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## CHIANTI RUFINA 1955–2006

by Franco Ziliani

Chianti Rufina is the highest but also the smallest of the seven Chianti subzones. Its 12,483ha (30,845 acres) stretch across the communes of Dicomano, Londa, Pelago, Pontassieve, and Rufina, but are all in the province of Florence. It boasts centuries of history, the first documentary evidence dating back to the 15th century. And in the 18th it gained official recognition as one of the “best four wines” in all Tuscany, in an edict issued by Tuscan Grand Duke Cosimo III de’ Medici in 1716.

Rufina has its own very particular characteristics, its climate, elevation, exposure, and soil composition setting it apart from other zones of the DOCG. Little more than 750ha (1,853 acres) are currently listed in the official register, but the total will soon approach 1,000ha (2,471 acres) thanks to new vineyards and re-plantings over recent years. The soil composition, largely chalk, *galestro* (a friable marl of layered sandstone and limestone), and *alberese* (compact clayey limestone); the predominantly south-facing orientation; and elevations well above 1,640ft (500m), all confer on the best wines exceptional elegance, finesse, and longevity.

More than any other area in Chianti, Rufina has seen heavy investment from 1999 onward. In addition, The Department of Crop Science at the University of Milan has recently completed a comprehensive zonation project under the direction of Professor Attilio Scienza, which has mapped the area into several *unità vocazionali* (viticultural units): Pelago, Grignano, Sieci, Selvapiana, Nipozzano, Santa Brigida, Rufina, Colognole, Pomino, Contea, and Frascole. Such efforts testify to a determination to raise standards. At the same time, however, the eradication of old vineyards and selection of new Sangiovese clones do not suggest any great sensitivity to terroir. Older vineyards may well be less productive, but if they are well managed they can still yield fruit of greater quality and complexity, thanks to their maturity and the depth of their root systems. Clonal selection, like cultured

yeasts and standardized winemaking practices, can mask the very potential that zonation is designed to reveal.

Because 65–70 percent of Rufina’s Chianti is exported, largely to the USA, northern Europe, and India, many producers style their wines to suit the more “modern” tastes in those markets. While one could understand such a trend in a relatively recent region, the shift is somewhat baffling in areas with long-rooted traditions, whose varieties have flourished locally for centuries and whose terroirs are ideal for producing wines of unmatched character. A tasting of the latest releases leaves the distinct impression that excessive cellar practices are leaving their mark—to the extent that many of the wines are robbed of their essential character and vintage variations are smoothed away.

Producers might be better advised to present their wines simply as Rufina, *à la française*, thus avoiding the “declassification” it inevitably suffers in the minds of many consumers who regard it merely as one of the “other” Chiantis and certainly inferior to the better-known Chianti Classico. Its distinctive characteristics really do make Chianti Rufina “the most elevated of the Chiantis,” the one most capable of expressing the very soul of Sangiovese in mountain terroirs.

Our tasting took place in two stages. The first, in Florence, was a thrilling trip through older vintages, from 1985 to 1955. The following day, the genius loci brought us to Rufina, northeast of Florence, where we previewed 27 of the newly released 2006s and 2005 Riservas. Unfortunately absent from our tasting, on the decision of Federico Masseti Giuntini, was Fattoria Selvapiana, the area’s leading producer, whose efforts have contributed so much to its reputation. Their venerable vintages have always served as proof of Rufina’s ability to mature superbly over time.

The impression we came away with from these two tastings is that yesterday’s wines—made with no recourse to clonal selection, and with Sangiovese supplemented with modest dollops of Colorino, Malvasia Nera, Canaiolo, and even a few drops of

white—are clearly a notch above today’s. These latter, of course, are in many cases works in progress (some were barrel samples), and all of them, because of the qualities particular to Rufina, are presently capable of expressing only very partially their personality and quality. They need to smooth out, blunt their rough edges, soften their tannins, and acquire the complexity that comes only with time, which some will surely reward.

