

The Second Wine Of Iconic Super Tuscan Ornellaia Starts To Come Into Its Own



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Spirits

A storyteller who focuses on wine and the people who make it.



Pier in Maremma coast at Sunset on the Mediterranean sea in Marina di Cecina, a short distance from ... [+] GETTY

The idea of having a “second wine” for a producer’s top wine was first made popular by famous châteaux in Bordeaux, France. Those that owned some of the most sought after Grand Cru Classé wines in the region of Bordeaux came up with the brilliant idea to make a second wine for their iconic, classified first wine that, many times, had become so expensive that it was out of reach for most wine enthusiasts. The creation of the second wine would also help to achieve stricter selection for the first wine and that process has only been heightened by adding third wines or even general regional wines to a grand Bordeaux estate’s portfolio. [Ornellaia](#), like many other Bolgheri ‘Super Tuscans’ in Tuscany, Italy, looked towards Bordeaux for inspiration although wanting to express their own sense of place that glows under the Tuscan sun; part of the Bordeaux inspiration

encouraged a second wine for Ornellaia that would share similarities as well as differences compared to the Bordeaux versions.

The estate director of Ornellaia, Axel Heinz, reflected on the twenty years of [Le Serre Nuove](#) dell'Ornellaia, the second wine of Ornellaia, as their twentieth vintage release was last year for 2017 as well as compared the evolution of making the wines from Axel's first vintage in 2005 to the last one he made during Covid times, the 2018.

Le Serre Nuove dell'Ornellaia



Vineyards in Bolgheri during Sunset with Tree in Background GETTY

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Le Serre Nuove dell'Ornellaia, or as it is more commonly known as just Serre Nuove, was created to not only become a wine that would be more financially attainable than its monumental parent but it would be a wine that would carve out its own importance within Bolgheri. Axel noted that the challenge of Serre Nuove lied in the fact that since it was a second wine that it “made it second to something and that in itself is always challenging” as there may be a subconscious thought to not treat it with the same intensive care as Ornellaia and hence Axel constantly fights the notion that it is only a second wine. But by the same token, there is an effort to show the link to Ornellaia in Serre Nuove as it is an opportunity to taste from the same terroir and that idea is fully embraced by Axel.

Serre Nuove is more Merlot driven with a range of 40% to 60% existing in any given vintage as opposed to Ornellaia's Cabernet Sauvignon dominant blend. As many well know, the team at Ornellaia is just as skilled at making stellar Merlot as great Cabernet Sauvignon which is evident by their highly sought-after single vineyard Merlot called [Masseto](#) and so both varieties hold an equal importance to Ornellaia, according to Axel. This higher percentage of Merlot in Serre Nuove will make it “more accessible in its youth” as well as having less new oak combined with a shorter aging period than Ornellaia, due to the latter being more powerful and structured, and so there are obvious differences in the wine just in regards to the blend and aging regime.

Traveling and Tasting Back to the 2005 Vintage

Axel, who worked at Bordeaux estates previously, had his first vintage with Ornellaia in 2005. “As a winemaker you hope that you will be blessed with a great vintage for your first harvest,” and he noted with a smile that such a wish was true for the two winemakers who preceded him yet not so true for him. The 2005 vintage looked like it was going to be perfect all the way up until the first day of harvest in late August yet the harvesting of grapes was constantly interrupted by rain showers; the local sea breezes did help to quickly dry the grape bunches and the fruit was healthy but the news of the harvest slightly tarnished the reputation of 2005 as well as being labeled as wines that were understated, especially when compared to the opulent 2006 wines.



2005 Le Serre Nuove dell'Ornellaia CATHRINE TODD

Also, looking back, it was an extremely stressful time for Axel as one can imagine that he wanted to prove to the world that he could live up to the iconic status of Ornellaia and so he was initially thrilled to be given a great vintage only to have that dream taken away during the harvest; it was extremely stressful and simply heartbreaking. Their 2005s turned out to be quite lovely and wine critics were impressed that Ornellaia could still make a fabulous wine knowing the troublesome end to the season. So, in a way, it really showed what Axel could do under pressure when a wrench was thrown into a harvest that was supposed to be, by all estimations, easy. Axel has had many great vintages under his belt since that time such as the 2006 and many more, so he has already proven time and time again that he can not only live up to what people expect from Ornellaia but can bring it to the next level.

And now, 15 years later, Axel has found that 2005 Serre Nuove to be a “great surprise” as he said that it is easy to forget about it because it was followed by the outstanding 2006. He was happy to see that the 2005 had evolved to a harmonious place with plenty of fruit with a nice amount of “chewiness” that had no astringency to the tannins and an overall freshness. He didn’t know when he first made the 2005 if it would be able to evolve so nicely and he feels that it is in its ideal spot now, recommending drinking it up over the next couple of years.

