

(on the vine)





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All photography courtesy of Tenuta San Leonardo

SAN LEONARDO

TRENTINO'S GRANDEST CRU

In the mountains of southern Trentino, the San Leonardo estate has been producing some of Italy's finest Bordeaux-style wines for generations. **Nicolas Belfrage MW** believes it deserves a wider renown

Among the best-kept secrets of the Italian *mondovino* are the wines of San Leonardo. Not that their authors, the Marchesi Guerrieri Gonzaga, are trying to keep them secret. Nor, indeed, that the secret has been kept in Italy, where year after year San Leonardo collects maximum awards in just about every one of the numerous guides. Nor is this fairytale estate in the southern reaches of the province of Trento any secret to the German-speaking world, while being well publicized by American wine-mags such as *The Wine Advocate* and *Wine Spectator*. Somehow, however, the Brits, who can't seem to get enough of Sassicaia, overlook this most serious challenger to the throne of the great Bolgherese.

Admittedly, San Leonardo, superb as it is, is somewhat tucked away among the massive mountains of southern Trentino. On the other hand, it has been there for a thousand years or so, time enough for travelers between Austria's Tyrol and Italy's Veneto (there must have been a few Brits among them) to get used to the fact of its existence. The present owners have been in residence for a slightly shorter time, it's true—a mere 300 years, minus a few. Time enough, however, for them to establish a fine villa, a part functional/part state-of-the-art winery, wonderful gardens including a large and bountiful *orto*, an agricultural/viticultural museum featuring one of the world's most extensive collections of tractors, and of course a vineyard—22ha (54 acres) of Cabernet, Merlot, Carmenère, and Petit Verdot out of a 300-odd ha (740 acre) total. This area also includes much woodland, mountain slope, and high pasture where fauna like deer, roe-deer, chamois, and boar roam, at altitudes ranging from 130 to 1,500m (427 to 4,921ft).

Left: San Leonardo's seclusion has reinforced its "well-kept secret" status

(on the vine)

Elegance and subtle power

San Leonardo as the extraordinary estate it is today is, certainly, the product of many people and much effort over a period of generations. The man behind San Leonardo as a world-class winery, however, is the current *titolare*, Marchese Carlo Guerrieri Gonzaga. He is the first to give credit to the numerous friends, family members (notably his son Anselmo), advisors, and assistants who have helped him, but indisputably the wine is his inspiration.

Carlo studied enology at Lausanne, returning in 1962 after obtaining his diploma to the family estate to lend a qualified hand. To his dismay, he discovered that just the day before his arrival his father had taken on a professional enologist. So he took himself off to Tuscany, where he was able to initiate a peripatetic consultancy, acquiring various clients including his old friend Marchese Mario Incisa della Rocchetta at a then-unknown estate called Tenuta San Guido, at Bolgheri. There he remained until, later in the 1960s, Mario's son Niccolò made an arrangement

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with Marchesi Antinori to make the wine. It was the end of Carlo's involvement with what was to become Sassicaia, but the beginning of a lengthy relationship with the man behind Sassicaia, Giacomo Tachis.

In 1969 Carlo got married and, to ensure an income for his new family, joined his brother in the cement business, while lending a hand from time to time at the family estate. In 1974 his father passed away and he set about repairing buildings, taking on new personnel, overhauling the *cantina* and planting, or re-planting, a few vineyards. The first year of production of the wine called San Leonardo was 1982. A little later he asked his friend Piero Antinori if he could "borrow" the services of his by-now famous enologist, Tachis. Antinori was most obliging and Tachis remained chief taster and blender for San Leonardo for nearly 20 years—though it was mainly Carlo going to Tachis rather than the other way round—until he was replaced in 2000 by the current consultant, Carlo Ferrini.

The growing season is dry and warm enough to permit organic viticulture





(on the vine)



Marchese Carlo Guerrieri Gonzaga (right) raising a glass with his son Anselmo

Thanks to Mario Incisa, whose palate Carlo describes as having been excellent (unlike that of most people, including his own father), he had developed a predilection for the elegance and subtle power of claret, and it was his intention to make Bordeaux grand cru-like wines from the off. With the alluvial, gravel and marl soil of the lower Adige valley, with his terraced and slightly sloping sites, and the temperate microclimate of the mainly west-facing vineyards, whose stones of all sizes were able to bask in the late afternoon sun, thus keeping the vines warm during the night, he reckoned he had the perfect conditions for his ambition. Regarding the other components it was a matter of choosing the right vine types, root stocks, training and viticultural methods, as well of course as the correct enological techniques.

