

20th Oct 2007 – Saturday

SQ 606 touched down at Roma Fiumicino airport at 7.30am as scheduled. The flight was 1/8 full and I was able to get a good rest. Temp 10 degrees celcius. After meeting up with Dr Chong and Dr Kevin Soh, we headed for Florence by train. Arrived in Florence at 11.30am, got on a cab and promptly, we met an “accident” – the vehicle in front of us - a Hertz delivery van driven by a lady was unable to turn right due to some large waste bins placed close to the bend. The right side of her vehicle grazed gingerly against the corner of the bin. Sensing her distress and the fact that we will be stuck unless she gets through, we got out and helped her push the bins away. Some morning “workout” will do us some good. We checked into Franchi Residence (www.franchiresidence.com) and met Stephen, the proprietor who is always helpful in pointing to us what we should know and do during our stay at this small but clean B&B. After a quick freshing up, we walked 15 mins to the city centre to Enoteca Pontevecchio near Santa Croce where our guide for this trip Mr Tony Sasa have been waiting for us.



A quick introduction and we get on with some tastings which Tony have selected for us. First up, Fattoria Zerbina from Emilia-Romagna, a IGT wine “Castellaccio” 2004 – blend of sangiovese and ciligeolo – lots of ripe wild cherry flavor, nice acidity and fine tannins. Next up a pure 100% aglianico 2005 from Campania made by Professor Luigi Moio – ex-winemaker at Feudi di San Gregoria. A very elegant wine – despite a big tannic & muscular grape like aglianico – lots of structure. We were told the bottle have been opened for at least 5 days - 2,000 bts produced. Our stomachs were rumbling despite the bread with olive oil and balsamico we had earlier. We need a proper lunch.

When in Florence, we were told we must try the Bistecca alla Fiorentina – grilled sirloin steak. The epitome of steak. Florentine steak is a hefty T-bone cut of Chianina beef, named after the Val di Chiana where these cows are raised. The meat is not fatty and more flavorful than other types of meat. To prepare the steak, which should be 2” thick, the meat is grilled quickly over charcoal and seasoned with extra-virgin olive oil, salt, and pepper. A quick phone call and we were booked at Dino Ristorante (www.ristorantedino.it), a mere 5 mins walk from the enoteca, across Piazza Santa Croce. We all shared a good Bistecca alla Fiorentina, a pasta with seafood and a plate of blanched spinach. It was nice and simple - enough to satisfy our craving for now. Back at enoteca, now joined by Wai Mun, Rene, Elvin and Caryn (the rest of the group), we tasted the super-Tuscan Macchie IGT 2004 & 2005 (100% sangiovese). The last time I tasted the 2004, it’s still in it’s infancy with lots of fruitiness and acidity. Now, the “baby-fat” is gone, the wine have evolved and develop secondary aroma of balsamic and another level of complexity. The 2005 is of course fresher – again nice ripe fruit, spice, menthol & seamless integration of subtle oak and fine tannins – a signature of Paolo’s work. Macchie is made by enologist Paolo Caciorgna’s own family’s holding of 2 hectares in Tuscany. Only 4000 bts produced. Paolo’s latest commitment is with brunello producer Altesino who have called upon his expertise to help improve the winery’s products.

We took a break outside and went across the street to Piazza Santa Croce where a fair is held there selling all sorts of farmers’ produce – local cheese, wine, pepper, chunks of lard from black pigs, basil sauce, honey etc etc. It’s nice to visit such fairs as we get the chance to purchase directly from the farmers their organic produce, ask them questions about quality & cooking method. Really, if not for such small scale fairs, most of them being small independent farmers, they will not have the resources to travel for example to Milan to participate in international fairs to promote their produce.

