

Decanter

Capezzana: Producer profile & tasting back 90 years

The little-known Tuscan appellation of Carmignano has some hidden treasures, as the recent tasting at Capezzana demonstrated...

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Credit: capezzana.it

By uncorking a bottle of 1930 Villa Capezzana, the Contini Bonacossi family reminded us just how deep the history of winemaking is in Carmignano. On 18 September the estate celebrated 90 years of winemaking with a tasting of 12 exceptional vintages.

There are few wineries in Italy, much less in the world, that can claim a history as deep as Capezzana's. The estate's cellars unveil old wines that are much more than simple marketing ploys or bottles destined for collectors of old labels: Capezzana has continuously turned out great, sound wines, perfect to drink even with decades of age...and not only for oxidative wine lovers!

Carmignano is an obscure appellation. At the crossroads of the Tuscan provinces of Florence, Prato and Pistoia, on the slopes of Montalbano, evidence of vines here imported from France dates back to the 14th century. Called at the time 'uva francesca', what was most likely Cabernet Franc or Carmenere arrived in Carmignano by way of Caterina de'Medici. Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, Cabernet Sauvignon was commonly planted next to Sangiovese and Canaiolo and thus the Carmignano appellation has always included international grape varieties, making it a historic precursor to the widely known super-tuscan category.

Carmignano's unique, consistent ability to turn out long-haul wines is credited to this blend. Close to Capezzana there are other great producers such as Piaggia, Fattoria Ambra and the biodynamic Fattoria di Bacchereto. Yet despite such an impressive history and quality producers, Carmignano often remains out of the public eye. In my opinion, this is because the entire appellation accounts for only 200 hectares of vineyards; too small to be critically assessed in the market and too scarce to arouse the interests of wine hunters.

'Peculiar' climate

Furthermore, the climate is so peculiar that climatologists are not able to agree on a solid profile. Montalbano straddles the Tuscan coast's Mediterranean climate and the continental climate of Chianti. Over the last two months of the growing season (September–October) it is not unusual to have more rain than average and, unfortunately, storms or hail are also common. Vineyard altitude, exposure and soils are therefore more crucial than elsewhere. Soil composition is, in fact, another firm determinant of these multilayered wines. 'We are in a chaotic patchwork of soils. We have vineyards on Galestro schist, Alberese chalk, but also pebbles and green clay. So, although it can be very challenging to work with such a wide range, today we can say that this is one of the secrets of our complexity,' said Filippo Contini Bonacossi, when presenting the tasting.

The estate spans over 650 hectares of which 78ha are planted to vineyards and 140ha to olive trees which turn out delicious, highly sought-after olive oil each year. The age of the vines at Capezzana ranges from just a few years for the newest plantings up to 55 years in the case of the oldest. Since 2016, Capezzana has been certified organic; an approach which, considering the size of the property, is an important and crucial matter for the environment in the region at large. 'For us, it guarantees that there is no contamination around the vineyards,' says the family. Vittorio Contini Bonacossi, who passed away two years ago, was a leading player in establishing an organic district in the Montalbano region. Aside from improving the vineyards, his goal was to preserve the biodiversity of these hills, thus enhancing the complexity of the wine.

Villa Capezzana

Villa Capezzana, the historic label of the estate bottled since 1925, is a blend of Sangiovese and Cabernet Sauvignon. Up until 1995, Canaiolo was also included in the blend. 'Canaiolo brought aromas to the blend, softening the firm acidity of the Sangiovese,' notes Bonacossi. Not surprisingly, it was here at Capezzana that Canaiolo 'graspo rosso' – a special clone of this indigenous grape – was identified and selected. Despite the elegant nuance of Canaiolo, Bonacossi notes that it is not included anymore in Capezzana's top wine, 'because it lacks acidic structure and is sensitive to disease in the vineyards'.

