



San Leonardo

December 30, 2014

When I first started learning about Italian wine and its legendary icons, there was another wine that loomed as large as Sassicaia in my imagination. That wine was San Leonardo from Tenuta San Leonardo in Trentino. As my education continued, however, I found that my initial impression of its perceived notoriety had been somewhat inflated. While Sassicaia enjoys worldwide name recognition, San Leonardo's status is limited to a knowing group of wine connoisseurs few of whom live outside Italy.

This is where my fascination with the Bordeaux blend made among the jagged peaks of the Dolomites began. Sassicaia and San Leonardo seem like brothers separated in childhood. Both are Italian incarnations of a French wine philosophy practiced expertly by consulting enologist Giacomo Tachis. Both are born to great families of Italian nobility (two families that are related by blood). Sassicaia saw its first commercial release in 1968 and San Leonardo in 1982 and both wielded everlasting influence on what was, at the time, a nascent wine culture. Both are bigger than their territorial roots: Sassicaia brought fame and fortune to Bolgheri in coastal Tuscany (not the other way around). San Leonardo put the mountainous Trentino region on Italy's enological map. Despite their shared genealogy, these brothers would develop distinctly diverging personalities. One is from the beach and the other from the mountains. One basks in the spotlight and the other shies away. My curiosity lay with the quiet one.

Marchese Carlo Guerrieri Gonzaga and his son Anselmo generously organized a complete vertical tasting of the 22 vintages of San Leonardo created since 1982. A tasting of this magnitude had never been prepared for an American audience and I tasted from the third to last bottle of 1985 housed in the historic cellars today. The samples were transported one week in advance so they could settle and tasted at the family residence in Rome, just off Piazza Navona.

From a broad perspective, what struck me most was the steady stylistic consistency of the wines over the course of three decades. The wines never veer far from a central set of core values that included elegance, finesse and freshness. The blend has consisted of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot and a grape later identified as Carménère, all vinified and aged separately. Of the estate's 300 hectares, 25 are vineyards located 150 meters above sea level. Some vines are planted with the traditional Pergola Trentino overhead trellis, but the largest plot sees Guyot and spurred cordon-trained, high-density rows. Sandy and gravel-based soils characterize this location on the left bank of the Adige River about 45 kilometers north of Verona. For those who have traveled this route, Tenuta San Leonardo is located in that dreamlike sliver of geography where the flat plains of the Veneto rise to the dramatic Dolomites at the southern perimeter of Trentino. It is a stunning site because your entire perception of a horizontal landscape is suddenly flipped over into a vertical one within just a few kilometers.





That impressive stylistic consistency endures despite winemaker changes. Carlo Guerrieri Gonzaga studied winemaking in Bordeaux and Switzerland and relied on his close friends Piero Antinori, Mario Incisa della Rocchetta and Giacomo Tachis (a bit later in 1985) for advice when he first endeavored to make wine in the early 1980s. The blueprint for San Leonardo remains the same, boasting many of the ideals shared by this visionary group of Italian vintners. Starting with the 1999 vintage, another Tuscan protagonist was introduced. Consulting enologist Carlo Ferrini remains to this day.

It is my strong impression that the continued presence of another man named Luigi Tinelli also explains San Leonardo's stylistic coherency. The estate director, "Luigini" (as he is affectionately called by father and son Guerrieri Gonzaga) has been with the wine since the beginning. He was a mere 20-years-old when the 1982 vintage was produced. A quiet, intense, detail-oriented and proud man (with a personality that very much reflects the wine itself), Luigini was present during my tasting. His laser-like memory was jogged with each successive vintage and he was able to offer anecdotes and vintage details as I tasted through the flight.

San Leonardo is one of the great wines of Italy. Its production numbers have grown from 9,700 bottles in 1982 to 34,000 in 1991 and up to 95,000 bottles today. The entire production reaches 220,000 bottles, of which 10% are exported to the United States market.

