

San Leonardo 1982-2006, Trentino's first growth

22 Aug 2012 by Jancis Robinson

I find it difficult to think of any wine anywhere that has changed as little over the last 30 years as San Leonardo, surely the most successful Bordeaux blend of northern Italy.

Verticals of even Bordeaux's first growths since 1982 tend to show the influence of different management regimes and the whim of winemaking fashion. And any similar range of most California and Australian wines, even the most iconic, tends show even greater contrasts between, particularly, the various phases of enthusiasm for oak, for alcohol, for imperceptible tannins, for low acidity and so on.

But San Leonardo seems to have hit its stride very early on in its life, which began in a modest way with the trial 1982 vintage and, even more miraculously, to have subsequently remained immune to the winds of fashion.

If I had to think of one possible other Italian wine it is most like, it would be [Sassicaia](#), so it came as no surprise when I read, after having tasted every vintage ever made up to the most recently released, the 2006, that the man who created this wine, Marchese Carlo Guerrieri Gonzaga, claims that it is 'based particularly on a long and fruitful collaboration with Mario Incisa della Rocchetta, who on his estate of San Guido in Tuscany [where Sassicaia is grown] had initiated Carlo into all of the secrets of his Bordeaux blend, becoming to all effects and purposes Carlo's "oenological godfather".'

So much faith did Incisa della Rocchetta have in Guerrieri Gonzaga's project that he suggested he take on his famous advisor-oenologist Giacomo Tachis as early as 1984. Tachis handed over to Carlo Ferrini only when he wanted to reduce his own workload in 1999 (the 1999 does seem rather different from other vintages but this may be a coincidence). The major difference between San Leonardo and Sassicaia is clearly one of climate. San Leonardo is made in the shadow of the snow-capped Dolomites.

You can read the background to this and much else (including the story of the noble family Guerrieri Gonzaga and how they got their names, in 1445 and 1506 respectively) in this [in-house account](#). But the bare bones are that this extensive property on the banks of the Adige river just east of Lake Garda in the southern tip of Trentino came into their family at the end of the 19th century via Carlo's grandmother. Carlo's father Anselmo rationalised the extensive estate to a certain extent but it was the scientifically trained Carlo who decided to concentrate on wine production and who introduced the Bordeaux grapes, the two Cabernets, Merlot and some Carmenère. Twenty-five of the estate's 300 ha are planted with vines, many on fairly steep hillsides of sandy gravel at an average altitude of 150m. Fermentation in the cellars that date back to the 15th century is in cement before ageing in barriques.



Although this tasting was the second time I was lucky enough to taste a number of different vintages, I have never visited the property - but to judge from the photographs and description in the background document, it is hugely atmospheric, and nowadays enjoys a team completely focused on top-quality wine production. (Some lesser reds and now a Sauvignon Blanc are also made.)

My favourite photograph in the booklet that accompanied all 39 bottles sent for me to taste (the Marchese apologised profusely that they had no back-up of the 1991) is of a mature gentleman in perhaps the most ravishing bit of tailoring I have ever clapped eyes on, sitting looking delightfully comfortable on the seat of an antique tractor. From the accompanying notes, I would guess it is the star of his collection of notable early-20th-century tractors, 'the celebrated semi-diesel Landini'.

But what of the wines? In this complete run of vintages from 1982 to 2006 (no San Leonardo was made in 1984, 1989, 1992, 1998 and 2002) there was the most remarkable consistency. Even if 1982 is now a bit past it, the 1994 a bit too weak to enjoy, and vintages 2001, 2005 and 2006 still a bit too young to think of broaching, they all share the most admirable blend of subtlety, balance, finesse and (positive) restraint. Even the alcohol levels show more consistency than I have seen in a similar range of vintages. Okay, they nudge up from 13 to 13.5% with the three youngest wines but they had been 13% since 1990.

These are wines with the most complex bouquets, showing just the sort of harmony you wish all classed-growth bordeaux had. None is a heavyweight, so I would not recommend them to someone raised on, say, Napa Valley Cabernet, but they are hugely digestible wines for drinking with food that is equally well-mannered and not too insistent.