In the winery, only indigenous yeasts are employed. Nevertheless, the fermentation takes place in just seven days followed by another two weeks of maceration. Stylistically, Capezzana has come quite far from the muscular wines of the 1990s such as the 1998, with dry extracts up to 33.29g/L. The 1998 vintage was a turning point – in that year, the estate introduced oak barriques and tonneaux after decades of the steadfast use of large oak vessels. Recent years have seen a return to the classic Capezzana style emblazoned with a new, more balanced style of extraction, despite global warming. The traditional *botti* were reintroduced in 2015 and are still used today.

Since 2006, the estate has held back 3,000 bottles every year in their cellars in order to preserve Capezzana's unmatched depth of history. Often celebrated for their highly lauded Vin Santo, the estate showed a truly impressive lineup of Villa Capezzana Carmignano in September, most notably the complex, well-intact 1930, the utterly elegant 1981 and the refined 2010 and 2016.

Capezzana: Tasting wines back to 1930



Capezzana, Villa di Capezzana, Vino da Tavola, Tuscany, 1930

One could be tempted to think naive thoughts when tasting such an ancient vintage. Instead, Villa Capezzana 1930 was not only in good shape, it was one of the best wines of the entire flight. The vintage is recorded for its exceptional conditions, with good levels of rainfall in the winter and spring preceding the growing season, while the summer was warmer than usual for the period. Completely brick coloured yet bright, it is clean on the nose with a smoky character and truffle notes, yet an aromatic core of rhubarb candy. Extremely savoury on the palate, it has a blood orange flavour, accompanied by deep nuances of gentian and Centerbe (aromatic herb bitters), then an embracing silkiness with a still-fresh profile. Great definition, outstanding emotion.

Drinking Window 2020 - 2030

96 Points



Capezzana, Villa di Capezzana, Vino da Tavola, Tuscany, 1969

Not too intense on the nose but displaying good concentration on the palate, the 1969 vintage was a balanced season with rainfalls at the right times. Focused on carob, cola bottle sweets, leather and chocolate, the palate shines for its coffee caramel flavour. Still firm yet evolved, the tannins and acidity keep this wine lively.

Drinking Window 2020 - 2025

88 Points



Capezzana, Villa di Capezzana Riserva, Carmignano, 1974

1974 was a unique harvest under a blanket of snow which arrived between the end of October and the beginning of November. The growing season ended late due to a moderate summer and a great autumn. This wine is full of restraint, dominated by helichrysum and truffle on the nose, with forest floor, carob and a lot of tobacco. Full on the palate, it is still vibrant, and silky due to the ripe tannins. It's a great example of the classic Tuscan wines based on Sangiovese.

Drinking Window 2020 - 2025

94 Points



Capezzana, Villa di Capezzana Riserva, Carmignano, 1977

After a rainy spring and a warm summer, some rainy days were registered in September. In the following weeks, good weather allowed the grapes to properly ripen. This wine seems to be focused on green notes, with sage and minty notes on the nose combined with raspberry and truffle flavours, and a slightly bitter finish with moderate acidity. It doesn't lack sweetness of fruit, with silky hints of peach.

Drinking Window 2020 - 2020

89 Points



Capezzana, Villa di Capezzana Riserva, Carmignano, 1981

The 1981 vintage registered a favourable climate, not too hot yet dry, resulting in very good ripening. Indeed the wine is one the most elegant of the tasting. Very pale ruby to garnet in colour, there's a kind of firecracker minerality on the nose followed by boiled beetroot, wild strawberry, dried fig and bitter orange. This amazing complexity surrounds a delicate, refreshing palate supported by silky tannins and outstanding savouriness.

Drinking Window 2020 - 2030

96 Points



Capezzana, Villa di Capezzana Riserva, Carmignano, 1988

In the first half of the year, with the exception of March, there was little rain. The summer was also dry, with punctuated rainfall in August and September. Along with the Sangiovese, Cabernet Sauvignon and Canaiolo, there is 5% of complementary grapes in this blend. The wine is pretty much evolved, with wax, copal resin, carob, forest floor and truffle. It's more lively on the palate, with rhubarb and cinchona. The acidity is almost sour and the tannins silky first and chalky at the end. Drinking Window 2020 - 2025

