

Vernaccia di San Gimignano, to drink & to keep

Lying in the west of one of the world's prime red wine areas, this Tuscan DOCG produces only whites. Some styles are delicious in their first flush of youth, while other bottlings can be a great offbeat choice for cellaring

STORY ALESSANDRA PIUBELLO

In the province of Siena, in the heart of Tuscany, lives the 'white queen' – Vernaccia di San Gimignano – whose name is taken by both the DOCG region and its key grape variety. Her vineyards gaze up to the striking hilltop skyline of the UNESCO World Heritage-listed medieval 'city of towers' (there are 14 that remain visible today) of San Gimignano.

To taste Vernaccia di San Gimignano is to be transported into a historical tapestry of art and culture; lauded by poets, popes and aristocrats, this wine's long, noble recorded history dates back to at least 1276. Covering some 750 hectares, the denomination's production has been steady for decades (the register of vineyards closed in 1998) at about 5 million bottles, but its value has increased. 'We have seen renewed interest in historic indigenous white wines, which are versatile and pair well with food,' says Irina Guicciardini Strozzi, president of the Vernaccia di San Gimignano consorzio. 'Remember, we were Italy's first DOC, certified in 1966.' The DOCG status came in 1993, after the modern renaissance driven by local growers as well as people arriving from other regions, beginning in the 1980s.

The soil here formed over Pliocene marine deposits of yellow sand and clays, often layered over denser blue clay beds. 'The soil influences the wine's style,' says agronomist and vice president of the consorzio Nadia Betti. 'While no zoning has ever been done, we can identify four zones: those which give complex, structured wines; those producing very fruity, fresh Vernaccia that is

ready sooner; others which produce less-fruity but savoury wines; and, lastly, zones offering lighter-bodied yet elegant, mineral Vernaccia.'

VINTAGE VERNACCIA & RISERVA

'Pity the poor Vernaccias that are sold and drunk too soon, without their true value being understood,' says Francesco Galgani (pictured, p60) at Cappellasantandrea. Indeed, time is crucial to understanding Vernaccia. The 'annata' wines (the benchmark wines of the vintage) display subtle, fine, fruity and floral aromas and are pleasant, saline and very quaffable. Above all, they have gourmet potential, their typical savouriness pairing well with meals, drawing out flavour and in turn being enhanced by the food. Give the annatas a few years and they gain in complexity, revealing their true nature.

The Riserva wines must, by regulation, age (in oak, steel, amphorae or concrete) for at least 11 months, of which three months must be in bottle, before going to market. One point to remember is that the Riserva category doesn't allow for a wine to be reclassified as Riserva later – the decision must be made at the time of harvest, since bunches set aside for Riserva are recorded separately. Therefore, when freshly picked, only the most valuable, highest-quality grapes are selected. Walter Sovran (pictured, p61), director at Panizzi, says: 'The Riserva is made with the finest grapes, so there is a high correlation with the vineyards but not necessarily with the soil. The grapes most suitable for Riserva can come from different plots, depending on the year. The



Above: the UNESCO World Heritage-listed medieval city of San Gimignano, with some of its iconic towers visible in the background

Right: Elisabetta Fagioli, owner of Montenidoli



Riserva is the most ageworthy type of Vernaccia. I recently tasted the Panizzi 1990 Riservas again and found them intact and still lively.'

The late Giovanni Panizzi, who was president of the consorzio from 2003 to 2009, and Elisabetta Fagioli (left), owner of Montenidoli, always focused on Vernaccia's potential for evolution over time; other producers then followed suit. As it matures, Vernaccia changes and improves considerably – in the Riservas it strikes a balance between an acidic, sapid backbone and a full, structured intricacy, displaying deeper and more complex aromas, too (think saffron and flint).

If you're patient, Vernaccia di San Gimignano is sure to impress. When visiting the city of towers, drop by the consorzio's wine bar – you'll be surprised at how this unique white can evolve. ►

Five producers to know: Vernaccia di San Gimignano

CAPPELLASANTANDREA

This 7.5ha organic vineyard includes a number of 60- and 100-year-old vines that have been trained up small maple trees. The winery also produces Vernaccia Riserva in amphorae. The wines undergo spontaneous fermentation with natural yeasts and their strong character expresses the terroir with authenticity. cappellasantandrea.it

FATTORIA SAN DONATO

It's worth making the journey to the medieval village of San Donato, home to the eponymous fattoria. Umberto Fenzi and family have managed the 20ha organic vineyard for more than 20 years, alongside 180ha of olive groves, orchards, crops such as spelt, barley and chickpeas, saffron, livestock and a farmstay that offers cooking classes. Their wines embody the true spirit of the terroir. sandonato.it



Flavia Del Seta and Francesco Galgani, Cappellasantandrea



'I recently tasted the Panizzi 1990 Riservas again and found them intact and still lively'

Walter Sovran, Panizzi (above)

IL COLOMBAIO DI SANTA CHIARA

The Logi family's wines are guaranteed to provide precision, verticality and slow evolution. The Locanda dei Logi (an upscale farmstay in the former rectory and adjacent buildings of the small Romanesque San Donato church, just southwest of San Gimignano), the new Osteria della Locanda and the wine shop are all well worth a visit. colombaiosantachiarait

MONTENIDOLI

Elisabetta Fagioli (pictured, p59) is a passionate, eminently knowledgeable wine-grower. It was 1965 when she moved to Montenedoli, on one of Tuscany's oldest hilltops, high up on dolomitic limestone soil. Her wines clearly encapsulate the spirit of their birthplace, set among 200ha of forests.

