
A QUEST for QUALITY

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On a rocky hillside in Tuscany, with the distant view of Siena as a backdrop, vines form a thick blanket of green. Their symmetrical rows undulate with the contours of the landscape, and the first thing one notices is their denseness and proximity to each other. In fact, these are among the most densely planted vines on earth. Among them walks a man of medium height, climbing the hill with the sure gait of a mountain goat. His face has a ruddy glow, and although it is clear that he has spent a half dozen or so decades on this planet, it is difficult to define his age. His energy is palpable and when he speaks, the words shoot out like bullets, in an intriguing accent that combines Italian and the English spoken by Canadian people. He gestures with his hands, his arm sweeping the landscape with a flourish. “I believe that this vineyard can produce among the best wines in the world” he says, “and I will keep at it until it happens.” The man’s name is Pierluigi Tolaini, or Louie, as he insists you call him. And Louie is a force of nature, with a quest that he will not back down from, no matter the difficulty, effort, or expense. That quest is for ultimate quality. The kind of quality that is world class, that defines its genre, that demands attention and recognition. The kind of quality that can put the final, fitting coda on a life that, upon inspection, seems more like a work of fiction than the confluence of will, hard work, and determination that it is.

Louie grew up in Lucca, Tuscany, the son of a dirt poor farmer. He grew up in a post World War rural Italy where families scraped out a meager existence from the land. It was backbreaking work with one cow and one cart, and Louie instinctively knew that he had to break free, to find a place where hard work could

turn into money, maybe enough money to perhaps buy a bigger farm and even a car. That place was Canada, where immigration was open. Early one morning in 1956, at the age of 19, Louie, armed with a one way ticket, left his home, not

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—Pierluigi (Louie) Tolaini

turning around to see his father watching him go from the front door. As he walked the half hour to the train station, he kept repeating to himself, “I will never be poor again. I will never eat polenta again. I will never drink bad wine again...and someday I will make my own wine.” Louie landed in Toronto, unable to speak a word of English. He worked as a bricklayer, and, after a few months, journeyed west to Winnipeg, where he worked in the oil fields on a drilling rig, 18 hours a day, 7 days a week. He bought a truck and started hauling water for the rig, eventually saving \$25,000. This was his down payment on a small trucking company – 5 trucks, 7 people, 1 small building. His company hauled general freight and livestock between Virden and Winnipeg. He worked and worked, investing the earnings back into his business. He built his business into what it is today: TransX, the largest privately owned transportation

company in Canada, with over 1,500 trucks, 4,000 trailers, and 2,500 employees.

Louie never forgot his dream of returning to Tuscany and making wine. In 1998, he bought a small property in the hills of Castelnuovo Berardegna, overlooking the beautiful Siena skyline. He added acreage, eventually accumulating 267 acres. He hired the well-known agronomist Andrea Paoletti, who told him that if he wanted to make great wine, he would have to make some changes. As Louie puts it, “when I bought the land, the rows alternated with strips of wheat and olive groves, according to the old custom. In places, the vineyards had mixed red and white varieties of uncertain origin. Good enough if you want wine for your own table but that wasn’t what I was looking for. So we ripped out everything and replanted the varieties that were most suitable for the wine I had in mind, and even before that, for the host soil type and environment.” These included the native Sangiovese, as well as Bordeaux varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Petite Verdot. There are two estate vineyards that make up a combined 160 acres: Montebello, with classic galestro soil (friable clay and limestone) and San Giovanni with porous tufa. Both sites overlie limestone to create outstanding conditions for long term vine growth. The vines are planted at an astoundingly dense 4800 vines per acre, and yield tiny amounts of concentrated fruit – each vine only produces one kilo of grapes, which are hand harvested into small crates and hand sorted at the winery.

The enologist is the famed Michel Rolland, about whom Louie says “at harvest time, he strides up and down the vineyards like a hungry fox... it’s awesome. He tastes the grapes continuously, thinks, and walks up and down, up and down. It’s the same in the cellar. He tastes each

wine individually, but he already has the final blend in his head. He remembers figures like a computer and in the end his decision is always absolutely spot on.” Rolland has specified two-chamber, open top fermenters that allow for a gravity flow rack and return that optimizes color and flavor extraction. The best grapes from each harvest are fermented in small open top fermenters made of French Allier oak. Rolland supervises the purchase of barriques of Allier and Tronçais oak from top barrel makers. To me, the Rolland influence shows in the purity of fruit and smooth tannins that show in the young wines aging in barrel right now.