After buying what we need, we walked and visited Enoteca Pinchiorri (www.enotecapinchiorri.com) – a legendary establishment of wine shop and 3-Michelin star restaurant – predominantly French cuisine - boasting a massive stock of at least 145,000 bottles of fine wines stored in their underground cellar. The restaurant menu prices start at 250 euro per person without wine. We were privileged enough to have the opportunity to visit the underground cellar that day, something Mr Giorgio Pinchiorri have always allowed but stopped since the incident in 1992. It happened that in 1992, a jealous visitor set off some light explosive inside the cellar and destroyed some 20k euro worth of wines. So now, unless we know someone there, they will not entertain any visits. Down at the cellar, we saw many verticals of Grand Crus and Chateau Yquem dating back to the 1800’s. I was told that what Mr Pinchiorri wants, he will get - just need to call the winery. We saw cases and cases of Masseto and Ornellaia stacked up neatly in customized wooden cases exclusive to Enoteca Pinchiorri. What a sight !

After a quick shower, we went for dinner at iL Guscio ristorante at 8pm – informal settings – apricot colour walls, soft lightings, chequered table cloth and impeccable service and high quality food. The best thing is we get to open our own wines ! We started off with Terlaner 2006 (Pinot Grigio, Pinot Bianco & chardonnay) from Cantina Terlaner from Alto Adige - complexity, depth and fruit (from the chardonnay I guess)– this wine strikes me with it's freshness and display of multi layers of fruit, acidity and minerality. Excellent white. Next up from same producer - Pinot Bianco 2005, very enticing flowery nose but lack the fruity palate we much enjoy of the Terlaner. The PB comes across as more suitable as aperitif, simpler, fresh with nicer bouquet. Still an excellent white. I remind everyone that it's only the basic wines we are tasting from Terlaner – their higher line of wines is much more impressive and is often sold out upon release. We moved on to the reds - Collosorbo Brunello 2001 – modern style brunello with lots of satisfying fruit and elegance, pairing very well with slices of seared fillet beef and rocket leaves. For comparison, we tasted La Campana Brunello 2001 – very traditional – only big slavianian cask – no French barrique. This wine is lighter in colour, less fruit but very drinkable. Next, we had a Sicilian nero d'avola, the Feudo Montoni Vrucara Nero d'Avola 2004 – it surprises many of us as we expected it to be big and heavy, like many southern wines but instead, it is extremely elegant and graceful . Fabio, the producer winemaker told me the secret lies in the fact that his nero d'avola grape is the original clone, untainted and only this special clone is capable of producing a wine which combines power with elegance. We ended the night early at about 11pm. I walked across the river back to the hotel while the rest shared a cab (can take only 4 passengers – strictly)

21st Oct Sunday

Early morning after breakfast, we picked up our trusty FIAT passenger van and headed north to Piedmont, passing Genova, into Liguria, then to Alexandria and arrived at Alfonso Boeri winery at Costiglione d'Asti at 1pm. Brothers Giorgio and Roberto greeted us warmly and showed us the vineyards Bricco Quaglie (Hill of Quail) which is the historic name – a site best suited to grapes because of the exposition. We proceeded to the cellar and tasted the 07' Moscato d'Asti still fermenting in tank –frothy, fresh and enticing sweetness – just what we need after a long journey. Production is down 20% in 2007 as there is little rain and this applies to the whole of Italy. We start off lunch with a dry Moscato d'Asti 2005 which unfortunately they have stopped producing because of low demand. Next, we tasted the Chardonnay (tank sample) along with nibbles like homemade salami and lard slices on bread. Moved on to Chardonnay aged in barrique which shows more buttery notes and body. To the reds, we tried the Martinette Barbera d'Asti 2004 which everybody loves, it's nice fruitiness and acidity paired well with packets of ravioli (veal). Next we were served roasted bell peppers with anchovy sauce – blend of anchovies, extra virgin olive oil and garlic (bagna calda – a traditional Piedmont dish - made for us by Giorgio's mama). This was washed down with Barolo 2004 – blend of Barbera and Nebbiolo (which from 2007 will be named Parbolo because the consortium disallowed the use of the word "Barolo" because it "sounds too much the same like Barolo"). We then moved on and tasted the Porlapa 2003 & 2004 (2003 more ripeness) and finish off with Moscato do Asti 2006. Alfonso Boeri is a barbera specialist and their Porlapa 2001 won the gold award of "Best Barbera" in the STARWINE Challenge USA.



