

Pugnitello back in the spotlight

A grape originally from the Grosseto area has found a new lease of life in Chianti, where a winery has transformed it into an alluring, well-structured red.



The wine is called Pugnitello and is named after the variety. It's a new product, but the grape has ancient roots in the Grosseto area. Both have been created, so to speak, by the San Felice winery, based at Castelnuovo Berardenga in Chianti, and two neighboring estates: Campogiovanni at Montalcino and Perolla in the Grosseto Maremma. Campogiovanni has 65 hectares while Perolla has 1,000, most given over to cattle farming, but with 35 hectares currently planted to productive vines. Pugnitello is grown on all three estates, in vineyards with a range of different aspects and soil types. This means that the best fruit can be selected at harvest time. For the time being, attention focuses on the site where

pugnitello performs best: the vineyards of the main winery, San Felice. *"There is a reason for this,"* explains Leonardo Bellacini, who has been the enologist for these Tuscan estates since 1984, and is regarded as the father of both variety and wine. *"The pugnitello vines at San Felice yield higher-quality fruit because they are older and better established. This was where experiments started in 1986, when we planted the few vines that would yield the first three barriques of wine five or six years later."* To get a better perspec-

tive on this, we need to go back more than 20 years to the time when San Felice was discovering its vocation for experimentation, among other things. In fact the two hectares of garden-vineyard rechristened the "Vitarium" came to hold an impressive 270 Tuscan varieties of yester-year, 161 of which were red. By dint of experimenting, trial fermenting, eliminating and starting all over again, many of the varieties were discarded. Despite their undoubted authenticity, their potential was limited. Pugnitello takes its name from the shape of the cluster, which resembles a small fist ("pugno"), and this variety in particular turned out to have unsuspected power and qualities that prompted the winery to intensify its program of experimentation and micro-

vinifications. Research was undertaken with the crucial support of the Agriculture University at Florence. We will take advantage of this to clear up a minor bone of contention. A few months ago, the Florence-based in-



San Felice
Toscana IGT Rosso
"Pugnitello" 2006
\$70

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stitute's celebrated ampelography researcher, Anna Schneider, said more or less this to the journal *Porthos* (in the summer 2008 issue): "Vines should belong to the whole of society. With pugnitello, what San Felice has done is to sponsor the research and then claim the variety belongs to the winery. San Felice will propagate it, and San Felice will own it. The blame lies with the university, though, which delegated the entire project to San Felice." Through these pages, Leonardo Bellaccini now replies to the scholar with a smile and soothing words. "I admit that at first I had a brief attack of selfishness induced by the long, hard job we did. However, I quickly realized that a vine recovered only to be shut up in one tiny vineyard is of no use to

anyone, and indeed renders the effort expended entirely pointless. Of course the ownership and use of the variety must be collective! Scions of pugnitello can be obtained from several nurseries. Anyone can purchase and plant them." End of story.

Why did pugnitello stand out from the vast crowd of recovered Tuscan varieties? Enologist Bellaccini explains: "The variety exhibits important qualities for the parameters of today's agriculture, for example the structure of the cluster, which is small, made up of fairly loose-packed berries with thick, robust skin. It has excellent resistance to molds. In addition, the vine

Pugnitello is planted on three separate estates in Tuscany, but so far the best grapes have been grown at San Felice.





is low-yielding with a very vigorous canopy that acts as a solar panel. Analytical data on the wine revealed good alcohol content, substantial acidity and significant phenolic content.” In a nutshell, all a winemaker needs to produce superb red wine.

Selected grapes from four vineyards

The first vintage of Pugnitello at San Felice was the 2003. It was followed by a 2004 release, but then skipped a year because the 2005 harvest wasn't up to snuff. The current release is the 2006, of which about 15,000 units went into bottle. The grapes were picked in late September in four vineyards: Casanova, Camponuovo, Le Rose and Poggio alle Povere. They represent a selection of different locations, elevations and aspects from the 650-hectare estate around San Felice. The vines are an average of 11 years old and sink their roots into soil rich in substances deriving mainly from the slow

Originally from Grosseto, pugnitello takes its name from its fist-like cluster

crumbling of porous galestro and alberese, a limestone containing clay and sand. Both rocks are very common in central and southern Tuscany. Environment and territory played an absolutely crucial role. We sincerely hope that producers who are serious about genuinely profitable native varieties and the new vineyards will soon be up and running. For the time being, San Felice is the only cellar to have turned the hitherto obscure pugnitello grape into an elegant, gutsy wine with loads of class. In fact, it is one of those wines that are destined to linger in the memory, as we can see from what our experts had to say. After our customary blind tasting, they awarded it flatteringly high

marks even without knowing where it came from. It was a score that very few of Tuscany's great reds managed to achieve over the course of the year.

A very promising future

This is a very gratifying outcome for the long-established Chianti winery, and also a spur to those who intend to follow it on the tortuous, twisting road that leads to the economic viability of native varieties. In 2006, Pugnitello underwent leisurely initial fermentation for almost 25 days to extract all those compounds from the skins before going into small wood, where it matured for more than 18 months. After bottling, it

Pugnitello spent 18 months in the neat barrel cellar at Castelnuovo Berardenga.

spent a further eight months in bottle. When it was poured into our panel's glasses, Pugnitello presented a fine ruby red shot through with lustrous purplish highlights. Alcohol-steeped fruit, spices and the faintest of hints of what the French call goudron, in other words tar, intrigued the panel's nostrils. It's an odd, but far from disturbing, medley. In the mouth, Pugnitello is intense, robustly structured and shows a nice acidity. Tannins are present, but very well honed. There was no grating sensation on tongue or palate. To sum up, Pugnitello is a soft-textured wine with plenty of personality, with all components in perfect equilibrium. We'll round off with a comment from one of our experts: "If it's as good as this now, when it is more widely planted, Tuscany will have another great red trump card to play".