One must emphasize, however, that many of today’s Rufinas raise serious doubts as to whether they will ever evolve favorably over time; rather, they seem designed to be drunk with enjoyment in their youth. Yes, a defensible business decision, but also a conscious denial of those elegant riches that an aged Chianti Rufina can release with the magical touch of a master. If this area really wishes to belong to the aristocracy of Tuscan wines, to join the ranks of those that serve as witnesses to their remarkable terroirs, then the choice of crass concentration and gross over-simplification, all too evident in far too many wines, is certainly not the right one. Granted, the wines of the past may have been less perfect in a technical sense. But each time the cork of one of these is pulled, one perceives a wine with a soul, capable of evoking an illustrious past and powerfully stirring the emotions, with nothing left hidden or unsaid. If this be not greatness...

### 2006 Chianti Rufina

#### Fattoria I Veroni

The most appealing and enjoyable of the 2006 Rufinas tasted, and the least international. A blend of 90% Sangiovese with 10% Canaiolo and Colorino, matured not in barriques but in 20hl Slavonian oak casks and tonneaux. A striking purplish ruby. A vivacious, crisp nose lays out violets and pungent Mediterranean scrub (laurel, rosemary, juniper); very seductive in the mouth, supple but energetic and vivid; a lovely vein of minerality, incisive tannins, and refreshing acidity. **15.5**

#### Travignoli

Classic Sangiovese qualities. Lively purplish-ruby. Crisp, fleshy cherry fruit predominates on the nose, with floral (violet) notes and subtle spice. A lively attack, quick off the blocks, then abundant, sweet and succulent fruit, the dense texture supported by nicely

incisive tannins, taut sinew, and a lengthy, earthy finish. A superb young Rùfina. **15.5**

#### **Frascole**

Purple-ruby in appearance. A woody, earthy nose, with juniper and rhubarb, but also prominent cherry and raspberry; a rounded palate, with juicy fruit, lively, crisp acidity, and mellowed tannins; brimming with energy and well balanced. Very appealing. **15**

#### **Dreolino**

Good balance and easy drinkability are the hallmarks of this Rùfina. Luminous violet ruby. Earth and spice notes run through aromas of cherry and violet. No great structure, but fresh, lively fruit and a savory, full-flavored finish. **14.5**

#### **Fattorie Galiga e Vetrice**

A lovely, simple, and refreshing young Rùfina. Violet ruby. Well fruited (cherry) on the nose, complemented by lily and pungent scrub; an exemplary balance of succulent fruit and tannins, refreshing acidity, and alcohol. Already enjoyable now, especially if paired with meat dishes. **14.5**

#### **Tenuta Bossi Marchesi Gondi San Giuliano**

A traditional Rùfina with a well-measured modernist bent. Dark ruby. Well-ripened fruit, with hints of plum and blackberry that complement crisp cherry notes; fleshy, round, firm tannins; still very young, awkward, and forceful, though admirably structured and finishing long. **14.5**

#### **Scopetani Risasso**

A modernist Rùfina, but made with an experienced, restrained hand. Dark ruby. Very ripe fruit, with berry and plum aromas enriched with notes of oak and leather. Round, fleshy, supple palate; an admirable quaffer, though one might wish for a little more energy and complexity. **14**

#### **Podere Il Pozzo**

Bright red ruby. A clean, fresh nose dominated by cherry and floral notes. Good balance between fruit and tannins, crisp and refreshing acidity, very appealing. **13**

### **2005 Chianti Rùfina Riserva**

#### **Frascole (barrel sample)**

Dark purple ruby. The nose is still coming together, with cherry and plum as well as hints of spice, game, and Mediterranean scrub; quite promising in the mouth, with dense, succulent fruit edged with an earthy tang, lively acidity, emphatic tannins, and impressive texture. A great future. **15**

#### **Fattoria di Grignano**

Dark ruby; scents of cherry and plum, with hints of spice, leather, and game. Very rich, fleshy, sturdily structured, with depth, good

heft, and solid tannic support; markedly earthy character; well balanced and judiciously acidic. **15**

#### **Travignoli**

Ruby red; ripe cherry and plum aromas with a pungent hint of wild herbs. Very rich and powerful, with prominent tannins and a long finish. **14.5**

#### **Fattorie Galiga e Vetrice Villa di Vetrice**

Very dark hue; rounded aromas of fleshy, ripe cherry, with subtle spice and plum. In the mouth, still very young and somewhat awkward, with aggressive tannins, but displays superb structure and aging potential. **14**