After a sumptuous lunch, we drove to Alba town centre to attend the truffle fair, with Giorgio leading the way for



us. He knows the place well as his daughter goes to school here. Every year, during the truffle season of October and November, the fair is held on every Saturday and Sunday in the town centre. The narrow streets were packed with locals and tourist. Wasting no time, we headed straight to main event – the Truffle hall - each paid 1 euro to get into the truffle exhibition hall.



Once inside, the heavy aroma of truffles were exhilarating and heady. Giorgio introduced us his truffle guy, a big man with thick moustache. He's the best because he is honest and he knows his truffles. He is not a merchant and hence, we are able to get the best prices from him. Some of us bought – white truffles slightly bigger than ping pong ball size for about 70 euro each (I am not sure the weight though). Others bought truffle butter, truffle cream and truffle oils. As we can all taste samples before we buy, we are quite sure we all got what we wanted.

We next headed to Barolo village and had dinner at Viberti ristorante cum cellar of the historic winery of Giovanni Viberti. We met young Claudio, down at the basement cellar and as he went on to introduce us to the history of his winery and products, we tasted the Dolcetto d'Alba 2005 – very focus and clean ripe fruit, fine tannins – very



fresh and drinkable. At the dinner table, in the wine list, we saw older vintages of 1973, 1980s and early 1990s Barolos etc. We picked a bottle of Barolo Bricco della Viole 1996. Before that, we tasted Langhe Nebbiolo 2005 – again very fresh and focus with ripe red berry notes and the unmistakable nebbiolo nose.

Next up is the Barbera Sup 2004 – very good ripe fruit and nice acidity and Barolo 2001 – earthy, typical of nebbiolo from Barolo, full bodied, warm and balanced. The Barolo Bricco Viole 1996 which we paid euro 70 (as indicated on the wine list), is the wine of the night – decanted – it is expansive on the nose, earthy, sweet tannins, full bodied with ripe red berry fruit filling the entire palate.

The finish is steady and firm. Elegantly textured. Long finish. According to Claudio, the winery started using French barrique since the 1999 vintage and I must say, from tasting the Barolo 2001, it was a fine effort. The oak was judiciously used and not intrusive and the sweet tannins come through, rounding off the wine beautifully. But still, the 1996 bricco viole was drinking beautifully that night. The wine did not last long of course. The food is of very good quality and we can see that many tables were quickly filled up by local Piedmontese.

We spend the night at the lovely Antico Asilo (www.anticoasilo.com) in



Serralunga. According to Tony, the place used to be a nursery school before it was converted to a B&B. Luciano Pira from Schiavenza, which we will visit first thing in the morning, knows better because he attended this nursery when he was young and in fact it was he who recommended this place to us. The place is now managed by the beautiful lady owner Emma who served us breakfast the next morning. On the shelf in the dining room are bottles of barolos from serralunga zone... Germane ettore,



Palladino, Massolino and of course Schiavenza.

22nd Oct Monday – Serralunga & Barbaresco

Just a short walk away is Cantina Schiavenza and we met Luciano, the current winemaker and owner of the cantina. He then lead us down to the basement vinification room cum cellar. I

have featured Luciano's wines in previous Producer Focus newsletters and explained the style of his wines. Traditional – 100% natural - no computer gadgets - all wines are made in the traditional way - long maceration on the skins for about 20 days, natural yeast, vinification without temperature control – just a heater lamp placed near opening to help keep temperature stable – for fermentation, fibreglass lined concrete vats,



ageing in large Slavonian oak cask. The whole set up is exactly the same as what we saw (or will see) at the Biondi Santi cellar in Montalcino the next day. We tasted the Langhe Nebbiolo 2005, Barbera d'Alba Vughera 2004, Barolo Perno 2003 and Barolo Prapo 2002 and Barolo Chinato. Acidity is high as expected for these highly traditional wines but make no mistake about Schiavenza wines as these are wines which will reward those with patience. I have tasted all these beautiful wines earlier this year in April while attending Vinitaly and as they were just been bottled, showed generous perfumes. Today, these wines seems to have started it's evolution and I suspect it have began to shut down – offering not very much on the bouquet. These phenomenon is common even among the great wines of the world.



