

San Leonardo - 1986-2013

Longstanding Purple Pagets may recall my enthusiasm for a very unusual estate in southern Trentino, expressed in this tasting article [San Leonardo, Trentino's first growth](#) devoted to a vertical tasting of vintages 1982 to 2006.

The team that runs the estate – father, son and estate manager – came over to Trinity Square, a new wine-minded club near the Tower of London, at the end of last year in an attempt to introduce more British wine lovers to their superb wines.

I will be writing more about them and their wines tomorrow but in the meantime here are the notes I took on the 15 vintages they showed us media folk: from 1986 to 2013 at the tasting shown above, plus magnums of three favourite vintages – 1988, 1996 and 2003 – over lunch.

Below are extracts from their tasting booklet.

Terroir

The San Leonardo estate is comprised of approximately 270 hectares of forest land designated as a nature reserve and of 30 hectares of vineyards of exclusively red grapes, which are all farmed organically.

Thanks to its position at the gateway to the Alps, San Leonardo is a kind of meeting point for the Mediterranean and Alpine climates. The estate benefits from both the tempering influences of the Ora breezes blowing up from Lake Garda and substantial temperature differentials between day and night, which not only give depth to the grapes' aromatics, but slow the ripening process, so that the harvest begins only in mid-September, and lasts through most of October. This unique enclave, known as the Campi Sarni since Roman times, is characterised by relatively infertile, well-drained chalk and clay soil, and 'mammeloni', river benchlands with sandy sediment that built up in stages through the lateral action of alluvial cones. Sited at a relatively low elevation of 150 metres, the Merlot is planted in gravel-rich soils that were once the bed of a branch of the Adige. Sandier, pH-neutral soils, at elevations of 150-200 metres, host Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and the venerable Carmenère vineyards. All of the vineyards are in well-drained, nutrient-poor soils that yield grapes whose wines boast levels of anthocyanins that are unusually high, and not just for the Trentino.

Today San Leonardo's viticultural philosophy dictates vine-rows that follow the contours of the slopes, in order to capture as much sunlight as possible. Vine densities vary according to the period in which the vineyards were planted and to the training system. Vineyards trained to Guyot and to spurred cordon have 6,600 vines per hectare, and yield a maximum for 60 quintals per hectare, while those trained to the Trentino double pergola are at 1,750 per hectare, which includes the old vines of Carmenère. To yield truly top-quality fruit, this variety needs severe pruning, which limits the crop to no more than 90 quintals per hectare.

Cellar

There is little to be found in the way of ultra-sophisticated, latest-generation equipment at San Leonardo. The required levels of temperature and humidity are maintained by the barricaia's semi-subterranean location, while in the fermentation cellar, at ground level, one sees just cement vats, where the spontaneous fermentations, without any selected yeasts added, take place and the wines spend the first phases of their life. Ceaseless monitoring ensures the correct progress of the fermentations, always kept at low temperatures without the aid of any artificial refrigeration but with just the help of natural ventilation. The macerations last some two weeks, which helps to extract only the finest tannins though the aid of frequent pumpovers carried out every day. This is, then, a winemaking cellar that still displays an exquisitely artisanal character, with not a trace of cold electronics. But it is also true that not a single thing is left to chance. Maturation of the various batches of wine is carried out separately in the large subterranean cellar, in Italian barricaia, where more than 600 barriques of different age, toasting and forest origin are carefully aligned in a spectacular setting enriched by a monastic atmosphere which infuses this place.

Blending, bottling, ageing

The final blends, each with a different proportion of lots reflecting the distinctive characteristics of an individual growing year, are assembled just before bottling. Every single barrel is rigorously tasted by Marchese Carlo and his son Anselmo, Estate Director Luigino Tinelli, and Consultant Carlo Ferrini. The wines are then bottled, using only natural cork, and remain in the ageing cellars for nearly 2 years before being released. A significant reserve of up to 10% of each vintage is kept in the cellar for many additional years, so that the most demanding clients may acquire wines that have reached perfect maturity and can thus be appreciated at their full potential.

The 15 wines are listed in vintage order below but you can change this.

San Leonardo 1986 Vino da Tavola

17

From Campi Sarni in Trentino. Insistent rain in the first twenty days of June, with heavy precipitation during and after flowering. As much as 180 mm of rain fell over twenty days, while the highest average temperature was 25 °C and the lowest 12.8 °C. The summer witnessed a dry period, which continued throughout autumn, so that they were able to postpone the harvest until late October. The period leading up to the harvest saw considerable day-night temperature fluctuations, with a minimum in October of 7 °C and a maximum of 23 °C. Bottles:

27,700; Magnums: 830.

