



CLUB MAGNUM

VINS ET EXPÉRIENCES

SESTI

MONTALCINO, TUSCANY



**IF YOU ARE EVEN REMOTELY SUSCEPTIBLE TO FALLING IN LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT, THEN A WORD OF CAUTION IS NEEDED IF YOU EVER FIND YOURSELF NEAR THE SESTI FAMILY'S KNEE-TREMBLING PROPERTY PERCHED ON THE EDGE OF A HILL IN THE SUB-DISTRICT OF ARGIANO, MONTALCINO.**

This is about as perfect a piece of earthly paradise as can be imagined. Imposing ruins of a 12th century tower, surrounded by lovingly-restored buildings of stone and terracotta with their Juliet balconies and cascading, hanging plants and flowers. Beautiful gardens, dominated by noble cypress trees and with olive groves and vineyards surrounding on all sides. Panoramic views that take in both the Tyrrhenian sea and the ancient, extinct volcano of Monte Amiata. Did my heart love till now?

Just when you have rubbed your eyes clear, your other senses will double down the drama. The sounds of birdsong from the carefully preserved woods that surround the estate; the feel of warmth from the Tuscan sun; the aromas of Sarah Sesti's brilliant cooking and of course the tastes of the family's fabulous wines, extra virgin olive oils and digestivi.



## APPROPRIATELY ENOUGH FOR SUCH ROMANCE, THE STORY BEGINS IN VENICE.

Giuseppe Maria Sesti- known as 'Giugi' by all- is a student of art, music and astronomy and as an educated man of wide interests, he travelled extensively in his early years. It was on a trip to North Wales when conducting research for a book that he was writing that he met his wife, Sarah. As a young couple, their spirit of adventure took them on many more journeys until the fateful day in 1975 that they stumbled across a long-abandoned property in Argiano. Like something out of the Secret Garden, overgrown with brambles, with a crumbling tower and infested with snakes, it took incredible vision to imagine what it could be. But Giugi and Sarah fell in love with it, taking on a project that would forever change their lives.

Over the next 15 years, as they began to restore the property, Giugi worked in the area, often helping the neighbouring estates with a variety of tasks, including translation as the area opened up to the outside world. In 1985, following the great frosts that laid waste to an enormous number of Tuscany's ancient olive trees, the Sestis realised that they would have to diversify their activity and in 1990, they planted their first vineyards. By now they had four children, three sons and a daughter and the children would happily work alongside their parents when not at school, beginning the process of cementing the attachment to the land in the next generation.

Slowly but surely, they were able to plant more vineyard as well as renovate the cellars. At 102 ha, the estate is sizeable yet even today, the vineyards barely total 10%, the remainder given over in a small part to olives but in the majority to wild, natural woodland, something that the family are fiercely proud of and that they are convinced gives them a unique microclimate that has been their saviour in many of the hot and dry vintages of recent years.

The range of wines is small but perfectly formed. From the beginning, Giugi planted a hectare of Sauvignon Blanc- not a grape that one customarily finds in Tuscany. Having seen this tactic in new wineries elsewhere in the world, I asked whether this was simply in order to have a quick cash crop. The astonished answer was typical: 'not at all. We planted it because of our memories of Venice'.

The personal touch continues with the Rosato, again not a traditional part of the Tuscan line-up. In 2003, the brutal sun made life intolerable and for Tuscans, who never sit at a table without bread, wine and oil, they were unable to enjoy their red wines in the incessant heat. So the following year, which gave a generous crop, Elisa Sesti encouraged her parents to make a Rosato. Using a little skin contact on Sangiovese, this is a more gastronomic style of Rosé than the lighter and fruitier versions that are fashionable in France but at the table on a warm day, with salume, bread and oil it is delectable. They have made it every year since.





Sangiovese of course reigns above all other red grapes in Montalcino but Elisa refers to it as the 'prima donna', requiring four times the amount of attention as Cabernet or Merlot and prone to give a sting in the tail if not treated well. With Sarah coming from Wales and with children schooled in the UK, the family were always both export-minded and well exposed to British tastes and they realised that Sangiovese was not well known or understood. By introducing their IGT Toscana, Monteleccio, they aimed to make an approachable, easy to understand style. The wine sees just twelve months in barrel and makes for a delicious, casual drinking red in a softer and lighter vein. The name comes from 'Mountain of the Ilex', the emblematic tree of the area.

As a leading authority on ancient astronomy, Giugi's academic work frequently influenced his thinking and direction in the vineyards and cellar. Since the beginning, he worked in a way that we would understand as 'natural' today, eschewing the notion of the use of chemicals and only working in order to promote health, balance and harmony on his estate. While biodynamics are often puzzled over by many in the wine world, working to the movements of planets and stars was for Giugi an entirely normal way to operate and indeed he goes much further than the most ardent practitioners elsewhere.

The flagship wines are, of course, the Brunelli di Montalcino. Here we deliberately include his Rosso di Montalcino. There are a growing number in the region who use the Rosso label to cynically promote a cheap wine vinified in stainless steel with very little terroir character while happily trading off the image of the Montalcino name in return for easy profit. Giugi, by contrast, makes his wine from a specific plot in the vineyard, giving it 18 months in barrel and declassifying anything not up to the mark. It is a small production wine, serious and ambitious in scope and very much a 'baby Brunello' as one would be entitled to expect. A couple of years in the cellar post bottling is advisable to permit it some development.

The Brunello itself spends four years in large, old oak barrels known as 'botte' (despite the legal minimum being reduced to just 24 months) plus a further year in bottle. The Sesti wine is not a flashy, attention-grabbing example but a wine of soul, personality and depth. The family are keen to show the character of each vintage year, such that a 2003 will be very different to a 2004, for example: if that is what nature has provided, then who are we to argue? With skill and tenderness, the fruit is handled in such a way that each different year brings new voices and tones, the emphasis on individuality rather than conformity.

Typically a tasting will finish with the Riserva bottling, known as Phenomena. To qualify for Riserva, the wine must spend an extra year in barrel, meaning that for the Sesti version we must wait six years after harvest to see it. The difference is seen in the extra smoothness of the tannins and Elisa points towards the maturing of the vines being in great evidence in the recent versions of this wine as it shows the trace elements coming from the oceanic sediments deep under the soil. The name comes from Giugi's identification of a celestial event that took place during the year in question. The labels are some of the most beautiful and original that you can find anywhere.







**IF YOU WERE TO GO BACK SIXTY YEARS, THERE WERE BARELY A DOZEN PRODUCERS IN MONTALCINO. EVEN BY THE TIME GIUGI AND SARAH ARRIVED IN THE MID-SEVENTIES, THE NUMBER WAS STILL WELL BELOW THIRTY.**

It was in the 1980s that everything started to change. It must have been severely tempting to join the bandwagon, throw out the traditions, grab as many dollars as quickly as possible as Montalcino became the darling of Manhattan.

The Sestis, however, have resolutely gone their own way. Even today, they receive covetous offers from impossibly wealthy neighbours but instead they prefer to plough their resources back into their own estate.

The restoration of the tower, a monumental heritage project which is only now being finished over 45 years after their arrival and which has exposed them to Italian bureaucracy at its most baffling, shows the depth of their commitment and love for this special place. To share even a fraction of it with them, be it in person or through their wines, is a treat that makes everyone feel good about life.

