

VINTAGE BULGARI

Giovanni Bulgari grew up dreaming of creating fine wine, not fine jewellery. The former gem buyer has turned wish into reality with his vineyard and sleek new cellar door in southern Tuscany.

Words **Josephine McKenna** Photography **Simon Bajada**



The sun rises over a patchwork of vineyards in southern Tuscany, painting the sky in a palette of soft pastels. Medieval towers rise from hilltop villages in the distance and wispy threads of mist hover above the valleys below. There is nothing to disturb the early morning stillness.

It's easy to see how Giovanni Bulgari fell in love with this magical landscape, a world away from the frenetic streets and fashion boutiques of Rome just two hours down the highway. The 37-year-old Bulgari is a member of the Italian dynasty known around the world for its elegant jewellery and watches. Now Giovanni and his father, Paolo, are hoping to transfer the family's golden touch to their own wine label.

"My father discovered it. He telephoned me and said 'I found this place and thought of you,'" says Giovanni of the abandoned vineyard the pair bought in 2004. The 22-hectare Podernuovo estate is just outside the tiny town of Palazzone in the Tuscan hills. Siena is about 100km away. Close by is San Casciano dei Bagni, famous for thermal baths dating back to the ancient Etruscans.

"The idea came to me after I stopped working at Bulgari eight or nine years ago," says Giovanni. "I always dreamed of working in agriculture; I love wine." The family has spent the past decade slowly rebuilding the estate and replanting the vines, a mix of Montepulciano, cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc, sangiovese and merlot grapes. But if anyone is expecting to see the Bulgari name splashed across the family's bottles he or she will have to look twice. When the family sold its majority stake in the luxury label to the French conglomerate LVMH (Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton) in 2011, family members gave up the right to use their name for any new products.

Although Paolo remains chairman of Bulgari and is now an advisory member on the LVMH board, the names Paolo and Giovanni Bulgari appear ever so discreetly in soft grey on their Podernuovo a Palazzone wine labels.

Giovanni admits the family name is still a great asset even if it is deliberately hard to find. "On the bottles you can see our names and there is a curiosity from the distributors," he says. "The name Bulgari creates a curiosity that opens the door."

Still, Paolo says the role of the family name should not be exaggerated. "It's a small advantage, but not a great advantage," he says. "The first thing has to be quality, how the wine is produced, the quality of the vineyard and the cellar."

Not surprisingly, there are plenty of sceptics who think this is a rich man's indulgence or a distraction of someone with no connection to the land. It has also become a familiar path for some big names in Italian fashion. Roberto Cavalli and his son Tommaso have been producing wines on their Degli Dei estate in the Chianti region outside Florence for nearly a decade. The Ferragamo family transformed their Il Borro property near Arezzo into a winery and lavish hotel – replete with its own medieval village dating back to the 11th century.

Giovanni's philosophy is simpler. "I want to create elegant wines that respect the diversity of their character: the common denominator among them is elegance, in harmony and respect for the soil," he says.

This region may be known worldwide for its full-bodied reds but the competition is fierce and Giovanni is the first to admit that cultivation requires years of dedication and commitment. "For a quality wine you need five or six years. It's a very long process," he says. "The plants need years for the roots to go deeper into the soil to improve the quality and performance, the taste and the range."

He moves slowly and silently through the vines, listening intently to members of his dedicated team and casting a discerning eye over the ripening sangiovese grapes days before they are harvested. "When the seeds crack like coffee, they are nearly ready."

Whether plucking the leaves from the vines or stroking the neck of a resident donkey, Giovanni looks so at home here in a chunky jumper and a pair of jeans, it's hard to imagine him ever surviving in a suit and an air-conditioned office in the world of luxury fashion.>



Estate duty
Below, Giovanni Bulgari (right) and Stefano Piccio, who's in charge of the wine cellar at Podernuovo a Palazzone. Opposite: the estate at sunrise.



Best cellar
Podernuovo's new cellar, designed by architect Massimo Alvisi, and (inset) its three wines: Therra, Argirio and Sotirio.

At university he enjoyed the distractions that came with studying literature and philosophy ("When you study that in Italy," he grins, "90 per cent of the students are women") before quitting to join the family's international empire.

Paolo took over as chairman of Bulgari in 1984 from his father, Giorgio. (Giorgio's father was the company's founder, Sotirios Voulgaris, a Greek silversmith who moved to Italy and opened his first shop in Rome in 1884.) Paolo taught his son all he knew about precious stones and Giovanni began travelling the world as a buyer, spending his days staring at diamonds, pearls and rubies. "I had a passion for precious stones, I loved the colours and the transparency," says Giovanni.