Dark crimson with a ruby rim. Very fine, complex nose. Mellow, all tannins spent, on the palate. Fresh, with acidity starting to dominate fruit, but rewarding. Lightly minty. Very well done for a wine more than 30 years old and only the fifth vintage ever. I look forward to comparing it with the Ch Lynch Bages I am planning to serve this evening. 12.5%

Drink 1994-2014

San Leonardo 1988 Vino da Tavola

17

Vallagarina. San Leonardo's first great vintage, which witnessed heavy rain in May (118 mm) followed by a dry summer when temperatures overall averaged nearly 30 °C. From the third ten days in July until 15 August, the average temperature was 32 °C, which is very high for the area. Picking began on 6 October for Merlot, 15 October for the Cabernet Franc and 23 October for the Cabernet Sauvignon. A crucial factor was the high day-night temperature fluctuation during September, with a minimum of 10.5 °C and maximum of about 26 °C. Marchesi Carlo: 'A great vintage, which has always been close to my heart.' Bottles: 29,700; magnums: 1,270; double imperials: 5. The first Tre Bicchieri vintage. Only three bottles remain at the estate.

Magnum. Direct, spicy and fresh on the nose. This gives the impression of needing food to combat the tannins that still make an impression initially. The acidity is also quite marked – indeed the wine is not unlike a 1988 red bordeaux – but it went extremely well with lightly cooked meat. 12.5%

Drink 2000-2025

San Leonardo 1990 Vino da Tavola

18

Vallagarina. Another outstanding growing year with very little rainfall, totalling only 380 mm from April to October, in comparison with the average of 570 mm. The year also enjoyed a very high number of hours of sunlight (1,407), making it with 1985 one of the two sunniest vintages of the past twenty years in our area. During the harvest period, which ended on 18 October, temperature fluctuations were normal. Bottles: 30,270; magnums: 1,500.

Rich, dense and spicy on the nose with a really Italian kick of freshness and interest on the end (more punchy and refreshing than most red bordeaux). Some balsam notes. Very powerful for a San Leonardo. A few traces of fine tannins remain. Very long. A special bottle with more guts and longevity than many a 1990 red bordeaux. 13%

Drink 2010-2024

San Leonardo 1995 IGT Vallagarina

18

Vallagarina. Weather during the 1995 growing year was normal, with very low precipitation, totalling only 404 mm. The rainiest month was May, with as much as 140 mm, half of this falling in the second ten days of the month. In contrast, the driest month was October, with only 1.7 mm of rain, which fell after harvesting was completed on 18 October. There was another positive note in that October enjoyed fully 150 hours of sunshine, one third more than the average for the previous twenty years. Half bottles: 4,700; bottles: 47,200; magnums: 3,000; double magnums: 150; imperials: 5.

Dark ruby with a pale rim. Strongly mineral nose. Round and fleshy but not at all heavy. Quite a charge of fine tannins still in evidence. More life than many a red bordeaux from this vintage. 13%

Drink 2005-2028

San Leonardo 1996 IGT Vallagarina

19

Flowering was perfect in 1996, with rainfall, hours of sunshine and temperatures all in line with the seasonal average. The only exception was summer, when rainfall was above average and temperatures were lower than in previous years. September was perfect with 33 mm of rain, only half of the average of 66 mm. The harvest, which ended on 19 October, suffered from higher rain in the second ten days of the month. Day-night temperature fluctuations were average. Marchesi Carlo: 'I am particularly proud of this vintage.' Half bottles: 7,050; bottles: 51,200; magnums: 3,000; double magnums: 200; imperials: 12; salmanazars: 12. Magnum. Very dark crimson still. Gorgeous, mellow, complex nose. Beautiful balance of mature fruit. A wine you could almost describe as 'rich' (unlike most vintages of San Leonardo). Stereotypically feminine? A wine of real beauty. Aromatic, fresh, so clean and long. Lovely with food. It was a real joy to taste this magnum. 13%

Drink 2006-2026

San Leonardo 1997 IGT Vallagarina

16.5+

The 1997 vintage, along with 1990 and 1995, was the growing year that saw the least precipitation. There were only 470 mm of rain in total, most of it concentrated in the period from mid June to mid July. Hours of sunshine were within the norm and high in the months of September and October. Temperature fluctuations in the same period were considerable, with a difference of 17 °C between day and night temperatures in September, and 13 °C in October. The Merlot grapes were the first to be harvested, starting on 2 October and continuing until 20 October. There was a total absence of rain in the second ten days of the month and thereafter. Half bottles: 10,000; bottles: 68,085, magnums: 2,300; double magnums: 100; imperials: 10; salmanazars: 10. Very deep crimson. Still extremely youthful with such density that it almost seems unable to communicate much perfume. Clean and fresh but angular and lacking mellifluousness. Long but edgy. 13%

