



DAVINCI.

Language Arts

KNOWING EVERY SEED: THE PEOPLE AND PLACE BEHIND DAVINCI WINE
BY EVELYN LAUER

“To grow is to make, to make from:
earth vine hands
her hands around the curve of a lemon
his hands in the red clay of land
our hands in the dough, covered in flour, we
make what we will eat, the smell of bay leaves
and lavender, the hot sun on our backs:
a word: *allevare*
the way they do of grapes.”



To grow grapes is to know them. Every seed. Every skin. Every stem.

Throughout the Tuscan hillsides near Vinci, Italy, 230 winegrowers have joined together to form the Cantine Leonardo da Vinci—an innovative growers’ cooperative committed to producing authentic Tuscan wine. The Cantine, now in its 50th year, encompasses more than 500 hectares of vineyards. Most of these vineyards produce sangiovese, the main grape variety in DaVinci® Chianti, Chianti Reserva, and Brunello di Montalcino. Sangiovese can have fruity and jammy qualities—and can also have oaky qualities if aged in barrels. It is Italy’s most-planted grape. It is also, as you will soon learn, the favorite grape of these people because of its deep connection to the place.

To drink DaVinci® wine—and to truly *taste* it—it’s important that you know its story. In July, I traveled to Vinci, the hometown of Leonardo da Vinci, with three other artists as part of the DaVinci® Storyteller contest.

This is the story of DaVinci® Wines—the people and the place behind those bottles.

Outside my shower every morning, I am greeted by a sparrow-like bird who perches herself on the bars that guard the window. I stare out over the clay-tiled roof of the Casale di Valle through the chimney stack out into the vineyards. The vineyards where Chianti is made (hectares of sangiovese grapes). It's not a bad way to begin each day. In fact, I tend to linger longer, day-dreaming about what it would be like to live here—to take in this view each morning ... do the Tuscan people realize how lucky they are? Breakfast is served outside on the patio. Chef Anna prepares a lovely spread of breads, prosciutto, melon, and coffee cakes. I sit with my espresso and again stare off into the vines.

AGRONOMIST ANDREA MEINI STANDS IN FRONT of the perfectly-lined sangiovese vines with pride, a bright blue sky in the background. Wearing a green Izod shirt, blue jeans, and sunglasses propped on his head, Andrea, who has been working with grapes for 27 years, explains how wine grapes are like all other fruit. When we eat peaches, each peach tastes different. A white-fleshed peach tastes different than a yellowed-fleshed peach, or a Gala apple tastes different than a Pink Lady apple. Different types of sangiovese make a different taste in the wine

Wine talk, like most things, is far more beautiful in Italian, I think as I listen to Carolina, our translator, explain what Andrea is so eloquently saying.

Currently, the Cantine works with 12 sangiovese clones. The best grapes from the best yield from the best grower go into DaVinci® Wines. They experiment until they get it right, Andrea informs. Andrea says he loves his job because he's the ring between the company and the growers. "I know all the growers and love working with them," he says.



INNOVATIVE

As I sneak over to take photos of the grapes—perfect prolate spheroids dangling in the sunlight—I see Storyteller David Jon Kassan running down the dirt path between two rows of vines. The magic of this place makes us all do things like this: carefree, whimsical, and worth-capturing. It's no surprise that we take pictures of each other taking pictures, making art, writing words, kneading dough, filming sunsets, sketching faces. Four artists together in this place.

One of the first things I learned upon arriving here: the five symbols of Tuscany are Cyprus trees, poppies, olive groves, sunflowers, and of course vineyards.

Cyprus trees and vineyards are hard to miss here. They line most properties, including the Casale where we are staying. But today we see olive groves, the olive trees you can see from the boyhood home of Leonardo da Vinci.

The leaves of the olive trees look silver in the sunlight, and that's what my eyes see today as we walk up the slightly steep path to Leonardo's home made of stone. The house itself is quaint, but the view is breathtaking. And it's easy to imagine why his creativity would flourish being surrounded by such beauty at such an early age.

It's fitting then that the wine of this place, cultivated by the Cantine of growers who care so much about this land, is named after the great artist from here. To make wine is to make art. Art bottled and then enjoyed.



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GROWER BRUNO ROSSETTI SITS AT A PICNIC TABLE

covered by white linen. We dine with him, *al fresco*, among copper pots and kettles and a plate with a picture of The Colosseum in his outdoor kitchen. A “light” lunch here consists of passed bruschetta, prosciutto, cheeses, and a bread salad. Everything is delicious.