He admits the sentiment he had for those gemstones is not unlike his love of the land, something that began as a child growing up on a property in Umbria. He has always loved to feel the soil beneath his feet and reminisces about visits to his grandmother's estate in Frascati, in the hills outside Rome where the family also made its own wine. "It was sticky and there were all the smells of the cellar. Then I discovered that my great-grandfather on my mother's side was also a producer in the north of Italy."

Giovanni's latest venture draws on that family tradition as well as his personal passion for the land. The altitude, climate, and clay and sandstone soils of southern Tuscany seem to offer the ideal conditions for the wines he wants to produce. The region is known for its hot summers and chilly winters but enjoys mild autumn and spring seasons, conditions which are considered ideal for maturing grapes. Giovanni has planted 5400 plants per hectare and has plans to expand the acreage under vine.

With early input from one of Italy's top oenologists, Riccardo Cotarella, Giovanni produced three 2009-

vintage wines: Therra, a Tuscan red blend; Argirio, a cabernet franc; and Sotirio, an impressive sangiovese that reflects the vineyard's connection with the terroir and honours Bulgari's ambitious young founder. The Sotirio has a full-bodied flavour with more than a hint of spice and plenty of potential. Podernuovo's Palazzone's first vintage seems perfectly suited to drinking with the picci al ragù from nearby Siena, or the Chianina bistecca alla Fiorentina, spezzatino di cinghiale or other gamy dishes synonymous with Tuscany.

Despite his years of business experience, it was a daunting experience when the somewhat-reserved Giovanni Bulgari presented the wines for the first time at the Vinitaly show in Verona last year. "I was paralysed, I imagined they were all thinking I was a Bulgari and I wasn't serious," he explains from his home just below the vineyard. "The first year we had to find the key elements and we had good character but there's a lot of room to improve."

Podernuovo wines are already being shipped to the US, Japan, Switzerland, China and Denmark. The first harvest produced 70,000 bottles and Giovanni plans to double that within the next few years. That expansion will be driven by his enthusiastic team and the completion of a new cellar and tasting area.

The striking glass and concrete building, with its stunning views over the vineyards, was designed by renowned architect Massimo Alvisi and features the latest technology for processing, refining and ageing the wine. Giovanni is also using solar power for temperature control and a raft of energy-saving techniques that are designed to leave a minimal carbon footprint. "Our philosophy is to rediscover the tradition of cultivating the land and mix that with the latest techniques and temperature control," he says. "Temperature control can make the difference between a wine with defects and none at all."

Giovanni's painstaking approach to winemaking means the prospects for the future seem positive. But his father is candid about the challenge ahead and describes the project as an "interesting gamble". Paolo, seated in his office in the landmark Bulgari store on Rome's Via Condotti, says the wine business is a long-term proposition and neither he nor his son are taking anything for granted. "We want to produce the best-quality wine we can," he says. "There's a lot of intense competition - there are also some very good Australian wines out there. We are not doing this for fun. It's very difficult work in what is a very difficult period. We have to be patient."

Giovanni is confident that his wines will continue to improve and ultimately impress - with or without the family name to promote them. "With this kind of activity you need at least 10 years. You need time." His father agrees. "For Giovanni, it's a challenge. It needs a lot of work, a lot of patience and humility. He has learned a lot and he still has a lot to learn."*



Vine arts
Top left: Giovanni Bulgari in his home on the vineyard. Left: some of the team at Podernuovo a Palazzone. Bottom left and right: the newly built cellar. Bottom centre: Locanda Toscanini boutique hotel.



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THE FINE PRINT

Getting there

Ethiad Airways operates four flights a week from Australia to Rome with codeshare partner Alitalia, via the hub port of Abu Dhabi. ethiadairways.com

Stay

Locanda Toscanini is a boutique hotel 10 minutes' drive from Podernuovo in the village of Piazze. It has nine rooms in a converted villa and olive mill. From \$90 a night. Piazza Arturo Toscanini 3, Cetona, Siena, +39 0578 244273, locandatoscanini.com

Visiting

Podernuovo a Palazzone is a two-hour drive from Rome. The cellar door is open to visitors by appointment only. Località Podernuovo, Palazzone, San Casciano dei Bagni, Siena, +39 335 5329759, podernuovoopalazzone.it