Drink 2015-2030

San Leonardo 1999 IGT Vallagarina

18.5

*Another growing year with very little precipitation, totalling 480 mm from April to October. Rainfall was concentrated particularly in April and the last ten days of August, but the August precipitation did not jeopardise the ripening of the grapes. The months of July and August saw little rain – only 40 mm in August – and very high temperatures with averages of almost 32°C in July. In September there were also considerable temperature fluctuations, especially during the first twenty days of the month. For Merlot grapes, the harvest started on 27 September. Cabernet grapes continued to be picked until 15 October. Half Bottles 3,870; bottles: 71,500; magnums: 4,880; double magnums: 190; imperials: 11; salmanazars: 10. Very dark crimson with a strong mineral note on the nose. Round, mellow fruit on the palate – seriously flattering with real interest and balance. Very complete. Polished tannins with great undertow. Extremely persistent and vibrant. 13%
Drink 2010-2030*

San Leonardo 2000 IGT Vigneti delle Dolomiti

18

*A very dry growing year. Precipitation of only 229 mm from April to October made it the least rainy year since 1983. The flowering period was very favourable, with only 36 mm of rainfall in May and June, followed by normal weather. September was very dry, with almost no precipitation and day-night temperature fluctuations of more than 15 °C. The harvest took place from mid September until early October in ideal conditions. Half bottles: 4,690; bottles: 81,059, magnums: 3,048; double magnums: 199; imperials: 10; salmanazars: 10. Dark crimson. The nose is decidedly lifted with a stony element, somehow. Then there's a deeply fruity undertow expressing considerable ripeness. Big, bold and like a particularly fresh red bordeaux. Claret incarnate, with that stoniness on the finish too. 13%
Drink 2012-2028*

San Leonardo 2001 IGT Vigneti delle Dolomiti

17.5+

The growing year went as expected, with the exception of a fairly rainy period during the first half of September, which did not, however, jeopardise the ripening of the fruit. The flowering period was excellent. The third ten days of May and the whole of June witnessed little rainfall (only 25 mm of rain in June) and an average June temperature of about 20 °C with 46 % humidity. The harvest began on 26 September and ended without any unforeseen difficulties on 15 October. Half bottles 2,330; bottles: 75,750; magnums: 2,986; double magnums: 200; imperials: 10; salmanazars: 10.

Deep ruby with a salty, stony nose. A wine that is clearly based on very ripe fruit that has not yet fully unfurled. Fine tannins are here in abundance in this youthful wine. Long and fresh with a salty finish. 13%
Drink 2015-2030

San Leonardo 2003 IGT Vigneti delle Dolomiti

17

At San Leonardo, as in the rest of Italy, the 2003 growing year saw little rain and, above all, very high temperatures. We need only mention that the average temperatures in June, July and August remained above 24 °C, which together with the lack of precipitation led to early ripening of the fruit. In consequence, picking began a few days earlier than usual on 21 September and continued smoothly to its conclusion on 12 October. Marchesi Carlo: 'A hot, challenging growing year, but thanks to our microclimate and significant work in the vineyards, the result is a beautiful wine nonetheless.' Half bottles: 3,000; bottles: 52,246; magnums: 2,970; double magnums: 200; imperials: 15; salmanazars: 15.

Magnum. Big, ripe and rather bold. This wine from the heatwave vintage doesn't have the subtlety of many other vintages but it has admirable and rather unexpected freshness. Carlo apparently decided to stop de-leafing and performing a green harvest this year to prevent sunburn and overripeness of too small a crop. The Carmenère element seems quite strong in this wine. If I tasted it in isolation I would probably be more impressed, but it doesn't stand up so well in comparison with less challenging vintages. 13%
Drink 2012-2025

San Leonardo 2004 IGT Vigneti delle Dolomiti

To say that the 2004 growing year lacked surprises would be an untruth. The season began with two very rainy months in May and June, when temperatures were below the seasonal average, albeit not by very much. But then there was an incredible transformation from mid July on. The weather stabilised and rising temperatures enabled veraison and ripening to proceed in fine style. September and October enjoyed excellent day-night temperature fluctuations and the fruit was able to ripen marvellously well. The harvest began with the Merlot on 5 October and ended on 23 October when the Carmènere was picked. Half bottles: 5,009; bottles: 58,222, magnums: 3,003; double magnums: 219; imperials: 23; salmanazars: 24.