—Monica Larner

Year	Wine Name	Rating	Maturity
 2008  Tenuta San Leonardo San Leonardo		92	Young
 2007  Tenuta San Leonardo San Leonardo		94+	Early
 2006  Tenuta San Leonardo San Leonardo		95	Early
 2005  Tenuta San Leonardo San Leonardo		88	Early
 2004  Tenuta San Leonardo San Leonardo		97	Early
 2003  Tenuta San Leonardo San Leonardo		91	Early
 2001  Tenuta San Leonardo San Leonardo		95	Early
 2000  Tenuta San Leonardo San Leonardo		92	Early
 1999  Tenuta San Leonardo San Leonardo		93	Early
 1997  Tenuta San Leonardo San Leonardo		95+	Early
 1996  Tenuta San Leonardo San Leonardo		92	Early
 1995  Tenuta San Leonardo San Leonardo		95	Early
 1994  Tenuta San Leonardo San Leonardo		93	Early
 1993  Tenuta San Leonardo San Leonardo		93	Early
 1991  Tenuta San Leonardo San Leonardo		92	Early
 1990  Tenuta San Leonardo San Leonardo		96	Early
 1988  Tenuta San Leonardo San Leonardo		84?	Early
 1987  Tenuta San Leonardo San Leonardo		87	Early
 1986  Tenuta San Leonardo San Leonardo		91	Early
 1985  Tenuta San Leonardo San Leonardo		88	Early
 1983  Tenuta San Leonardo San Leonardo		85	Early
 1982  Tenuta San Leonardo San Leonardo		87	Early

Reviewer: Monica Larner

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	Rating	
San Leonardo 2008	92	Drink 2017- 2030

To be released in 2015, the 2008 San Leonardo is a wine in its infancy. The nose is immediately redolent of dark cherry, blackberry, leather, tobacco, mint and eucalyptus leaf. You will also appreciate the floral tones of pressed rose and almond blossom that lift from the glass. The harvest schedule played out on time with Carmenère coming in at the end of September and Cabernets Franc and Sauvignon towards the beginning of October. The 2008 vintage is especially marked by a duality of floral and menthol notes that rise from the glass with brilliant intensity. The 2008 vintage needs ten year or more to find its proper footing.

	Rating	
San Leonardo 2007	94+	Drink 2015 – 2035

My feeling is that the 2007 San Leonardo has yet to shows its mettle or true grit. There has been a long-standing competition between the 2006 and 2007 vintages in many parts of Italy including Brunello and Barolo. But the mountainous vineyards of Trentino may actually find a brighter future in 2007 compared to the highly-acclaimed 2006 vintage. I say that because only here do diurnal (night versus daytime temperature shifts) play such a fundamental role in the future development of wine. In Trentino, 2007 was characterized by warner summer temperatures for darker concentration and fresh autumnal nights for developing aromatic intensity. I believe that mountain wines will show greater results down the road in 2007 compared to other parts of Italy.

	Rating	
San Leonardo 2006	95	Drink 2015 - 2038

From yet another great vintage, the 2006 San Leonardo exudes elegance and sophistication. A slightly cooler summer season helped to cement the wine's aromatic complexity and the fresh sense of acidity that lends so much energy and vitality to this wine. This is a great vintage that has only begun to find its true voice. It needs more time in the cellar to complete its evolution. Dark fruit nuances with thick concentration and velvety tannins segue to drying mineral notes and more cherry brightness. I'd suggest another ten years of cellar aging. But you could also opt to drink the wine sooner with prolonged decanting (of four hours or more).

San Leonardo 2005Rating
88

Drink 2014- 2025

I liked the 2005 San Leonardo, but I was not completely won over. I had issues with some of the burnt spice and toasted nut aromas that seem detached from the greater base of black fruit that forms the base of this wine. The personality on display is bold and big thanks to the higher temperatures that characterized the summer months in 2005. Black cherry and jammy blackberry are backed by chewing tobacco and spice. The mouthfeel denotes a touch of grittiness with thick tannins that still need time to unwind. The wine's textural identity will soften with time but that rawness to the tannins may never go away. Try aging this San Leonardo for another ten years.