[San Leonardo 1982 Vino da Tavola dei Campi Sarni](#) 16 Drink 1990-2008

Pale ruby with a rusty rim. Very '1970s bordeaux' on the nose - quite leafy with the merest hint of decay. Some sweetness on the nose. Light and fresh and vibrant. Fruit is fading so the acidity is coming to the fore. Not as plump as a typical 1982 Bordeaux classed growth but refreshing and well balanced. A little like a Chinon. 12.5%

San Leonardo 1983 Vino da Tavola di Vallagarina 17 Drink 1995-2015

Mid healthy ruby. Slightly acrid nose. But beefier than the 1982. Rich fruit with some delicacy. Dancing and what Michael Broadbent would call 'high toned' but very pleasant. Racy and at its elegant peak. Lively and far from heavy. Very fine, polished and appetising. Just very slightly dry on the finish. 12%

San Leonardo 1985 Vino da Tavola dei Campi Sarni 16.5 Drink 1995-2015

Very healthy, lustrous ruby that's not quite as dense as the 1983. More complex nose than the two earlier vintages but with rather spicier oak notes. Rich but with the sweetness and acidity less married. Quite a presence in the mouth for a 12% wine. Acidity starting to poke through the fruit. Slightly aggressive finish. Was there a new oak regime this year? Not that subtle. 12%

San Leonardo 1986 Vino da Tavola dei Campi Sarni 17.5 Drink 2000-2018

Bright glowing dark ruby. Very sweet, almost gamey, animal nose. Hint of candy. Maybe even well-hung pheasant. Quite marked acidity and still some tannin. This is still very lively indeed. Bravo! Vigorous and complex. Dry finish. 12.5%

San Leonardo 1987 Vino da Tavola dei Campi Sarni 17.5 Drink 2000-2018

Pale crimson. Very clear and bright. Reminds me a little of the 1983 with its hint of acid. Bitter cherries. More Italianate than some vintages with a slight dustiness on the finish. Mineral notes. Piercing acidity. Very bright. Challenging rather than flattering. Impressive persistence. Hint of oyster shells. Still very lively. 12.5%

San Leonardo 1988 Vino da Tavola dei Campi Sarni 18 Drink 2005-2022

Deep red with no hint of blue but no hint of orange either - good, firm colour. Rich and dense and concentrated. Very savoury and intense. Still very vigorous and youthful. Very complete. Yes there is acidity but there is also so much fruit! Long. Vibrant. Well done! 12.5%

San Leonardo 1990 Vino da Tavola di Vallagarina 18 Drink 2000-2016

Healthy dark crimson. Lovely mature bouquet - 'cooler' and more fragrant than a typical classed-growth 1990 bordeaux. Very aromatic and slightly leafy with marked acidity. Perhaps just the tiniest bit too lean for perfection. But a bewitching bottle for those seeking refreshment. Fine tannins only just present. Cool as a mountain stream... 13%

San Leonardo 1991 Vino da Tavola di Vallagarina 17 Drink 1998-2013

Mature dark brick colour. Evolved nose with hints of tar and the very slightest hint of decay. The fruit is fading and there's a certain dustiness on the finish. Lightly minty. Bracing at this stage. Light to medium bodied but with great integrity and interest. 13%

San Leonardo 1993 Vino da Tavola di Vallagarina 18 Drink 2002-2016

(No 1992 was made.) Dark blackish ruby. Lovely supple fruit in the prime of life on the mid palate but the nose suggests a whiff of TCA and it's a little dry on the end so I opened the second bottle. The second bottle was not desperately forthcoming but did smell a little cleaner, with a little hazelnut aroma. Lovely spread of mature claret flavours across the

palate. This is a lovely wine, even if it's not chock full of ripe fruit or sweetness. Great balance and energy. Tastes as though this was quite a dry year. 13%