Dark crimson with a blackish tinge. Riper nose than most. A sweet start and then the wine somehow gives the impression of having had stones macerated in it, but this vintage somehow has less real core and intensity than some others. (The first of the two bottles I tasted seemed a little jammy on the finish.) Minerally and somehow a bit less gloriously mellow than some. 13%

Drink 2015-2030

San Leonardo 2007 IGT Vigneti delle Dolomiti

The 2007 operations began far earlier than usual. April was dry and warm with average temperatures in excess of 17 °C, causing the vegetation phase to begin very early, with flowering starting as early as mid May. The months of June and July saw very little rainfall (around 60 mm), allowing veraison to arrive without any notable health problems for the vines. In August, almost 200 mm of rainfall was concentrated in just a few days and in two distinct periods – the beginning and the end of the month – which, however, did not impact too heavily on the ripening process. The perfect, healthy grapes enabled them to do something they had not done for a while: the differentiated harvesting of Merlot and Cabernet. The harvesting lasted more than a month, and came to an end in early October, with no particular problems to report. Half bottles 2,500; bottles: 59,973, magnums: 3,100; double magnums: 269; imperials: 45; salmanazars: 41; balthazars: 10.

Relatively intense nose with considerable subtlety already. A hint of black pepper and admirable composure. Fresh balsam notes. A ripe base with a lifted overlay. Very smart with great drive and persistence. 13%

Drink 2015-2032

San Leonardo 2010 IGT Vigneti delle Dolomiti

17.5+

Not always does a growing year with beautiful weather mean a quality harvest and not always does a rainy year result in a poor vintage. 2010 gave us a very wet August and September (334 mm) with few hours of sunshine, yet this did not undermine the quality of the grapes. The season started slightly late, with some delay in the flowering which started around 10 June, which then was followed without any particular issues by veraison of Merlot around 20 July. August and September were particularly rainy and resulted in an early harvest, which started with Merlot on 16 September and finished with Carmenère on 30 October. Half bottles 2,500; bottles: 48,314; magnums: 3,300; double magnums: 145; imperials: 40; salmanazars: 30; balthazars 12.

The first vintage with more than 13% on the label. Very bright crimson with a hint of putty on the nose but then mellow, broad fruit on the palate. It really does taste of macerated stones. Still quite tight, it has quite a charge of still-perceptible tannins. Solid, clean and fresh with lots of taut energy. 13.5%

Drink 2020-2035

San Leonardo 2011 IGT Vigneti delle Dolomiti

18

A particularly early start to the season, with flowering around 20 May, thus avoiding the two main rainfalls in June. In fact, during this period, the most important rainfall of the season (150 mm) was concentrated with an average temperature not exceeding 18 °C. This rainy season brought the season into line with normal trends with veraison beginning around 18 July. August and September were dry, with a significant diurnal range which allows for a perfect ripening. The harvest started on 20 September with Merlot and resumed after a short break of a few days to allow the complete ripening of the Cabernets, and ended on 10 October. Half bottles: 2,480; bottles: 55,000, magnums: 3,400; double magnums: 200; imperials: 40; salmanazars: 30; balthazars: 10; melchiors: 1.

Notably dark crimson. The nose hints at warm beeswax. Fine tannins and lots of ripe red-fruit flavours. The construction of this wine is beautiful but it's still fairly embryonic. You would want to serve it with some chewy food if you opened a bottle now. Extraordinary density of fully ripe fruit but masses of energy so it certainly isn't heavy. Great balance. 13.5%

Drink 2020-2038

San Leonardo 2013 IGT Vigneti delle Dolomiti

17++

2013 can be considered as one of the most regular in recent years. In April and May, we had quite abundant precipitation (430 mm of rain in two months), but this did not have a negative effect on the vegetation. From June onwards, summer began with sporadic rains, but these arrived at the most suitable moments and therefore helped the vine to overcome any water stress. Budding started slightly behind the standard with blooming around 10 June and the veraison in early August. September provided a good diurnal range, which favoured the aromatic development of the grapes. The harvest started on 25 September and ended without any particular issues on 15 October.

Half bottles: 2,500; bottles: 58,824; magnums: 3,400; double magnums: 300; imperials: 60; salmanazars: 30; balthazars: 12; melchiors: 2.

Smudgy ruby with a very youthful, tight nose. This tastes as though it's still doing exercises in the baby gym. Still very taut and relatively light. Extremely racy and bone dry but so tight it's really quite difficult to read the flavour at this early stage. 13%

Drink 2024-2038