montenedoli.com

TENUTE GUICCIARDINI STROZZI

With more than 1,000 years of history, this estate covers 530ha (with 90ha of vineyards) a few kilometres northeast of the city of towers. A visit to the winery is a unique experience, encompassing rolling hills, woods, vineyards, a stately home and park, historic wine cellars and a truffle orchard. guicciardinistrozzi.it

A view on Vernaccia: Piubello's 10 wines to try

① Cesani, Sanice Riserva 2020 93

cesani.it

The Cesani family have been devoted wine-growers at Pancole, northwest of San Gimignano, since 1949. Vincenzo manages their 27ha of organic vineyards, situated on sandy soils with Pliocene-era marine fossils, helped by his daughters Letizia and Maria Luisa. Clear aromas of camomile, yellow peach and graphite mineral herald a structured, balanced and juicy palate that shows substance and good progression.

Drink 2024-2034 **Alcohol** 13.5%

② Terre di Sovernaja, Assola Riserva 2021 93

[@terre_di_sovernaja](https://www.terre-di-sovernaja.it)

Federico Montagnani grew up among vineyards and returned home to produce wine on his family estate in 2017 – 51 years after his grandfather made his first bottling. The Assola Riserva is from an organic vineyard that's more than 50 years old, on sand with Pliocene-era marine fossils. The wine displays clear aromas of sweet spices, citrus fruits and chalk. Its pure style and expressive complexity are captivating.

Drink 2024-2034 **Alc** 14%

③ Cappellasantandrea, Rialto 2022 92

US\$20.40 [Saratoga Wine Exchange](http://SaratogaWineExchange.com)

Cappellasantandrea is a bucolic microcosm of old vineyards, some of which are 60 years old, combined with livestock, woodlands and meadows, thoughtfully managed by the founder's granddaughter Flavia Del Seta and her husband Francesco Galgani. From a single vineyard, Rialto expresses clear herby, peaty and briny aromas. A quintessential Vernaccia, energetic and authentic, it makes for easy sipping.

Organic. Drink 2024-2034 **Alc** 13.5%

④ Il Colombaio di Santa Chiara, Campo della Pieve 2022 92

£37.90 [Alivini](http://Alivini.com)

From a 15-year-old vineyard, owned by the Logi family, planted on 1.5ha of yellow sand and limestone below the *pieve* (parish) of San Donato. Spontaneous fermentation and long ageing on the fine lees in concrete have made this wine highly distinctive, displaying herbal, citrus and elderflower aromas. There's quintessential salinity, dynamism and depth of flavour here.

Organic. Drink 2024-2034 **Alc** 13.5%

⑤ Il Palagione, Lyra 2021 92

ilpalagione.com

Giorgio Comotti, who founded the winery in 1995, works with his sons Gregorio (oenologist) and Gabrio (agricultural technician). Their 20 zoned hectares are planted on a mixture of sand and clay. An intense nose swirls with sage, hazelnut, citrus and pencil shavings. Its profound, energetic character has substantial weight, supported by a bright streak of acidity.

Organic. Drink 2024-2032 **Alc** 13.5%

Panizzi, Vigna Santa Margherita 2022 92

£26.50 [Beckford Bottle Shop](http://BeckfordBottleShop.com), [Focus Wines](http://FocusWines.com), [Sociovino](http://Sociovino.com), [The Solent Cellar](http://TheSolentCellar.com), [The Stroud Wine Co](http://TheStroudWineCo.com)

This 50-year-old vineyard is the mother of all the winery's plots, spread around San Gimignano. In 2005, founder Giovanni Panizzi (who was instrumental in steering Vernaccia into modernity, and consorzio president from 2003-2009) passed ownership of the estate to Luano Niccolai, a prominent local producer, who passed it on to his son Simone a few years later. Hazelnut, floral and iodine aromas in the glass lead to a palate of remarkable depth, lifted by

acidity, the flavours lingering on a spicy finish. **Organic. Drink** 2024-2033 **Alc** 13.5%

Casa alle Vacche, I Macchioni 2023 90

£19.50 [Pimlico Dozen](http://PimlicoDozen.com)

From a cru with vines averaging 35 years of age. The blend includes 3% Viognier. Third-generation Andrea Ciappi and family also run a farmstay and trattoria. Enticing bouquet of lily of the valley, white-fleshed fruit and herbs, then a fresh, sapid texture, fine dynamic mouthfeel right through to the long finish. **Drink** 2024-2028 **Alc** 13.5%

⑥ Mormoraia, Suavis 2023 90

£18.50 [Classic Car Bar](http://ClassicCarBar.com), [Lea & Sandeman](http://Lea&Sandeman.com)

Second-generation Alessandro Passoni's organic winery also features a high-end guesthouse. At an altitude of 300m, the 37ha vineyard has vines aged between 25 and 45 years. Delicate aromas range from sage to white peach and elderflower in this structured, juicy and dynamic wine, with overarching freshness and a savoury finish. **Drink** 2024-2028 **Alc** 14%

Signano, Poggiarelli 2023 90

casolaredebucciano.eu

The Biaginis are among a handful of San Gimignano winemaking families. They

began bottling in the 1960s and located their cru in the Vigna Poggiarelli. Third-generation Pietro Biagini runs the winery today. Floral notes alternate with saffron and yellow peach aromas. A well-balanced opening and fresh, dynamic progression culminates in a deliciously savoury finish. **Organic. Drink** 2024-2028 **Alc** 12.5%

Tenute Guicciardini Strozzi, Riserva 2020 90

guicciardinistrozzi.it



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