At the same time when we were at the winery, some government “controlee” officials also visited for a routine check on the inventory record of the winery, just to make sure everything is proper and records are straight. Towards the end of our tastings, Luciano and his wife have to attend to the officials to bring them the records and were going back and forth attending also to us at the next room. We bought some wines from Luciano and when it comes to issuing of invoice, Tony jokingly tells Luciano (knowing

the officials are in the next room) "Oh Luciano, invoice ? what invoice ? I don't need any invoice from you, since we are all good friends !!!" Of course, we got all our wines and all documents duly issued before we move on to our next appointment to Roagna in Barbaresco.

Next up, we are in the cellar of Roagna in Neive, Barbaresco. Believe me, this small producer is even more traditional than Giacomo Conterno and Bartolo Mascarello, as they leave the skins on the juice to macerate



anything from 90-100 days without temperature control in open top vats !!! This practice is unheard of anywhere else in Piedmont (or Italy). The young and energetic Luca Roagna is only 26 year old and is a qualified oenologist from Alba and is now in charge of the wine-making. Luca releases his wines only when he feels they are ready and his wines, I must say is difficult to understand for the uninitiated. The wines are very highly



extracted and after tasting it, it reminds of wines from another historic producer in Barolo – Giacomo Borgogno. With frightening levels of high acidity in it's youth but capable of ageing for more than 40-50 years turning mellow, expansive, sweet tannins, toffee, tar and raspberry. Memorable bottles include the Barolo 61' riserva & 67' riserva . We tasted the Dolcetto 06, Langhe Rosso 50/50 blend of barolo & barbaresco wine, Barbaresco Paje 99, Barbaresco 98, Barolo 97 rocca e la pira, Barolo 93 riserva rocca e la pira & Barolo crichet paje 98.

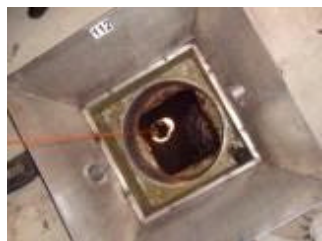
Turning up late for our appointment at Produttori del Barbaresco, the very kind and professional Aldo Vacca (ex-Gaja man), suggested we go eat something nearby and he will wait for us. After a quick, bread, cheese, salami, pruscitto bite, we headed back to meet Aldo. He first introduced Produttori del Barbaresco – 110 hectares divided into 55 family growers producing 500,000bts – 35% crus (9 crus altogether). Despite the volume, they still sell about 10% of their barbaresco wine as bulk. Produttori del Barbaresco is one of the most successful



cooperative in Italy in upkeeping the very high quality of barbaresco wine – affordable and always of good quality. Aldo explained to us that to achieve this success year on year, they work within 3 strict parameters : a) namely, all growers cannot bottle their own wine, b) they produce ONLY barbaresco (not any other grapes except nebbiolo) and c) all growers are paid in accordance to the quality of the grapes harvested. During harvest season, each batch brought into the winery is inspected and verified – net weight, sugar level, polyphenol levels – all calculated according to scale of index of

quality - wages are then paid according to the index. Growers bring in 5 times, he will get 5 receipts and each receipt may have a different index. This gives growers the incentive to concentrate on quality and not quantity and thereby ensuring only high quality of grapes are brought into the cantina.

The wines are vinified in 6 metre deep underground concrete vats (total 13), afterwhch they are pumped up into stainless steel vats for the malolactic treatment. Once it's done, the finished wine is moved to large cask for ageing. We tasted the 2003 barbaresco and the cru Ovello 2001 – in 2003 they did not produce any crus as the quality of the crus varies a lot.



In keeping their focus on quality for their base product (ie. not the crus), they decided to produce only the base barbaresco for vintage 2003 which benefitted from the extra body and sweet fruit from the crus. It is more important for cooperative to first maintain the high quality level of their basic products. The 2003 Barbaresco was rated 91 point by Wine Advocate.