San Leonardo 2004Rating
97

Drink 2015 - 2035

It's impossible not to fall in love with the 2004 San Leonardo. This may well be the greatest wine made by the estate (equal to the delightful 1990) thanks to the infinite, ever-shifting complexity on display. It's hard to know where to start: Bright fruit aromas segue to spice and leather and then segue to cola and balsam herb. Blue flower and button mushroom also make brief, but meaningful appearances. This iconic vintage started with a wet spring and moved forward to a dry, warm harvest period. Give the wine another ten years to find its footing. If you serve it in the near term, allow three hours for decanting.

San Leonardo 2003Rating
91

Drink 2014- 2024

After the disappointing 2002 vintage (that was not produced), the 2003 San Leonardo shows a greater degree of harmony and balance that I may not have initially expected. As you will remember, 2003 saw soaring, scorching temperatures that wreaked havoc on vineyards across Europe. But cool mountain breezes and deep diurnal shifts have helped to preserve the integrity of fruit on display here. The mouthfeel does not boast the same depth as San Leonardo's greatest vintages, but the bouquet shows immediate fruit, spice and grilled herbs. It must be said that this wine does not lack in acidity and this is an important point. The Guerrieri Gonzaga family opted to harvest a bit early and this proved an excellent decision for maintaining freshness. It's ready to drink now but could also hold a few more years.

San Leonardo 2001Rating
95

Drink 2015 - 2035

The lovely 2001 San Leonardo is a wine in its adolescence phase. Its pedigree is cemented, but its future is still open to chance. This was an excellent vintage that saw pre-harvest rains and warm, dry weather once the fruit had reached optimal ripeness. With this vintage, you begin to get some of the younger aromas that distinguish this great red wine from the far north of Italy. Red cherry and blackberry are followed by chocolate, spice and moist leather. The wine is more immediate, modern and "international" with soft tannins and thick extraction. It opens with a bang and follows through to the end of the palate with the same generous intensity. I'd suggest parking this wine in your cellar for up to ten years or more.

San Leonardo 2000Rating
92

Drink 2014 - 2028

The 2000 San Leonardo comes from a relatively uneventful vintage and displays classic characteristics of the wine, without extreme high or low points. In fact, this vintage will be remembered for its even-keeled nature and abundant fruit generosity. The wine still tastes young, despite its 15 years in the bottle. It opens to plush cherry, blackberry, Indian spice and tobacco. There's a point of strong firmness to the tannins that suggest it needs a few more years in the bottle. Harvest was finished on time by mid-October. By the 2000 vintage, Tenuta San Leonardo had reached its current average production of 95,000 bottles per year.

San Leonardo 1999Rating
93

Drink 2013 - 2028

The 1999 San Leonardo marks the first vintage made by consulting oenologist Carlo Ferrini who took over after Giacomo Tachis. The 1998 vintage of San Leonardo was not produced. The wine is full and generous but doesn't reach the same dizzying complexity as 1990, 1995 and 1997. The vintage saw low rainfall, but the growing cycle remained on track from flowering to harvest. This edition is soft and yielding from the start with dark fruit, leather, spice and cola. It's a big picture wine painted in broad brush strokes. It doesn't have the fine detail of other vintages but it speaks well of the San Leonardo philosophy. It still has room for further evolution.

San Leonardo 1997Rating
95+

Drink 2014 - 2030

The 1997 San Leonardo comes from a landmark vintage that was characterized by warm temperatures and very little rainfall. In fact, 1997, 1995 and 1990 are similar in terms of the general lack of rain. Of course, that dryness helped to contribute to greater concentration and intensity of fruit. This is a powerful and gorgeous expression that bursts open with dark fruit aromas, spice, leather, cola, tar, licorice, wet earth, porcino mushroom and grilled herbs. Of particular beauty are the delicate floral tones of violet and rose that linger softly in the background. The wine is full and generous with excellent tannin management. There are no sharp edges here. Instead, the wine is round and soft on the palate. This is a true standout that will stand the test of time. It should be decanted up to three hours before serving.