Ornellaia and Serre Nuove Starting to Get There

It may seem odd, considering the lavish praise that Ornellaia and Serre Nuove have received through the years, to hear Axel say that they are “a little bit getting there” in terms of discovering the full potential of their vineyards. But he pointed out that their

vineyards haven't been there that long - the first vineyards planted in 1981, and today the vines range from 10 to 30 years old with the average age of around 15, and as time goes on they understand the land better and better and which vines do well where. Although Ornellaia and Serre Nuove share the same vineyards, he has noticed over the years that there are some spots that are "more suitable for Serre Nuove" as they are warmer sites with sandy soil that make wines with more generosity in their youth, although Axel avoids over-ripeness in the vineyards, contrasted with the higher elevated vineyards with more limestone or clay that give structure and power to Ornellaia.

Axel said that he is learning more and more from their specific terroir as each year passes as the vines are able to express the place better and he fully admitted that despite having some big successes early on with Ornellaia and Serre Nuove that he is still learning and that it is a "trial and error" process where he is only given one trial each year to get it right. And although he has learned so much from his past professional experiences in Bordeaux, he does depart from them in some instances. If they have a great year they do not make more of their first wine, Ornellaia, by sacrificing the quantity of the second wine as they understand that many of the retail stores and restaurants whom they have built relationships with over many years depend on them more or less making the same amount of Serre Nuove and not shorting them because they could sell a lot more Ornellaia for a vintage with lots of hype.



Axel Heinz with the Vines ORNELLAIA

And although Axel can start to notice through the years that some vineyards always go into Serre Nuove and others into Ornellaia, he doesn't want to create a hierarchy among his vines. He remembers being in Bordeaux where some château would show a map of their vineyards and there were the ones marked for their first wine that were known as superior to those that were marked for their second wine. Axel wants to avoid such a mindset and tries to treat all of the vineyards as if they were going into their most important wine, as Serre Nuove is just as important to him as Ornellaia.

The major thing that has changed in the winery for Axel is the amount of stress that accompanies the blending. When he first started, he would have to take from some of the lots that were supposed to go into Ornellaia to make sure that Serre Nuove had enough complexity because although it is a wine that is supposed to have charm in its youth, it is also supposed to impress on its on with an ability for further improvement down the line.

But today enough of their vines have reached an age and quality potential that makes enough complex wine for Ornellaia and Serre Nuove both and today blending is much more of a relaxed process for Axel as he has enough of what he needs for both wines.

When it comes to Ornellaia trying to balance the prestige of its iconic first wine with not giving its second wine an inferiority complex, it seems very fitting that this balancing act comes from a producer who was one of the first to wave the flag for Tuscany's rightful place in making red Bordeaux blends. At first, the Super Tuscans may have taken the world by storm by seeming like they were almost as good as the top Bordeaux producers, but today they have surpassed that sentiment with the idea that they make something that is very uniquely their own. But Axel notes that they are really just getting to know the potential of Ornellaia and Serre Nuove and in another 15 years he expects them to be much further along with truly knowing the capability of the land and vines.

As Serre Nuove starts to come into its own, it coincides with Tuscany no longer having to live in the shadows of Bordeaux. Yes, the Bordeaux blends that are made in Bordeaux can only be achieved there but the same can be said for Tuscany now.



2018 Le Serre Nuove dell'Ornellaia CATHRINE TODD

2018 Le Serre Nuove dell'Ornellaia, Bolgheri Rosso DOC, Tuscany: 33% Cabernet Sauvignon, 32% Merlot, 18% Cabernet Franc and 17% Petit Verdot. “2018 is a slightly more balanced blend where none of the grape varieties completely sticks out but you can definitely feel a strong presence of both Cabernet varieties in this wine,” stated Axel. 2018 was not a hot or cool vintage overall as it was fairly warm for most of the year with no heat spikes and a good amount of rain. A beautifully aromatic wine with floral and fresh red raspberry notes that had a fine texture with crisp acidity and lovely balance of sweet fruit and savory dried herbs.

2013 Le Serre Nuove dell'Ornellaia, Bolgheri Rosso DOC, Tuscany: 36% Cabernet Sauvignon, 32% Merlot, 20% Cabernet Franc and 12% Petit Verdot. 2013 was fairly warm but the cold and wet spring led to a longer flowering process which reduced production and resulted in uneven grapes. However, the summer was perfect - dry and sunny and

August saw significantly lower temperatures which favored aromatic expression and led to a later than average harvest. This wine was going through a tight phase and so it took several hours for it to open and Axel noted that this is a more retrained, linear profile of Serre Nuove although he expects the wine to evolve past this stage. Granite and tar on the nose with dark fruit brooding in the background and spice on the extremely focused finish.



2013 Le Serre Nuove dell'Ornellaia CATHRINE TODD

[2005 Le Serre Nuove dell'Ornellaia](#), Bolgheri Rosso DOC, Tuscany: 50% Merlot, 35% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10% Cabernet Franc and 5% Petit Verdot. As noted above, the 2005 was on its way to becoming a perfect vintage until rain showers constantly interrupted harvest. The wine was singing at this stage which was a nice surprise for Axel and was quite impressive with a good amount of richness with a lush body and plenty of fruit such as stewed red cherries and blueberry pie with notes of smoldering earth and lavender that had plenty of structure to give it elegance and shape with a long persistence of flavor.

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