Before I move on to the wines, one final observation. As I walked the vineyard with Louie, one thing was notably different from the typical scene of bent-over vineyard staff, working the vines. As he greeted each by name, they responded warmly, looking up from the seat of a small minitractor that was invented by, yes, Louie himself. He calls it the Rossetto. After observing the traditional ways of working the vineyard, with the back-breaking amount of bending over and then bending some more, he figured that there had to be a way to make life easier on the workers, while achieving better results and saving time and energy. So he conceived, designed, built, and subsequently patented a red track-driven minitractor that the estate workers can steer with their legs while sitting across it sidesaddle, facing the rows of vines. They don’t have to walk, carry loads, or, worst of all, keep stooping over all the time. They sit at cane height with their hands free to prune, tie, thin, or pick. Rossetto tows a special cart so that cuttings or just-picked grapes can be stowed safely, immediately. No one needs to go through the vineyards collecting the harvested bunches or the leaves, canes, and other debris. As a result: “During the 2007 harvest, we had a 50% savings in time and 40% in labor, even though we still did everything by hand. We harvested more and better and the workers were very happy.”

What about the wines? There are three, all Toscana IGT, although Louie says that the Al Passo will be bottled as a Chianti Classico beginning with the 2007 vintage.

AL PASSO is a blend of 80% Sangiovese and 20% Merlot. The current vintage, 2005, shows classic Sangiovese character, with red cherries

and cranberry fruit supported by the black cherry essence of Merlot. There is a spicy sandalwood character to the wine, which has bright tones and an overall impression of harmony and balance. The 2006 I tasted at the winery has deep fresh plum and black cherry fruit with very well integrated tannins. It will be terrific.

VALDISANTI is a blend made up of 75% Cabernet Sauvignon with Merlot and Cabernet Franc. The current vintage is 2004. Here the Cabernet shows

ripe, rich blackcurrant and cassis aromas with warm cooking spices from the French oak. The palate has wonderful intensity to the dark fruit, with well-integrated oak and smooth, fine tannins. This is one of those rare wines that is eminently drinkable right now but would also cellar for a decade. The upcoming 2005 and 2006 wines show similar flavor profiles, with even finer integration.

PICCONERO is the estate’s top wine, and no amount of effort, time, or expense is spared in its creation. The blend is 85%

Merlot, with Cabernet Sauvignon and Petite Verdot. The fruit undergoes three selection processes before only whole berries are transferred to open top French oak fermenters. Grand Cru Classé

style winemaking ensues, with a 30 day maceration accompanied by manual push downs, 6 months on the fine lees, aging in French oak for 18 months, and aging in bottle for another 12 months. The result is frankly stunning. I have rarely experienced such superlative quality in a relatively new wine. It is difficult to not resort to hyperbole when describing the class, elegance, purity, and complexity of this wine. At Louie’s beautiful house for dinner, he went down to his cellar and brought up three bottles: 2004 Picconero, 2004 Chateau Palmer and 2004 Masseto. We gladly tasted the three wines side by side. To my amazement, the Picconero surpassed the Palmer easily, and was a serious contender to the suppleness and breed of the Masseto. Unbelievable. The 2005 and 2006 versions of Picconero are worth waiting for. Both wines are lush, beautifully balanced and pure.

It turns out that I am not alone in my assessment of the superior quality of the Tolaini wines. In Italy, the wines are getting some serious attention. In June of last year, at a blind tasting of the top Tuscan wines at the famed Sira e Remino restaurant in San Gusme, Picconero came in first, followed by Sassicaia and Valdisanti. 62 sommeliers, enologists, agronomists, and winery owners were the judges. In October, at Two Star Michelin Cracco restaurant in Milan, Picconero came in third after Ornellaia and Chateau Palmer in their blind tasting of top international wines. And at the 18th Annual Merano Wine Festival in November, Picconero was the top scoring wine. The American press has also recognized the wines, with numerous publications (the usual suspects) awarding 90+ point scores to the wines. Something is clearly happening here!

I urge the reader to look into these superlative wines. They all come in at various price points, and there is something here for everyone. This is an opportunity to turn your customers on to the next Sassicaia or Ornellaia. *This is an opportunity to join in the quest for quality.*

