

Let's start the New Year with a trip to Tuscany!

I know, I know. The holidays are over and we're supposed to go back to work. But, with the possibility of a bargain rate for only a few days' stay in Siena and some of the surrounding villages, and the strong probability that your boss is out of town until the end of the month, why not throw caution to the wind and fly to Italy!? You just might have a good time. I found a trip that will enable you to start in Siena, tour wine country for four days, and get back to the Lowcountry before anyone even knows you've left.

So . . . all aboard! We fly to Siena and arrive in time for an orientation that kicks off at 4pm the very same day. We receive a briefing about the regions that we will visit and also have an opportunity to meet the other tourists. The briefing is important as it previews not only the wines of the regions, but also the typical foods of each area. There may be an opportunity to meet some of the local owners of farms and artisanal shops that you will visit over the next four days.

Day One is San Gimignano. This is important as San Gimignano is Tuscany's classic area for a white wine called Vernaccia. (More on the wine later.) First there is a short morning tour of the city where you visit small shops that make gelato, chocolate, olive oil and vinegar, and saffron. In the afternoon a visit is scheduled to a winery that produces the famed Vernaccia Wine. Vernaccia di San Gimignano records go all the way back to 1276. (The grape is mentioned in Dante's *Divine Comedy*.) Despite its prominence, Vernaccia does not seem to be as internationally known as are the prestigious reds. Nevertheless it is one of the most charismatic and distinctive Italian Whites. It is recognized for its golden color, powerful and full-body nature, heady floral bouquet, and dry flavor. This is a wine that reflects its terroir, offering mineral characteristics of stone (flint) from the sandstone soils where the grape is grown.

Vernaccia is available in the Lowcountry, mostly during the summer months. It should run between \$13 and \$26.

Day two is a tour of Montepulciano. This is a town high atop a hill in southern Tuscany not too far from the tour base in Siena. It is a medieval town of rare beauty and always appears at the top of everyone's "recommended" list. The reason for this is that the town is full of elegant Renaissance palaces, along with ancient churches and squares. From there, one can also easily reach many additional charming villages or just enjoy the view of the hundreds of acres of vineyards that produce the famous Nobile. Nobile is made from the grape called Sangiovese. The product itself derives its name from the fact that the historic mindset said that this wine was to be served at the table of 'NOBILITY.' This wine was the first DOCG. Now Italian Wine Law requires that this wine be barrel aged for a minimum of one year and bottle aged for a minimum of three years. The wine is very delicate with bursting fruity flavors. It is a wine that can be considered medium to full body. It is available in the Lowcountry at \$25 plus.

On day three we go to Chianti Classico. (Very hilly so wear foot friendly shoes.) Chianti Classico is the heartland of the Chianti wine region. The term "Classico" is used on wines from many different Italian wine regions (Orvieto and Valpolicella are good examples), however Chianti is probably the most famous example. The fame is due not just to the high quality of the wine, but also the outstanding Tuscan soil and the strict winemaking traditions. The typical Chianti Classico is made from the Sangiovese grape which gives the wine a rich, ruby color. The wine carries aromas of cherry, violet, and earthy spice.

The day extends itself into more shopping, mostly food based, as you will experience exquisite pecorino cheese and rich olive oils. Have these items packed well and save room in the checked baggage.

Day four takes us to Montalcino. We are south of the city of Siena at a classic fairytale town watched over by a mighty medieval castle. Montalcino is a beautiful village, immersed in the breathtaking Val d'Orcia Natural Park, renowned all over the world for the production of Brunello Red Wine. The town of Montalcino has been made quite rich and famous by its Brunello wine, one of the world's best and most appreciated red wines. Brunello was already famous before 1888. However in that year Ferruccio Biondi Santi perfected the formula for Brunello wines by leaving out the traditional grapes (Canaiole and Colorino) and in their place he used 100% Sangiovese. Still a success after all these years.

Enjoy Montalcino in many other ways. Enjoy the Architecture, the imposing fortresses that go back to 1350 and still stand. Also enjoy the summer jazz and wine festival held each July. Above all else remember to include Banfi Winery on your list of places to visit. I will say no more except that it was very special.

WINESPEAK

Tuscany is the kind of place that has so much magic you want to return every year. It is rich in art, history, literature, music, landscapes and wine, wine and more wine. Truly, Tuscany is the gift that keeps on giving.