Continuity and change

Over the years some aspects of the San Leonardo system have changed more than others. Grape varieties have remained fairly constant, the main surprise coming when it was discovered—not just at San Leonardo but throughout northern Italy—that what had been thought to be Cabernet Franc (which makes up about 30 percent of the San Leonardo blend) was in fact another Bordeaux grape, much grown also in Chile, called Carmenère; since which discovery (from about 1997) some genuine Cabernet Franc has been planted, though some Carmenère also remains. Varietally, the principal component of the blend has always been Cabernet Sauvignon, at around 60 percent, with around 10 percent Merlot and minimal amounts of Petit Verdot.

Regarding pruning, at the beginning the whole vineyard was trained to the traditional Trentino *pergola*, though today almost all has been switched to single or double cordon spur; the exception is Carmenère, which has been found to perform better with long pruning, and so remains, or has been returned to, *pergola*. Other features of the estate's viticulture include the fact that the vineyard is effectively organic, only copper sulfate being used for spraying, with cow dung mixed with mature humus for fertilizer: no chemicals. There are even rose bushes grown at the end of rows, Bordeaux-style.

In the winery, the classic Bordeaux method has been followed since the outset. Fermentation takes place in glass-lined concrete tanks, which Tachis providentially insisted that Carlo keep when all around were switching to stainless steel. Maceration of Cabernet Sauvignon will last 16 to 17 days, Merlot—which ripens earlier—getting a couple of days less. As for aging, Carlo has always used barriques made of various French oaks (plus a bit of American), one third new, one third second passage, and one third third passage. His *barricaia*, constructed underground a few years ago, resembles more a temple than a cellar.

One change initiated by Ferrini, when he replaced Tachis, was to leave the wine in the same barriques throughout their *élevage* (the malolactic having taken place in tank). It had been Tachis's practice to carry out periodic rackings. After around 24 months the wine is bottled without filtration, and is further aged for several months in glass before release.

From the year 2000, San Leonardo has had a junior partner in the pure Merlot Villa Gresti, made in the Pomerol mode and named after the family that took over the estate in the 18th century and into which the Guerrieri Gonzagas, originally of Mantuan stock (the Duke in Verdi's *Rigoletto* is a Gonzaga), married about a century ago. I say "junior" partner because, in my opinion, Villa Gresti, though probably as good as it gets for pure Merlot in northern Italy, is not on the same quality level as San Leonardo. Wisely, the winery has priced it accordingly.

The elegance, the subtle power, and the sheer quality of San Leonardo, however, argue strongly in favor of it shedding its "well-kept secret" status, and becoming recognized for what it is: a product of one of the most consistently quality-conscious wineries in that complex land called Italy.

CONTACT INFORMATION & PRICES FOR RECENT VINTAGES

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THE TASTING

SAN LEONARDO

2005

Deep of hue with signs of turn on the rim. Toasty oak on the nose, with berry fruit piercing through. Firm acidity, smooth tannins, good concentration. Well expressed fruit, quite oaky—toast and hints of bitter chocolate. Fairly forward, this should come good soon and be an attractive bottle for several years; not a long-distance runner. **15.5**

2004

Deeper and more youthful than the 2005; almost opaque. Fruit predominates over oak on the palate. The acidity is slightly higher than in the 2005 but more effectively covered by rich, ripe, berry fruit, as are the aromas of expensive oak. The nose takes time to come through but hints at elegance and balance, confirmed on the palate. The tannins are very smooth and ripe but give promise of great complexity and durability. Drink 2012–2025+. **18**

2003

Like 2004 in color, deeper and more youthful of hue than 2005. Clean, ripe berry fruit on the nose. The effects of the year's heat are felt in the ripeness of the fruit and tannins but there is nothing cooked or green about it, while the jammy note gives it a certain immediate appeal. Despite this, it has the structure to last another dozen years. **15.5**