With the tastings of Roagna's wines still fresh in our minds, we pose Aldo Vacca the questions about over-extraction. How long does it take for maceration to be considered over extraction ? – 20 days ? 50 days ? 90 days? Aldo explained to us that for the cantina, they leaves the skins on the juice for about 14 days. He is not sure whether leaving it too long will result in over-extraction (ie. drawing out too much astringency and acidity / bitterness from the skins, pips and stems) but someone once told him it's ok to leave it for a long time because given time, these bad elements will actually recedes back into the pips, skins and stems, leaving the wine unharmed. Aldo remembers this was the case of winemaking for the cantina back in the 1960s and perhaps this is the reason why some old vintages of the cantina's wine of the 1960's are still drinking well now.

We headed back to Florence to spend the night.

23rd Oct Tuesday - Montalcino

We left early for Montalcino for an appointment at Biondi Santi (Blonde-Saint). The winding road up to the town centre was relentless. At 10 past 10, we arrived at IL Greppo where the vineyards and winery is located, at the top of the Montalcino hill at 500 m asl. The road leading to the historic cellar is guided by two neat rows of trees – rather scenic I must say. Like in Chianti, altitude in Montalcino is a crucial factor in the wine's character. The vineyards around the town and along the ridges heading south are the ones with greatest structure. BS's Greppo vineyards is in this district, as is Costanti, Poggio Antico, Fattoria dei Barbi, Case Basse, IL Poggione – some of the most illustrious and long lived brunellos. Biondi Santi's vineyards are located at some of the highest altitude in Montalcino.

When we arrived, we were greeted by the affable Laura who will be our guide. Before joining BS, she use to



work for the Brunello consortio. The temperature that morning was between 1 – 7 degrees celcius , according to Laura. As we toured round the estate, she explained that Trancredi is the creator of the Brunello wine – he discovered a specific clone BS 11 sangiovese grosso – which is suitable for long ageing. His son Franco, went on to make the Biondi Santi Brunello famous around the world. The estate comprise of 22 hectares under vine and grapes from younger vines (around 20 years old) goes into the annata bottling while those from 40+ years old vines will become the riserva bottling. As we went into the vinification room and listened to Laura's explanation, we realize



the set up and wine-making process described is exactly the same as those of Schiavenza in Serralunga, which we visited the other day. At this moment, we could see the owner of the estate, Signore Franco Biondi Santi was already with us, working away, giving instruction to his cellarman and checking through some paperwork records. He greeted everyone warmly and everyone was amazed how strong he still is, given that he is close to 80 years old (or more?) . After some brief introduction of his estate, he was very kind to pose for pictures with us before bidding us farewell and continued with his work. This was followed by tastings and we tasted IL Greppo Brunello Annata 2000 – very good fruit, balance acidity, focused and graceful. Second sample servings were offered and we accepted it with gratitude. At the wineshop, some us bought 68' riserva, 97' riserva, some Rosatos and 3 bts of riserva 98 – of which 1 bt we have decided to open for dinner later that evening.



Next stop – Tenute Collosorbo. We met Madam Giovanna Ciacci – yes, she is related to many Ciaccis' of Tuscany – eg. Ciacci Piccolomini etc etc. Collosorbo's vineyards are located in southern part of Montalcino and



where there is very good exposure to the sunlight, the wine style is somewhat more robust and fruity. We went down to visit the historic underground cellar where some 2000 years ago, secret tunnels were dug measuring not more 5 feet wide and used for hiding from the enemies. Later it was used as prison camp – where crawling marks on the walls left by some prisoners could



still clearly be seen. Also evidence of it being used as cellar – a wine bottle fully covered by lime-clay soil was embedded tightly at the end of one of the passageway. As I ease myself slowly between the narrow passageway towards it, reaching down, I could feel the punt of the bottle.

Back upstairs at the tasting room, we gathered around the table set out for us. We went on tasting the rosso 2005 – bright ripe fruits, full bodied and very drinkable. Brunello 2001 was more austere, firm tannins & fresh acidity - which is typical for most of 2001 brunellos I have tasted. The Brunello 2003 was still very young. Lastly, we tasted Sant Antimo 2004, a blend



Syrah, Merlot, Cabernet, Sangiovese. A wine meant for the international palate, very enjoyable though.

