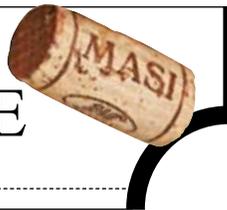


FINE PALATE



Chinese cheese is a rare treat as a dessert; the entrance to Piero Incisa's Patagonian vineyard; the 2008 Cincuenta y Cinco is rounder on the palate; while the Barda uses pinot noir grapes grown in sandy soil.



Photos: Alex Lai

THE RIGHT STUFF

Argentina has given pinot noir a new meaning, writes **Alex Lai**

ARGENTINA MIGHT have earned a name for itself with the tango and Eva Peron, but it is its pinot noir these days that is getting the attention it deserves from wine lovers.

That is timely for Piero Incisa, owner of Bodega Chacra and the grandson of Marchese Mario Incisa della Rocchetta, the creator and proprietor of Sassicaia.

For the Italian was struck by the Argentinian pinot noir years ago. That was during a dinner in 2003 in New York where Incisa, who read economics for his first degree in California, had gone to in 2000 to start on his master's.

Incisa thought the wine was a burgundy but realized the immense potential when he discovered it was Argentinian.

"I packed my things and left for Argentina," he said. That trip ended with him buying a property in the Rio Negro Valley of northern Patagonia.

He arrived before the boom in the country's wines began. The political situation was difficult, the currency had just been devalued, and times were tough. The vineyard had been abandoned for years, but it was a rare find for him.

"It is the oldest vineyard we have in northern Patagonia. The number 32 refers to the year 1932 when it was planted," Incisa said. "It's a small block of land, about 2½ hectares."

Pinot noir, which originated from Burgundy in France, usually produces a soft, fresh and fruity taste, with a nice bouquet and an acidity that makes it vivid and persistent on the palate without being aggressive.

But terroir is a major factor, and Argentina has never been thought of as possessing quite the right terroir for the delicate pinot noir, which grows in a medium, compact and elongated cluster and requires long maturation in fresh weather.

"Today pinot noir represents less than 1 percent of the total grapes planted in Argentina," he said. "It is the most difficult grape to farm and ferment. That is a reflection of the terroir,

more than any other grape, I have done experiments in growing pinot noir in Italy. They were a complete failure. I don't have an interest in making a wine for a fashion that does not have a real substance or any intellectual aspect to it."

Yet he's unwilling to judge others for their pinot noir. "Everyone should choose their own path. I just don't subscribe to that world. We come from a traditional farming and artisan background. We don't produce industrially or follow trends."

He reminds us his family wine, Sassicaia, is considered one of Italy's top bordeaux-style red wines. "My family has owned the estate in Bolgheri for over 850 years. It's rich, not necessarily from a financial point of view but from a cultural and heritage one. There's a wealth of information translated from one generation to another."

Critics and distributors, Incisa said, have tried to push the family to change its style of wine over the past 20 years. "They started mentioning French chateau wines and focused on wines that have a more concentrated and extracted taste."

But he stresses integrity. "Wines should have finesse and elegance and we treat wine as a companion with a meal, which is like a marriage: one should not overpower the other."

Fortunately, today the pendulum is swinging the other way in a return to elegance, and Incisa is excited about the potential for his Barda, Cincuenta y Cinco and Treinta y Dos.

And, as one discovers the variation of palates from the pinot noir between courses, it might remind us of Incisa's philosophy – it's about doing something beautiful and right.
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Piero Incisa says the 2007 Cincuenta y Cinco has a good balance of minerality and a floral nose, making it a sexy and subtle wine.

TALKING ROT

SOMEWHERE LURKING in my collection of wine books is a volume of cartoons by the British artist Ronald Searle that matches well-known wine phrases to humorous illustrations. My favorite is a picture of a very elderly aristocratic-looking gentleman. The matching caption: "Has undergone noble rot."

Noble rot is also referred to as *pourriture noble* by the French or *botrytis cinerea* in its Latin form. It is best described as benevolent rot to distinguish it from the malevolent form, *botrytis grisea*, which can have a devastating effect on a crop of grapes.

Many wine regions, including the two classic regions of Bordeaux and Burgundy, are highly susceptible to this type of rot and adopt methods such as canopy management and chemical sprays to control it.

With a growing trend towards biodynamic practices in top wine estates, canopy management plays

an increasingly important role. By better use of trellising systems and removal of vegetation around grape bunches, air can move more easily around the fruit and there is more exposure to sunshine, meaning that rot is less likely to form.

Botrytis cinerea plays an important role in the production of many of the world's classic sweet wines. In Sauternes and Barsac, the right combination of humidity and temperature leads to the formation of this good *botrytis* before harvest time.



Mist forms in the low-lying vineyards that are close to rivers, leading to this specific rot, which concentrates the sugar and acid components in the grapes, here mainly sauvignon blanc and semillon with a small component of muscadelle. The wines will show greater complexity and distinctive aromas that separate them from their non-*botrytised* counterparts.

As well as these classic Bordeaux sweet wines, many other regions make wines that owe their characteristics to this magical rot. The Tojaj region of Hungary produces a highly regarded style that owes its character to the addition of crushed aszu grapes affected by noble rot to a base wine.

This is the time of the year to be adventurous with your wine purchases and I encourage you to find room for at least one bottle of good-quality sweet wine in your holiday purchases.

By Diogenes
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Chateau D'Yquem 2001



Around HK\$2,850 per half bottle from specialist fine wine merchants

This is the classic Sauternes from an exceptional vintage that earned a 100-point rating from Robert Parker. Delicious now, but with decades of life ahead of it.