When you think of Italy’s greatest wines, you think “red.” Yes, Italy’s white wines are better than ever, but with the possible exception of Jermann’s Vintage Tunina, none have reached the “great” category yet. Most critics agree that a short list of Italy’s great wines would include the following – and they’re red:

- Barolo and Barbaresco
- Brunello di Montalcino
- Super-Tuscans

Super-Tuscan wines are the oddballs in this triumvirate because they are not a DOCG category—Italy’s highest official category of wine—and they are relatively new, having existed for less than three decades. But in their brief existence, they have definitely helped to establish Italy in the realm of great wine.

What is a “Super-Tuscan?” It’s an elite, small-production Tuscan wine usually styled for international palates, with oaky character from aging in French oak barriques, and fairly pronounced fruitiness for a European wine. It’s usually a wine that goes by a special, proprietary name, and it often contains internationally fashionable grape varieties, especially Cabernet Sauvignon—although some Super-Tuscans are made entirely from Sangiovese. It’s a wine made from the grapes of a producer’s best vineyards. Like all great wines, it’s ageworthy, usually needing at least ten years from its vintage date to mature, just like Barolo and Brunello.

Another way to define a Super-Tuscan wine is by its price; any wine from Tuscany—other than Brunello di Montalcino—that costs over $50 retail (and some can go as high as $150 to $200 a bottle, especially in great vintages) is a Super-Tuscan wine.

The principal grape varieties that producers use to make their Super-Tuscan red wines include various combinations of Sangiovese, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, and/or Syrah; a few producers also include Malvasia Nera and/or Petite Verdot. The few Super-Tuscan whites that exist are invariably made from Chardonnay.
The Birth of the Super-Tuscan Category

Whereas Barolo and Brunello di Montalcino wines date back to the 19th century, Super-Tuscan wines as a category originated in the late 1970s. The first Super-Tuscan wine, Sassicaia, actually was born in 1944, when the late Marchese Incisa della Rocchetta founded his wine estate, Tenuta San Guido, outside the coastal town of Bolgheri. At that time, the only world-renowned red wines were Burgundy and, especially, Bordeaux. Incisa della Rocchetta admired Bordeaux wines, and believed that Bordelais varieties would grow well in the warmer, sea-level Tuscan coast rather than the cooler, hilly, inland Chianti zone. And so he created Sassicaia, 75 percent Cabernet Sauvignon and 25 percent Cabernet Franc. But the wine wasn’t commercially available until 1968, and it wasn’t sold worldwide until the early 1980s, when della Rocchetta’s nephew, Piero Antinori, began exporting his uncle’s wines. Today, most vintages of Sassicaia are more than 90 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, with a small percentage of Cabernet Franc and, lately, a little bit of Merlot.

If Marchese Incisa della Rocchetta can be called the Father of Super-Tuscan wines, certainly Piero Antinori is the Godfather. Antinori’s own first Super-Tuscan red wine, Tignanello (80 percent Sangiovese; 20 percent Cabernet Sauvignon) played a big role in the saga of the Super-Tuscans. Back in the early 1970s, Chianti wines had poor sales and a poorer image. Many producers felt hindered by the rigid DOC regulations, which stipulated that Chianti could contain no more than 70 percent Sangiovese, with a required minimum of 10 percent white varieties (Trebbiano and Malvasia) and up to 20 percent other red varieties such as Canaiolo. Producers such as the late Sergio Manetti of Montevertine and Fabrizio Bianchi of Monsanto started making red wines that because of their grapes could not legally be called Chianti; these wines were often entirely Sangiovese, and had the legal status of Vino da Tavola (table wine) with a geographic indication of Tuscany. But it was not until a producer with the stature and marketing clout of Piero Antinori defied the DOC Chianti regulations—with his 1971 Tignanello, released in 1978—that Super-Tuscan wines gained critical mass. Suddenly, in the early 1980s, scores of other notable Chianti producers began releasing elite reds. These wines were so impressive that the humble designation, Vino da Tavola, became a badge of honor for Italian wines. Indeed, some of Italy’s best wines in the 1980s and early 1990s were Vino da Tavola-designated rather than DOC or even DOCG. Today, most Super-Tuscans carry the IGT Toscana, Indicazione Geografica Tipica, designation, and a few, such as Sassicaia have DOC status.