San Leonardo 1996Rating
92

Drink 2014 - 2020

From a cool vintage, the 1996 San Leonardo is a wine of minute details and budding complexity. The quality of fruit shines bright and the wine boasts beautifully balanced acidity that adds energy and a great sense of vertical lift or buoyancy. Small fruit nuances are embellished by more substantial layers of tobacco, cola, mint and dusty mineral. The wine evolves slowly in the glass, producing many enticing aromatic layers that peel back slowly one at a time. It is ready for immediate consumption and although it is drinking wonderfully right now, it seems near the end of its evolution.

San Leonardo 1995	Rating 95	Drink 2014 - 2028
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From another very sunny and dry vintage, the 1995 San Leonardo is an excellent wine with enormous power, intensity and determination. This edition shows muscle and brawn with dark cherry and blackberry followed by spice, leather and tobacco. The wine shows bold structure and a compact build with tannins that are firm and structured. San Leonardo has not completed its evolution and still offers youthful points of bright fruit. It can withstand a longer decanting period of three hours or more and will continue to age well for more years to come.

San Leonardo 1994	Rating 93	Drink 2014 - 2022
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The 1994 San Leonardo is born from a classic vintage that awarded good results to those who took care to harvest at peak ripeness. The harvest came early forcing farmers to work intensely in a shorter amount of time. The fruit purity is proudly on display with pretty tones of dried cherry, red currant, chopped mint, cola, toasted almond and Indian spice. In the mouth, the wine shows polished tannins with very focused mineral definition on the close. It drinks beautifully right now and should continue to hold. This vintage shows a lot of territory identity and evokes the clay, sand and gravel soils that characterize this part of northern Italy near the Adige river bed.

San Leonardo 1993	Rating 93	Drink 2014 - 2024
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The 1992 vintage was not produced, and the 1993 San Leonardo is immensely floral and feminine in personality. This is an excellent vintage that still shows some potential for short cellar aging. Harvest came slightly earlier than average, before autumn rains would pose a threat to the fruit. The bouquet here is fresh and bright with dried violets and delicate rose followed by tar, licorice and cola. In 1993, the Guerrieri Gonzaga family started an ambitious replanting effort to improve their farming methods and vineyards. The wine could fade fast, so opt for a shorter (one hour) decanting period.

San Leonardo 1991	Rating 92	Drink 2014 - 2019
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An encouraging surprise, the 1991 San Leonardo is elegant and immediate with a very promising evolutionary trajectory. By this vintage, the winery had reached production numbers of some 34,000 bottles produced per year, up from 9,700 in 1982. Despite that growth, this harvest saw reduced yields because of strong rains during both flowering and harvest. Despite those difficulties, this wine is fundamentally elegant and poised in character. Pretty menthol and licorice notes add to the overall length and persistency. It's ready to drink now after a short decanting.

San Leonardo 1990Rating
96

Drink 2014 - 2025

The standout 1990 San Leonardo is a wine of towering achievement and aspiration. It is an illuminating experience. It vaunts its beauty and pedigree from the outset with gorgeous dark fruit that is followed by nutmeg, clove, bresaola and dark mineral. The growing season saw very little rain and this led to increased concentration and intensity of fruit. It also counted many more sunlight hours (tabbed in at 1,407 hours) that makes this, along with 1985, the estate's sunniest year. The wine is ready to drink now and shows the potential to evolve further. It has the muscle to endure a longer decanting period of three hours or more.

San Leonardo 1988Rating
84?

