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## A Moving Target

Tuscan legend Paolo De Marchi has studied everything from Sangiovese genetics to hornet guts in hopes of understanding Chianti



Photo by: Robert Camuto

Chianti legend Paolo De Marchi in the vineyards of Isole e Olena

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Paolo De Marchi is, at 64, considered by many Tuscan peers to be a dean of Chianti. So, what has he learned during four decades at his highly accomplished Isole e Olena estate in the heart of the Chianti Classico hills?

"After 40 years here, you don't know anything," he says, grinning broadly as he stands atop a hillside in this remote vineyard hamlet one hot morning in August. "That's the beauty of it."

Of course, that's an exaggeration. De Marchi has studied area grapes, soils and vineyards more than most anyone and is a font of information on subjects ranging from Tuscany's agricultural history to climate change to the digestive systems of vineyard hornets.

When he talks, producers listen. In the past 30 years, De Marchi has produced more than 50 wines scoring 90 points or more on *Wine Spectator's* 100-point scale—from his Cepparello (an all-Sangiovese super Tuscan) to his Chianti Classico (Sangiovese blended with Canaiolo and his signature dose of Syrah) to his Cabernet Sauvignons, Chardonnays, Syrahs and sweet Vin Santo.

De Marchi has grown and matured at the same time as the Tuscan wine scene. He started out in 1976 as a know-nothing fresh out of agricultural school, 20 years after his father, a Piedmont lawyer, bought the 800-acre estate surrounding the hamlets Isole and Olena.

"It was a mess," De Marchi says. With the rise of mechanized farming, his father bulldozed antique hillside terraces and, using European Community subsidies, replanted some 90 acres with high-yielding, tractor-friendly vineyards. "The quality was what it was," he laughs, throwing up his hands and shaking his thicket of gray hair.

The young De Marchi joined the small group of super Tuscan producers who looked to boost quality by making wines that fell outside of the Chianti Classico designation's confusing rules at the time.

"First, I wanted to understand the potential of Sangiovese," says De Marchi, who studied his vineyards—vine by vine. In each vintage, he used color-coded tags to note grape quality and resistance to disease.

After a decade, he was ready for his first replanting—5 acres of vines, including selections from his best-performing Sangiovese. De Marchi continued refining his selection and replanting. In the 1990s, he rebuilt more than 5 miles of terrace walls and replanted more vineyards, at higher and higher densities and with further selections from his best Sangiovese clones.

"I did not replant the whole estate. Every year I took another step," he recalls.

De Marchi is still replanting his father's vineyards, with about 20 acres left to go. But four years ago, he reconsidered his vineyard selection.

In the hot, dry 2011 vintage, De Marchi became convinced of the effects of climate change. Ten percent of his Sangiovese produced wine that topped 17 percent alcohol; he sold that off in bulk.

"It was not Chianti Classico," he says. "It was like Amarone!"

De Marchi launched a new project, determined to get grapes that would reach phenolic maturity at lower sugar levels. "We went back to the first vineyard [planted in the late 1980s] to see if there were vines that were late-ripening then but that might be the solution now," he says. That means more tests, more time, more vine-by-vine observation.

In the past decade, he had already turned his vineyard selection attention to Canaiolo, the blending variety that makes up 15 percent of his Chianti Classico. "I do not believe the Chianti of the future will be 100 percent Sangiovese," he says. "Canaiolo gives freshness and drinkability."

Other recent projects include restoring his family's largely abandoned northern Piedmont estate, Proprietà Sperino, after buying out other family members. His son Luca now runs that property. And he has recruited yeast and insect experts to study the spread of vineyard yeasts via hornets. "I'm trying to understand wild yeasts!" enthuses De Marchi, who wants to see how yeasts vary by their distance from hornet nests.

De Marchi concedes that in his career he has learned some things, but they often lead to more questions. "As you get better," he explains, "the target moves."

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