Next stop, we had a simple lunch at the estate of San Filippo – we tasted the 2002 and 2003 brunello along with some cheese, salami and hams– I am further convinced that 2002 was actually not a bad vintage as the critics made it out to be. This 2002 brunello is not as austere and structured but rather, it is rounder, much more approachable and overall, it is very drinkable ! While waiting for some hot pastas to be served, we went outside to view the accommodations available for rent – we saw a 2 bedroom unit (I think), modern furnishing and the designs are definitely made with entertaining guest in mind – long table with open-style kitchen . There is a swimming pool too.



Next stop, we visited our good old friend, Andrea of La Serena – tall, wavy long hair and fast speaking. When Andrea speaks, his hands and arms swing wildly, just to make his point across to you. Wild, yes, and it reflects in the style of his brunello (WS rated 96 pts for his Brunello 2001) . He showed us his new cellar – designed by his architecture-trained twin brother – who, by the way, also designed Banfi's cellar. We wanted some of Andrea's wines to bring for dinner and we are not interested in his regular bottling. We are going after his riservas and cru Gemini. After much negotiating and "arm-twisting", we got what we wanted and left promptly, before he changes his mind. We got the Brunello riserva "Gemini" 2001 and Brunello 1998 riserva, which we will open for dinner tonight.

Next stop La Campana – Only 2 hectares under vine, the two cousin owners are very old and sadly, we don't think they will produce anymore brunellos in the coming years as they have the intention to give up the property due to their old age. Their brunello style is traditional and this is what Parker says about their wines : *A reliable producer of smooth and elegant Brunello di Montalcino from the eastern part of the zone, this 1998 Brunello di Montalcino is a good example of the house style. A firm garnet with a perfumed nose of red fruit, resin, and incense, it is round on the palate, medium in weight but with a perceptible tannic backbone and a tarry, mineral finish.* Paolo consults at this winery and on numerous occasion, persuaded them use French barrique as sometimes their wines are too angular. For example, Parker had said this : *The 1996 Brunello di Montalcino is complex, austere and light. Aromas of rose petals, cherries, dried herbs, leather, and soy are followed by a tight, angular wine. If this is your style, you will enjoy it even more than I did.* But never once they have used the French barrique Paolo bought for them. They say "Yes Paolo is a very kind man to buy for us the barriques and we like him and we thank him a lot". But still the barriques were left untouched at the cellar. We tasted their wines and as we like the traditional style, we bought all 60 bottles of their riserva 1995 plus 2001 normale. A point to note : these are wines which are made naturally with very minimal sulphites and hence, are wines to drink now.

By the time we get to dinner place (best pizza place – I forgot the name – but located in Sesto Fiorentino – outskirts of Florence) which is 20 mins by car out of Florence, it was around 8pm. There were the 8 of us plus Tony's wife Laura and their beautiful daughter bella bambina Martina, and our guests for the evening who all arrived on time: winemaker Paolo Caciorgna, producer Gianfranco Fino (of the famed "ES" wine – 100% primitivo di manduria) and her girlfriend, our good friend Antonio – ex-sommelier at Enoteca Pinchiorri. On the table line-up, we started with a superb sparkling Col di Luna Spumante, golden colour with very fine perlage. Very refreshing and balanced. Next, we had a white wine sample brought by Paolo : Trebbiano/Chardonnay from Tuscany. Nice ripe fruit of chardonnay balanced off with trebbiano's acidity. Fresh and soft on the palate and the finishing is steady and convincing. Moving on to the reds, we tasted Paolo's Nera Mascalese 2005 from Sicily – only 1,500 bts produced, from old vines, 1.5 hectares divided into two plots at altitude of 600m asl (1 hectare) and the other 0.5 hectares at 400m asl. On the palate, exquisite balance and finesse with ripe fruits. Reminiscent of a very fine pinot noir. Moving on, we tasted again the Macchie 2004, followed by Collosorbo 98 riserva, Biondi Santi Brunello 98 riserva, Gianfranco's "ES" 2006 100% Primitivo di Manduria 16.5% alcohol and also his new wine "JO" a 100% negroamaro of 14% alcohol which we are liked very much for it's elegance really stands out. The food at this ristorante cum pizzeria was fantastic.

I do apologise we did not make it to visit chianti classico this time as promised. Will make up to everyone the next time.

Written by : Nicholas Leong