2001

Deep of color, just the beginnings of turn on the rim (cf 2005). Black fruit on the nose, with some interesting tertiary aromas starting to develop, the wine showing what it can do with a bit of age: ripe fruit, leather, graphite, and a herbal element. The emphasis is on elegance, but there is complexity and length with a firm line of acidity and oak well integrated. Still developing. Drink from 2012. **17**

2000

Good depth of color, still youthful. A brooding nose, a bit dumb. The palate displays juicy, meaty fruit with some fallaway on the finish; the acid is adequate as are the tannins but the fruit is just a touch easy. More immediately and jammily attractive than refined, not really built to last. Drink now for 5+ years. **14.5**

1999

Deep of hue, distinctly brick on the rim. The first bottle tasted was disappointing, and the producer sent another which was much improved. What had seemed like an excess of oak might be explained by slight cork taint. The second bottle was full of intense blackcurrant fruit together with leather and spice, with toasty oak tucked in nicely behind, fine, smooth tannins, and considerable length, the hallmark elegance informing the whole. A very fine wine. **18**

1997

Still exhibiting a lively color. Deep, satisfying aromas of black berry fruit on the nose, still forceful and youthful. Hints of toast are there, too, but well integrated. Concentrated and complex, solid of structure, this is a wine that combines power with elegance, complexity, and very considerable length. Will happily improve and hold for a dozen+ years. **18.5**

1996

Here again the first bottle was defective, the second showing an enticing aroma of concentrated blackcurrant fruit with some plum/sweet prune notes. Concentrated of structure, with lively acidity and firm tannins, the wine displays complex primary and tertiary flavors while retaining sufficient structure to carry it forward for several years. **16.5**

1995

Deep color, still quite full. Like '99, a little oaky on the nose, but youthful. A complex palate with mineral (graphite, iodine), fruit (black currant, myrtle), and herb (rosemary) on *retrogusto*. Firm acid-tannin structure and very good length add up to a fine bottle, at one point considered for wine of the tasting, though it seemed to fade somewhat on re-tasting. Still, it should have another 15 years in it. **17**

1994

Seeming much older than its predecessor. Showing definite signs of fading, though still interesting with dried fruit (prune) and mineral (iodine) notes. Still elegant and refined, but ultimately threadbare and a little short. Drink up. **13**

1993

One of the surprises of the tasting, this wine displayed a healthy depth of color and plenty of life on the nose—leather and spice, medicinal notes, not unlike a fine claret. Quite mouthfilling and fruity with good balancing acidity and tannins in perfect balance, keeping it young and muscular, yet with the characteristic elegance. Very good length, and has the ability to travel on. **17.5**

1991

Medium-deep color, the presence of medicinal, herby notes on the nose, the palate however not quite living up to the nose's promise with concentration beginning to weaken perceptibly. Good wine, still valid, but lacks the excitement of the 1993. **14.5**

1990

The wine of the tasting. Deep of color, bright and youthful. A nose of fresh and dried fruit, dried herb and tea-leaf, persistent and enticing. Complex, layered, lively wine with mouthwatering acidity, still-firm tannins, and abundant fruit. Excellent depth and length of flavor, still with time to go. **19**

1988

Medium-deep color, still relatively youthful. A little reserved on the nose, but reasonably fresh. The main feature in the mouth is favors the former. But a remarkable 21-year-old wine overall, quite capable of continuing another decade. **17**

(All of the above wines were tasted at the property in the fall of 2009, and represent all of the vintages produced and released since 1988. No wine was released under the San Leonardo label in 2002, 1998, 1992, or 1989.)

VILLA GRESTITI

I also tasted a flight of Merlots under the Villa Gresti label, of which I give my general view above—from 2005 back to 2000 (the first vintage), excluding the 2002, which was not made. Pick of the bunch were 2004 and 2001.

2004

Very deep color. Strongly vinous red and black berry aromas. Middling acidity, ripe tannins, perhaps a touch too much toast, or coffee, on the palate, dark chocolate, too. Saved by acidity, rich and ripe without being overstated. Out of balance now, needs 5 years. **15** now, but may develop to **17** or more.

2001

Deep colored. Attractive blueberry aromas with hints of woodsmoke. Plenty of fruit and firm structure too, the fresh acidity holding the fruit up throughout. Has balance and elegance, so should last well. Drink now through 2020. **16.5**