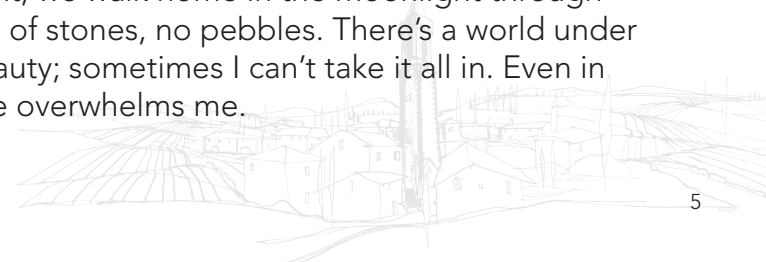
It’s 100 degrees in the shade and DaVinci® Pinot Grigio is served chilled and it goes down easy despite the heat. The Storytellers pose for pictures, toasting as if we’re on the cover of a magazine, acting goofy like we’ve known each other for years. Bruno wears a Panama hat in this heat. He poses for pictures too; especially when he brings out his bottle of 2004 vin santo, an Italian dessert wine that is amber in color and varies in sweetness. He is extremely proud of his vin santo, which he makes on the property he purchased in 1977.

“It’s not only my passion, it’s my piggy bank because every penny I make goes back into it,” Bruno says of his land.

Like most of the Cantine growers, Bruno grows sangiovese. He explains that he’s had to make many sacrifices since he produces wine and olive oil. “I love it though,” he says.

To travel here is to travel to the place where the wine is made. Made as in grow like grapes, olives, like rosemary and lavender; these are the “things” of Vinci, things of life, a good one.

After dinner tonight, we walk home in the moonlight through the vines, pathway of stones, no pebbles. There’s a world under the stars full of beauty; sometimes I can’t take it all in. Even in the dark, this place overwhelms me.



DAVINCI® WINEMAKER RICCARDO PUCCI GREETES US at the entrance of the winery facility where DaVinci® Chianti and Chianti Reserva are crushed, fermented, aged, and bottled. He wears a red shirt and jeans with a gold chain around his neck. He looks relaxed and young for a winemaker, but he's been making wine for 15 years.

Surrounded by American oak barrels, Riccardo explains the wine-making process. In mid-September, during harvest, each grower picks their grapes on their own and brings the grapes to the winery facility. Riccardo and his team select which grapes will be used for which wine and in which combination. The best of the best make their way into the DaVinci® wines.

The concept of the growers' cooperative is pretty remarkable—all these people who have come together to grow grapes and make great wine. There is a deep passion for what they do and how they do it that becomes clear the moment you meet them, the moment you feel the connection to the land that prevails.

I sense this immediately from Riccardo, even though I do not speak his language.

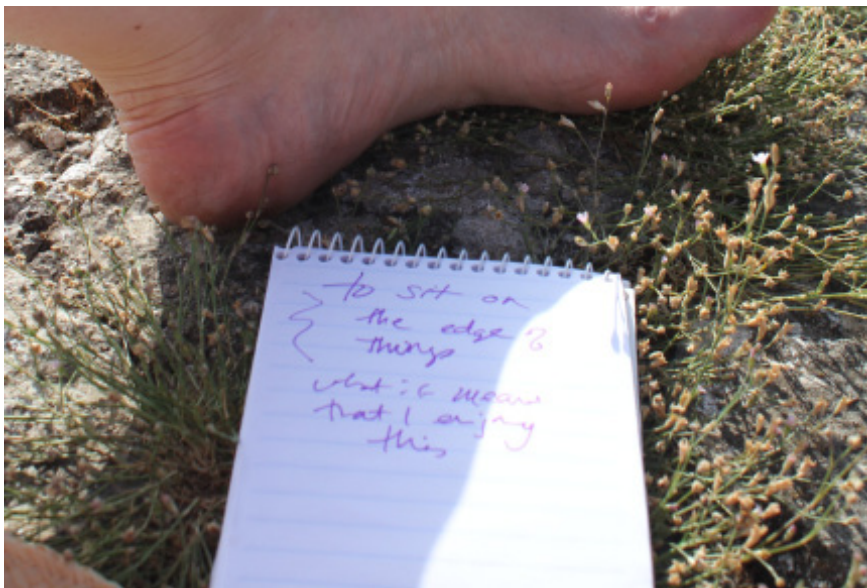
When I ask him why he loves to make wine, he tells me his passion for it is difficult to capture in one sentence, but then says, "The emotion comes from the work that I do. Taking the wine through its different phases is like taking a baby by the hand, knowing that it's now in the bottle and someone is drinking it who appreciates it."

Like taking a baby by the hand; yes, just like that.



"He tells me his passion for it is difficult to capture in one sentence."