Montevertine introduced its Super-Tuscan, Le Pergole Torte (100 percent Sangiovese), with the 1977 vintage; Castello di Rampolla followed with its Sammarco (80 percent Cabernet, 20 percent Sangiovese). Piero Antinori’s younger brother, Lodovico, founded his own estate in Bolgheri, Tenuta dell’Ornellaia, and made not one, but two Super-Tuscan wines: Ornellaia (60 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, 25 to 30 percent Merlot, 10 to 15 percent Cabernet Franc and Petite Verdot) and Masseto (100 percent Merlot). Piero Antinori added a second Super-Tuscan, Solaia, with the opposite blend of Tignanello, 80 percent Cabernet Sauvignon and 20 percent Sangiovese. All of these new Super-Tuscan wines, including the original Super-Tuscan, Sassicaia, garnered rave reviews from the wine critics and became sought after by wine collectors.
With the new infusion of capital into Tuscany and the restoration of the region’s reputation, all of a sudden Chianti—especially Chianti Classico—improved in both quality and sales. No small factor was that, bowing to pressure from the producers, authorities altered the DOC regulations several times, now allowing Chianti to be entirely Sangiovese, or even to contain up to 25 percent Cabernet Sauvignon. The introduction of Super-Tuscan wines was the best thing that happened to the Tuscan wine business in this past generation.

And yet Super-Tuscan wines are not popular among all Italian wine lovers. Some complain that they’re too international in style—that oaky flavors play too big a role—or that international varieties such as the Cabernets, Merlot, and Syrah dominate the wines. But even lovers of traditional Italian wines can usually find some Super-Tuscan wine they like, especially those that are entirely Sangiovese and not too oak-influenced, such as Le Pergole Torte.

Although Super-Tuscan wines can technically come from anywhere in the Tuscan region, in practice most of them are either made by Chianti Classico producers or, increasingly, by producers on the Tuscan coast. Some larger producers, such as Piero Antinori, make Super-Tuscan wines in both locations.

In addition to the wines already mentioned, here are some of our other favorite red Super-Tuscan wines (listed in alphabetical order), along with their varietal composition and the producer:

- **Cabreo Il Borgo**, 80 percent Sangiovese, 20 percent Cabernet Sauvignon (Ruffino)
- **Ca’Marcanda**, 50 percent Merlot, 40 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, 10 percent Cabernet Franc (Angelo Gaja)
- **Cepparello**, 100 percent Sangiovese (Isole e Olena)
- **Flaccianello della Pieve**, 100 percent Sangiovese (Fontodi)
- **Fontalloro**, 100 percent Sangiovese (Fattoria di Felsina)
- **Grattamacco**, Sangiovese, Malvasia Nera, Cabernet Sauvignon (Grattamacco)
- **Guado al Tasso**, 60/65 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, 25/30 percent Merlot, 10 percent Syrah (Villa Antinori)
- **Lamaione**, 100 percent Merlot (Marchesi de’Frescobaldi)
- **Luce**, 50 percent Sangiovese, 50 percent Merlot (Frescobaldi)
- **Macchiole**, 95 percent Sangiovese, 5 percent Cabernet Sauvignon (Le Macchiole)
- **Il Pareto**, 100 percent Cabernet Sauvignon (Nozzole)
- **Percarlo**, 100 percent Sangiovese (San Giusto a Rentennano)
- **Prunello**, mainly Sangiovese (Viticcio)
- **Sassello**, 100 percent Sangiovese (Castello di Verrazano)
- **I Sodi di San Nicolo**, Sangiovese, some Malvasia Nera (Castellare di Castellina)
- **Spargolo**, 100 percent Sangiovese (Cecchi)
- **Summus**, 40 percent Sangiovese, 40 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, 20 percent Syrah (Castello Banfi)
- **Excelsus**, 60 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, 40 percent Merlot (Banfi)
- **La Vigna di Alceo**, Cabernet Sauvignon, Petite Verdot (Castello dei Rampolla)