



1 On the Chianti hillside of Castello di Ama was once a medieval castle that grew into an 18th-century stone hamlet. Today the vineyards that surround its grand palazzo are home to a museum-worthy collection of contemporary art that is integral to the wine-making.

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BETWEEN THE VINES

Sitting on a low rock wall overlooking her family's wine estate, Castello di Ama, Lorenza Sebastì gazes at the newest of the 17 artworks here: a garden composed by conceptual artist Jenny Holzer. Four years in the making, Holzer's "Per Ama" carpets the hillside with yellow flowers, paddle cactuses and mulberry trees, which descend to a pond surrounded by weeping willows. "These works don't belong to me," says Sebastì, whose short charcoal hair frames her wide-drawn features and joyful smile. "These works belong to this place."

"Per Ama" is Holzer's first garden in decades. The artist's signature messages — often broadcast via projections, billboards and electronic signs — are whispered here, with poetry carved into two stone slabs laid under the pond's waters. "Artists give you a new dialogue with the space," says Sebastì, a collector who travels to art fairs and meets artists in their studios and at the Venice Biennale. "Here, the art is a gift we treat ourselves to almost every year, regardless of profits, because our desire for it is just overwhelming."

In turn, thousands of guests visit Castello di Ama every year, tasting the wine and touring the art collection. "In Italy, Ama has become a model for another way of presenting art that's outside the commercial world and museums," says New York-based curator Philip Larratt-Smith, who oversees the collection and for many years was artist Louise Bourgeois's literary archivist. "It's a different experience to see art in nature, and to eat here, sleep here and get the unique sense of awareness that comes from spending time with works by some of the biggest names in contemporary art."

Art aside, since taking over the estate from her father and his group of founding friends in 1994, Sebastì has also helped to make Castello di Ama one of Chianti's most respected wine producers. Not yet 30 when she became CEO, she faced scepticism in a male-dominated field but established her winery's ascendancy by using traditional French methods, reducing production for greater quality and incorporating oak barrels for ageing several of the wines. Working alongside her was oenologist

Power of place

The combination of art and wine-making finds special expression at Castello di Ama. Other vineyards have experimented with hosting art: a museum at the Château Mouton Rothschild in Bordeaux, created by the Baron Philippe de Rothschild with Baroness Pauline in 1962, showcases drinking vessels and wine-related art. But the genius of the curation at Castello di Ama is that the works displayed are connected not only with wine but with the estate: many were commissioned for particular places within the estate. The link between each piece and its location amplifies the effect. — GBA

1. Neon sign by Kendell Geers
2. Lorenza Sebastì
3. Castello di Ama has 75 hectares under vine
4. Mirrored wall by Daniel Buren



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Marco Pallanti; he became her husband and remains integral to Ama even after their split. The estate became one of the elite vineyards that raised Italy's wine-making reputation at a time when the country's wine was largely mass-produced or treated as a hobby pursuit. She also turned the property into an inn and, later, a centre of contemporary art.

Sebasti believes that the presence of art "boosts the sensitivity" of everyone working on the estate. "The influence of beauty makes us all pour more passion into our own art of making wine," she says. She remembers the moment she installed a totem-like split tree trunk by Michelangelo Pistoletto in the cellar in 2000. "We became convinced that it enabled us to make a better wine, and we're still convinced today," she says. "Wine should be an expression of its territory and also the personality of its makers. The art gave us courage to liberate ourselves from the traditional protocols of wine-making, and make wine that reflected who we are."

The artworks here also reframe the landscape. "Artists imbue everything they

touch with a magical value," says Sebasti. "They give you a new dialogue with the space," she adds, pointing to a mirrored wall by French artist Daniel Buren, which runs the length of a distant field, capturing and reframing the Tuscan landscape.

When Sebasti arrives at the palazzo dining room for lunch, Pallanti, her ex-husband, is sitting at the table, with their 25-year-old son Arturo, who works alongside his parents. We're joined by Cendrine du Welz, who became a friend when Du Welz's husband, artist Kendell Geers, stayed at Ama to install his 2003 neon "Revolution/Love" sign in the wine cellar.

Over a meal with produce from the winery's garden – bowls of orzo with courgette and tomato, green beans, chickpeas, a pie stuffed with *cicoria* from the garden, and a dessert of creamy mascarpone topped with a home-made raspberry jam – we sip a wood-mellowed 2014 Al Poggio chardonnay. Sebasti puts an arm around her son's shoulders, toasting each of us at the table before holding forth on her vision for the vineyard. "I want Ama to be open, I want

it to be vibrant," says Sebasti, her sunset-orange blouse the brightest object in the room. She pours a slug of Castello di Ama's own olive oil on the home-made bread. "I believe in a Tuscany that's alive with contemporary art, because it can't remain fixated only on the past."

Castello di Ama is among a handful of private ventures that have attempted to fill the gap of contemporary art in Tuscany. (Another is the Fattoria di Celle, a sprawling outdoor installation of site-specific art sponsored by fabric magnate Giuliano Gori.) "Florence was the cradle of art so it should continue to nourish art today," says Sebasti. "But when it comes to public initiatives for art, Tuscany and Italy do a very poor job," she adds, swirling her wine glass like an accusation in the general direction of Italy all around us. "What we're doing in the private sector, we hope, is creating a model of what could actually be possible if we believe in art again." It's a cultural shake-up, an attempt to outdo ossified thinking that, for Sebasti, flows directly into the quality of what's in her bottles. — κ



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1. Renaissance red
2. Miniature Great Wall of China by artist Carlos Garaicoa
3. Oenologist Marco Pallanti
4. Stone houses on the site once formed a small village
5. Care for a top-up?

Classics of Chianti

About a third of the way north from Siena to Florence near the village of Adine, Castello di Ama is the historic heart of the premier "classico" area of the Chianti region. The dry, rocky soil has been recognised for centuries as ideal for fine wine production. There are now 75 hectares under vine at the estate, spread over four valleys and lying between 420 and 527 metres above sea level. Some 320,000 bottles are produced every year.

For apéritif, besides the Al Poggio chardonnay (a dry white), there is a rose; for digestif there is a choice of a powerful grappa (a pomace brandy) and a vinsanto – a Tuscan speciality where local white grape varieties are dried before pressing and ageing to give an intense, mature, nutty *vino da meditazione* (literally "a wine of meditation", meaning that its complexity deserves to be sipped and savoured). The vinsanto is produced at a cost of 20 per cent of the volume harvested being bottled, such is the concentration achieved.

The heart of the estate is its reds. The starting label, Ama, is a chianti classico – age-worthy reds from the sangiovese grape with touches of malvasia nero or merlot to add further complexity or richness. Castello di Ama's riserva wine is an even more impressive and expressive wine from selected parts of the vineyards, further aged before release.

At the top of the tree in Chianti are the riservas made in tiny quantities from the best grapes in the best vineyards, such as Montalbano and the "gran selezione" from each of the San Lorenzo, Bellavista and La Casuccia vineyards. These showcase the very best that the region can produce.

Then there are the Super Tuscans – wines made from international grapes, such as haiku (a three-part blend of Bordeaux's cabernet franc and merlot with Tuscany's sangiovese). The most celebrated is L'Apparita, a 100 per cent merlot, produced since 1985 from a tiny three-hectare vineyard; allocations of this wine are fought over by enthusiasts. Like the chianti classico riservas, L'Apparita has garnered high praise from wine critics, frequently taking a top Tre Bicchieri ("three glasses") award from the annual guide *Gambero Rosso Italian Wines*. — GBA