined, exhibiting black currant, black cherry, cedar and iron notes (94 points, non-blind).

Despite the reliance on French grape varieties for its super Tuscan, since 1984, San Felice has planted 270 traditional Tuscan grapes varieties in a 5-acre experimental plot, for research in conjunction with the University of Florence. One of those grapes, Pugnitello, has been planted to 30 acres on the San Felice estate, second only to Sangiovese in terms of acreage there. It shows enough promise that San Felice not only makes it as a solo bottling, but also introduced it into the Vigorello blend as the majority grape with the 2011 vintage, to infuse more Tuscan character.

Both the **2015** (95 points, non-blind) and the 50th anniversary **2018** (94 points, non-blind), set for release in 2022 (I tasted the final blend from tank; it will be bottled this month), are blends of 35 percent Pugnitello, 30 percent each of Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot and 5 percent Petit Verdot. The Pugnitello brings more savory, balsamic flavors of wild herbs and plum fruit, while emphasizing the tobacco and iron notes.

It also brings the evolution of Vigorello full circle, back to its Tuscan roots, without sacrificing the all-important Sangiovese that San Felice relies on for its Chianti Classico program.