San Leonardo 1994 Vino da Tavola di Vallagarina 16.5 Drink 2002-2010

Dark ruby with a pale brick rim. Rather dry, dusty fruit with the acidity to the fore. Ageing. Dry finish. The fruit is not that intense - just a bit spindly. 13%

San Leonardo 1995 IGT Vallagarina 18.5 Drink 2006-2020

Healthy dark ruby. Much fruitier and more youthful than the early 1990s vintages. Intense ripe fruit with strong liquorice notes and still a bit of tannin evidence. There is more than enough fruit here to counterbalance the lively acidity. Relatively plump. 13%

San Leonardo 1996 IGT Vallagarina 18 Drink 2005-2020

Very dark, blackish ruby. Sweet ripe cassis aromas. Some light spiciness on the nose. Very mellow with attractively mellow tannins and just the right amount of fresh fruit. Between light and medium bodied. Very refreshing and beautifully balanced. Persistent. The epitome of claret in build. 13%

San Leonardo 1997 IGT Vallagarina 17 Drink 2005-2016

Maturing ruby. Smells more evolved than the super-vital 1996. Hedonistic and flattering on the nose, then the acidity is starting to poke through the fruit on the palate. Really quite evolved with a little dryness and heat on the finish. 13%

San Leonardo 1999 IGT Vallagarina 19 Drink 2008-2024

Dark healthy-looking ruby. Rather different from previous vintages: the fruit is less sweet and frank; there is a (far from unpleasant) savoury, almost leathery, overlay. A new cooper perhaps? Very big and round and complete. Tastes almost like a (fine) Bolgheri wine rather than one grown in the mountains. Lots of pleasure but still lots of potential too. Surely this is more than 13% alcohol? I like that graphite topnote. Very appetising. Nothing heavy about this complex whole. 13%

San Leonardo 2000 IGT Vigneti delle Dolomiti 17.5 Drink 2008-2018

Dark ruby with pale rim. Complex, lifted nose. Lighter in weight than the 1999 but very appetising. Quite marked acidity. But very true and pure. Dusty tannins that are still a little dry but the fruit is not that intense. 13%

San Leonardo 2001 IGT Vigneti delle Dolomiti 17 Drink 2015-2025

Ageing crimson. Still very youthful and unformed. Suddenly we are into an era of young wine... The acidity and tannins are still quite prominent and the finish still dry. All the ingredients are here for a long life but I would choose to hold on to this a bit longer before drinking. 13%

San Leonardo 2003 IGT Vigneti delle Dolomiti 17.5 Drink 2009-2017

Mid ruby with some age at the rim. Mild, warm, already complex nose with graphite and blackberries. Relatively lightweight with the tannins quite evolved but no sign of any heatwave characteristics. But not one of the most intense or longest-lasting vintages. Freshness on the finish. 13%

San Leonardo 2004 IGT Vigneti delle Dolomiti 19 Drink 2010-2024

Dark crimson (much, much darker and bluer than the 2003). Very interesting, complex, rather lush amalgam of tar and super-ripe black fruit. Lovely velvety texture and not at all unlike a first-class bordeaux, although more evolved than most 2004 bordeaux of my

acquaintance - perhaps like a particularly lifted, fine 2000? There are tannins here but very supple ones. Lip-smacking balance and interest. Persistent. Most impressive balance. 13.5%

San Leonardo 2005 IGT Vigneti delle Dolomiti 17 Drink 2015-2024

Very dark, blackish ruby. Warm and open and more diffuse on the nose than the more focused 2004. Polished tannins and with the acidity a little more obvious and less integrated. A flattering wine but just a little awkward and jagged at the moment. A bit of alcohol on the finish. Not much development on the nose yet. A hint of char. 13.5%

San Leonardo 2006 IGT Vigneti delle Dolomiti 18 Drink 2016-2030

Very dark, lustrous ruby. Mild but sophisticated nose. Lightly warm and toasty but no hint of oak. Very juicy and well balanced. Quite delicate with some fine grained tannins in evidence. Not a massive blockbuster but super-digestible. Lovely young wine. But needs cellaring. And needs a drinker not looking for mass. 13.5%