#### **Marchesi de' Frescobaldi Nipozzano**

Dense, opaque appearance; very ripe, with sweet vanilla, banana (!), and blackberry notes. Flaccid entry, and no sinew in sight in the mouth; bitter, astringent tannins; little verve. **10**

#### **Marchesi de' Frescobaldi Vigneto Montesodi**

Even more incomprehensible than the Nipozzano; lacks crispness and finesse on the nose; displays an over-abundance of new oak and harsh wood tannins; massive, but no evidence of terroir. **9**

#### **Fattoria di Basciano**

This contradicts every characteristic of elegance and terroir expected of a Rùfina. Eggplant-streaked, ultra-inky purple. New wood and toasty notes that follow through onto the palate, with super-ripe, sweet marmalade fruit. Instead of freshness, a drying, tired finish. Others may disagree. **7**

### **2003 Chianti Rùfina Riserva**

#### **Castello del Trebbio Lastricato**

The only 2003 on offer, this was surprisingly elegant for such a hot year as 2003. Exquisitely nervy and sapid, with a finely calibrated acidity, expressive tannins, and superb balance. Unalloyed pleasure, still youthful and fresh. **14.5**

### **Older vintages**

#### **Marchesi de' Frescobaldi Montesodi 1985**

The 1985 vintage followed a severe winter and hot summer, and in many cases it was an excellent harvest. This wine matured for 22 months in barriques. It still shows a very dark, almost opaque purple, garnet-edged. Notes of oak and toast will never be completely integrated, as the palate makes clear: it is still dominated by oak, alcohol, and aggressive, harsh, bitter tannins, lacking both elegance and pleasure. **13**

#### **Travignoli Riserva 1984**

A surprising wine from a difficult vintage, and 100% Sangiovese at that. Garnet tending

toward brick red. The nose is captivating and enchanting, with a somewhat rustic character redolent of leather, tobacco, dried roses and violets, mint and rhubarb, with mineral, mushroom, and musk notes. The palate is even more intriguing, with marvelous freshness, fleshy black cherry, a salty edge, superbly crisp acidity, bold tannins, and a long finish. **16**

#### **Marchesi de' Frescobaldi Montesodi 1974**

The first vintage of Montesodi (running to 4,500 bottles), this was matured for 18 months in barriques—a pioneering technique at the time. Very dark, deep purple, testifying to significant polyphenol extraction. Ripe, dense, and pungent on the nose: earth, tobacco, dried mushroom, cigar box, graphite, and licorice, along with cherry and plum fruit. The palate is not as compelling as the bouquet, but is nevertheless earthy, mineral, and vibrant, with bold tannins and a lengthy, spiraling finish. **15**

#### **Tenuta Bossi Marchesi Gondi Molin del Piano 1962**

All is spectacular in this 1962. A luminous, rich, garnet ruby. Complex, fresh bouquet, showing oriental spices, leather, black pepper, gunpowder, dark chocolate, and tobacco, plus hints of roasted coffee, prune, tar, truffles, and mineral essence. The palate is amazing: undiminished, vibrant, very dense, and long, with incredible, refreshing acidity and splendid tannins that are miraculously reminiscent of Serralunga's Barolo. Still just a little austere, with licorice and an earthy edge to the long, elegant, sapid finale. A fabulous wine. **17.5**

#### **Fattoria di Poggio Reale Spalletti 1960**

1960 was a poor vintage, but the results here are remarkable in terms of aromatic complexity. Garnet ruby hue. The nose is ripe, sweet, dense, and velvety, with dried flowers, cocoa powder, tobacco, prune, and cherry, as well as notes of dried rose petals and underbrush. The palate is still fresh, with a lively acidity and firm tannins, releasing subtle citrus, licorice, and earth. Concludes long and elegant. **16**

#### **Fattoria di Poggio Reale Selezione Etichetta Rossa Spalletti 1955**

Red Label Selection for this unforgettable 1955 (older than the taster...), a masterpiece of elegance and freshness. A splendid, garnet red in appearance, shot through with pale orange. The multi-layered bouquet releases cherry, plum, and prune, black tea, herbs, laurel leaf, oriental spices, tobacco, graphite, mint, black pepper, dried mushroom, and a hint of truffles. The palate of this wine, now more than 50 years old, is still youthful and vibrant, with austere but not aggressive tannins; exceptionally savory and superbly balanced, with tobacco and olive on the finish. **16.5** ■