PASSION

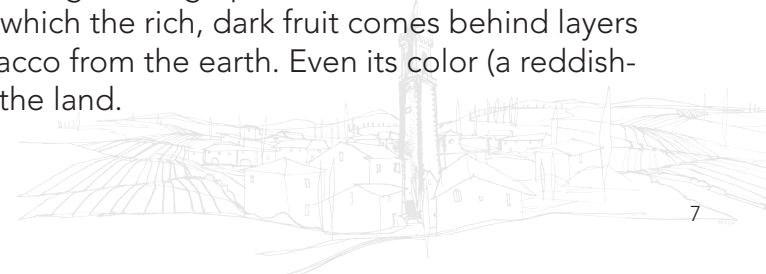


Sea wind, a hot breeze that could blow off a hat. That kind of breeze. I sit along the walls of Montalcino and write, "to sit on/ the edge of/things/what it means/that I enjoy/this."

Most famous for its wine (Brunello), Montalcino is a hillside Tuscan town that dates back to the 13th Century. A fortress—which now houses the Benvenuto Brunello, a celebration each February that introduces the new release of Brunello to the world—sits in the center of the city, adding to the old-world feel of this special town.

Because of its dry and hot climate, Montalcino is the perfect location to produce Brunello, which is often recognized as one of the best wines in the world by aficionados. Classic Brunellos will have both a fruit component and an earthiness, which reflects the land where they are made.

DaVinci® Brunello—a fan-favorite on the Storyteller trip—is no exception. The 2006 Cantine Leonardo Brunello di Montalcino is made from 100% sangiovese grapes. It tastes like a classic old-world wine, in which the rich, dark fruit comes behind layers of leather and tobacco from the earth. Even its color (a reddish-brown) resembles the land.



“And, for a moment, he’s my cowboy.”



It’s difficult to describe how jaw-dropping the land is where the DaVinci® Brunello begins. In the hands of grower Artibano Menchini and his family who have owned the land since 1971, Sangiovese becomes Cantine Leonardo Brunello di Montalcino. It’s a beautiful yet taxing process to watch—even in glimpses.

The difficult life—you see it in Artibano’s hands and face. He wears a straw cowboy-like hat to help hide from the sun. It’s more than 100 degrees today, and I watch him bend over to prune a leaf from the sangiovese vine so the sun hits the grapes just right. He pulls out a cigarette and stares off into the horizon of Montalcino.

It all seems romantic to me—the sun, the vines, his cowboy hat, dreams of Brunello, the red clay of earth. And, for a moment, he’s my cowboy.

**LORENZO LOCCI, THE PRODUCER OF CANTINE
LEONARDO'S BRUNELLO, HAS AN INFECTIOUS SMILE.**

After touring the fermentation area, we make our way downstairs into the barrel room, which is meticulously clean and organized. Lorenzo explains that he always uses oak barrels and bariques to age his Brunello, which spends three years in the cellar and one year in the bottle before it's released each February. "There's a chemistry in the wood; the wine wants this," he says.

In addition to art, there is always the science of wine. But I see the people behind DaVinci® Wine more as artists than I do scientists. They *live* their wine; they don't just work with it.

"My passion, my heart is in the country. I need to have my hands in the land," Lorenzo says. "I love my work here. I love every month, every day with the grower."



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FILIPPO VOLPI WORKS IN THE ENOTECA (wine shop) that sells DaVinci® Wine to Italian customers as well as tourists. Today, Filippo pours me the four DaVinci® wines, and we discuss the background of each one, where the grapes grow, how they are selected. We also discuss their distinct characteristics: Pinot Grigio (crisp with tropical fruit); Chianti (soft and fruity); Riserva (spicy and fruity with silky tannins); and Brunello (elegant, smooth and silky).

In between tasting notes, we converse about the views of wine in Italy versus America.

Filippo speaks of the red table wine that most Italians drink every day, how it's like food here.

"[Wine is] something to eat, not something to enjoy," he says. "When I drink, I want to drink something I love, but many, many people here don't want to spend money on wine."

Another Italian told me that his grandmother used to serve bread with sugar and red wine on it—and this was dinner. Something to eat.

Filippo, who has been working here for three years, says he drinks Riserva, even though it's more expensive, because it's more sophisticated.

"If my friends go out to dinner and order the house wine, I prefer to drink water," he says.



"When I drink,
I want to drink
something I love."

"To drink wine is to make wine is to grow grapes together. *Insieme. Together.*"



At dinner the final night of the Storytellers' stay, across a long, elegant table lit by a chandelier and donned in white linen, I ask winemaker Riccardo Pucci which wine he drinks, which wine is his favorite. He tells me he drinks Chianti because that's what his father and grandfather drank. It's the wine of his region, his home.

"My father was a man of the country," he says, in between bites of Chef Anna's zucchini risotto. "I wanted to follow the love of my family."

To drink wine is to make wine is to grow grapes together. *Insieme. Together.*

As the plates are cleared and we make our way to the terrace for dessert, the general manager of the Cantine, Franco Ambrosino says, "In Tuscany all we have is the land, the weather, the food, and the wine," and I think, what else is there?

Because really that's what life is all about (or should be).