91 Points



Capezzana, Villa di Capezzana Riserva, Carmignano, 1995

This vintage is usually favoured by connoisseurs because of its tension and typicity. 1995 was the watershed vintage between the cold and the warm years in the 1990s. 'September was very rainy up to the 22nd, but then October was as dry as July and August'. For late-ripening varieties such as Sangiovese and Cabernet, this was a classic vintage. Here, those two varieties were still blended with Canaiolo, a precious contributor to this wine. Dense garnet in the glass, restrained aromas of rhubarb root, quite raw yet typical cherry, and great integrity and freshness. Slightly austere and definitely angular on the palate, it flows with an amazing liquorice finish. Incredibly well defined.

Drinking Window 2020 - 2030

95 Points



Capezzana, Villa di Capezzana, Carmignano, Tuscany, 1998

The first vintage to introduce tonneaux instead of botti grandi, marked with a change from the old brown label. An exceptionally warm summer moved the picking date forward by 15 days. Both Sangiovese and Cabernet Sauvignon were harvested before the end of September, avoiding two weeks of rainfall at the beginning of October. This 1998 still has a ruby colour with an amazing oxidative style full of nuance, from curry to dried prunes, cigar box, leather, mushrooms and carob. On the palate there is also a slight bell pepper character, with a cinchona finish. Dense, fresh and more moderate in alcohol, it shows firmness with a slightly green finish.

Drinking Window 2020 - 2030

92 Points



Capezzana, Villa di Capezzana, Carmignano, Tuscany, 2006

Despite another great vintage in Tuscany, this 2006 lacks the overall harmony to reach the highest level, being the product of the years when concentration was a diktat. Nevertheless, on the nose it's amazing for its rich blueberry fruit, intense balsamic notes, and earthiness, with tobacco, liquorice and yellow gentian. On the palate the balsamic notes merge with chocolate. The structure is austere for both its chalky tannins and crisp acidity.

Drinking Window 2020 - 2035

93 Points



Capezzana, Villa di Capezzana, Carmignano, Tuscany, 2010

Exciting and unnerving' at the same time because of its relatively early ripening, 2010 was one of the last classic vintages with the harvest at a similar time to previous decades, before climate change played a large part. The wine exceeded expectations for Capezzana. It is full of forest floor notes, with cigar box, liquorice, leather, game and graphite minerality. A touch of curry on the palate is followed by an almost zesty freshness with angular tannins and complex officinal herbs on the finish. This is not the most refined wine, but certainly one of the most typical.

Drinking Window 2020 - 2035

94 Points



Capezzana, Villa di Capezzana, Carmignano, Tuscany, 2016

A mild winter was followed by a rainy spring, giving great water reserves for the summer. The growing season was without extremes, the grapes reaching ripeness after three days of rain in the middle of September. 'All the grapes were perfect,' said Filippo Contini Bonacossi. Indeed, 2016 is one of the best recent vintages in Tuscany. This wine, crimson and dark, is full of concentration and extract without losing grace. Fresh bramble fruits dominated by raspberry are joined by violet, leafy notes and liquorice. The tannins are grainy and masculine, yet precise on the finish. Refreshing and balanced, this is the wine representative of the estate's postmodern winemaking: the first to be officially organic and partially aged in large oak vessels. A great Carmignano.

Drinking Window 2020 - 2046

96 Points



Capezzana, Villa di Capezzana, Carmignano, Tuscany, 2017

The 2017 vintage was so dry and warm that by the end of September there were 400ml of rainfall registered compared to the annual average of 800-900ml. 'We were lucky to have 15 hectares under irrigation,' says Filippo Contini Bonacossi, 'thanks to the lakes obtained by my father. There we were able to produce outstanding grapes'. Aged partially in large oak, this organic Carmignano - a blend of 80% Sangiovese and 20% Cabernet Sauvignon - shines for its richness of fruit with ripe cherry and cassis, clove and carrube spices, then officinal herbs in depth. Broad and powerful, extracted yet crunchy, it shows a fresh yet not overt acidity, with a glycerol-rich texture and a great saline finish.

Drinking Window 2021 - 2035

93 Points