Drink 2014 - 2017

The 1988 San Leonardo is billed as one of the greatest editions of this celebrated wine. I was disappointed however by aldehydic or oxidized notes of dried apple skin or candied orange peel that emerged quickly from the bouquet. Growing conditions were close to ideal with warm summer temperatures to push ripening forward and steep shifts between day and nighttime temperatures during the harvest at the end of September and throughout October. This wine shows the hallmarks of a good vintage in terms of concentration and color appearance. Sadly, the bouquet was off on the two bottles I sampled from. It may well show better in magnums. The 1989 vintage of San Leonardo was not produced because of heavy rains through much of the growing season.

San Leonardo 1987Rating
87

Drink 2014 - 2017

The 1987 San Leonardo is slightly thinner in the mouth and shows a lesser degree of aromatic intensity. The fall season saw lots of rainfall and dark cloud cover, especially in October, that made the harvest very challenging especially for late-ripening varieties. The wine opens to delicate tones of pressed rose, ash, forest berry and spice. There's an elegant tightness to the tannins with dusty mineral notes that also characterize the streamlined mouthfeel. In appearance, this San Leonardo exhibits moderate to dark concentration and fullness. Decant one hour before serving and drink this wine in the next few years.

San Leonardo 1986Rating
91

Drink 2014 - 2022

The 1986 San Leonardo offers many pleasant surprises. This is not a wine that should be underestimated and indeed it showed the best results of these first five vintages despite the challenging growing conditions. The year saw lots of rain in the spring and a dry summer that led to a late harvest. The vintage was characterized by sharp diurnal shifts immediately before the harvest and this has inevitably assured the wine's longevity. The aromatic intensity is remarkable with pristine tones of dried cherry and cassis. The wine also shows more extract and fullness in the mouth. It winds down with crushed mineral, ash, cured meat and spice.

San Leonardo 1985Rating
88

Drink 2014 - 2020

The disappointing 1984 vintage was not produced, but the 1985 San Leonardo represents the first standout year for this historic wine. You can taste the warm sunshine of the vintage thirty years after the fact. It opens to a richer, more immediate style with impressive fruit integrity and plush layers of dried cherry, sweet plum, tobacco and spice box. The nose on the bottle I tasted was not impeccable in terms of cleanliness, although the wine performed well on all other levels. The mouthfeel is fuller with polished tannins and a touch of lingering sweetness that comes as a nice surprise. The 1985 vintage is fast reaching the end of its drinking window. After my tasting, only two bottles of the 1985 vintage remain in the cellars today.

San Leonardo 1983Rating
85

Drink 2014 - 2018

The vintage is in decline but the 1983 San Leonardo still shows a beating pulse. This is a fragile and delicate wine that could show signs of disintegration if left to aerate for too much time. But in that encouraging window of time (from one to two hours after decanting) the wine is beautifully redolent of evolved notes of balsam herb, Teriyaki, cured meat, crushed mineral and licorice. The aromas definitely reveal the true age of the wine, yet they also show a tangible level of sophistication and pedigree. In 1983, the Guerrieri Gonzaga family ripped out cement vats in the basement of their monastery-winery to make room for a Bordeaux style barrique cellar room. The cellars had previously been cemented off by German command forces who inhabited the villa during World War II.

San Leonardo 1982Rating
87

Drink 2014 - 2018

The inaugural 1982 San Leonardo opens to a transparent, garnet-ruby color with veins of dark amber that give the wine inner luminosity. The color intensity is preserved very nicely as is the aromatic integrity of the bouquet. You no longer get a clear vision of the fruit, but you are awarded a bouquet that is elegant and graceful with accents of cassis, licorice, dried lavender, cola, balsam herb and menthol. The tannins are relaxed to the point of being ultra polished and finessed. They flow over the palate like shimmering silk. Because the wine has held together this long, I'd venture that it can go another five years, maybe more. The bottle I tasted from sat still for one week before being served so all the sediment would settle. I'd suggest decanting this wine not more than one hour before serving. It evolves quickly in the glass to reveal some oxidative tones if kept too long.