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Tuscany's Donne in Quota – women in high places



These four women are producing some of Chianti Classico's most exciting wines at high elevations. Above, left to right, Serena Coccia, Susanna Grassi, Sofia Ruhne and Sophie Conte.

It was my Italian colleague Giampaolo Gravina who came up with the idea to put Susanna Grassi, Serena Coccia, Sofia Ruhne and Sophie Conte in one room. Gravina organised a tasting with their wines right after COVID allowed for it, calling the tasting 'Donne in Quota'. When, in turn, I tasted their wines on a separate occasion, I was so impressed by their individuality and complexity that I asked these fab four to present their Sangiovese-based Chianti Classicos at an event in London last year.

Since then, I've visited each of them at their wineries, further confirming my impressions. Let me introduce you to these four *donne in quota*.

The tasting notes accompanying each profile are listed in the order in which they were presented by the producers.

Sofia Ruhne, Terreno

After a career in shipping, Sofia Ruhne's father acquired this estate in 1988, including the beautiful 16th-century villa, high up in the hills of Greve at the end of a narrow, winding road. The family moved there when Ruhne was just seven years old, allowing her to become familiar with every aspect of the estate from a young age.

In 1998 her father secured the consultancy of Federico Staderini, a star oenologist known for his subtle way of working and elegant wines, as evidenced by Poggio di Sotto, his most famous client, among others. (You can read more about him in [Italy's new Pinot Noir crack corps.](#))



When Ruhne began taking over the winemaking in 2011, she had already begun to perceive stylistic differences between Terreno's three vineyards. She decided not only to convert the vineyards to organics, but also to bottle the produce of the estate's

oldest vines, planted in 1980, separately. This effort led to ridicule from her male staff, who began to refer to the tank of this wine in the cellar as *A Sofia*, believing that the wine was simply too light in style to please the international market. She proved them wrong, labelled the wine *Asofia* as a rebuke and consequently overhauled the entire team.

Ruhne's stylistic quest continued. 'I wanted to have an additional style of Sangiovese [as opposed to Greve] and I also was looking for a component of acidity for the other wines', she told me when I visited her last February. She started to look at Lamole, where the vineyards, at elevations up to 700 m (2,300 ft), are some of Chianti Classico's highest, but it is near impossible to acquire land here, as it extends to barely 80 ha (198 acres).



View from Terreno towards Montefioralle
Ruhne ended up in Montefioralle, the newly minted UGA (*unità geografica aggiuntiva*, or communal designation) in the hills to the south

I never found the Montefioralle UGA entirely credible because it seemed to have been stamped out of the ground in a ridiculously short time, but Ruhne taught me better. Driving from Terreno to the Lignallo vineyard at 400 m (1,312 ft), the sweeping views showed a contiguous band of vineyards across the valley, suggesting a clear consistency in the UGA's creation. 'I was strongly in favour of [UGA Montefioralle's] creation', Ruhne said. (It comes as no surprise that she is now the president of the association of Montefioralle producers.) She found a beautiful vineyard in the commune, at 500 m in the parish of San Piero di Sillano, where the vines grow on *pietraforte*, a hard, compressed sandstone interspersed with greyish-white calcareous sand. 'I didn't know if it would be a better quality [than Lamole], but I had this gut feeling', Ruhne explained.



Terreno's Sillano vineyard

In 2017, a very hot vintage, she harvested mid September rather than mid October, which is the norm, and was surprised that the grapes had high levels of acidity combined with a modest 13.5% of potential alcohol. 'I felt this was unique for 2017.' She abandoned the idea of using the grapes from this vineyard as a blending component, and bottled it on its own instead, first as Sillano Riserva, then, from 2018 onwards, as a Gran Selezione.

In the vineyards she applies the Simonit & Sirch method of 'soft pruning', while every row is identified by different coloured tape and assigned to the same person year after year. 'It makes them aware of the effect of their work but also [encourages] them to take responsibility', Ruhne explained.

The total size of Terreno's vineyard area is 20 ha (49 acres), which is not enormous, but Ruhne doesn't shy away from complex situations: she spontaneously ferments every parcel of each vineyard separately, further dividing the batches by clone, in



Sofia Ruhne and Giacomo Fioravanti

food-grade plastic bins. All wines are aged in large oak casks followed by at least 12 months in bottle.

In the cellar she works with Giacomo Fioravanti ('I wanted another person in the cellar to challenge my ideas'), who came to Terreno in 2018 after having worked for 10 years at Isole e Olena. Fioravanti is also an agronomist and Ruhne wanted him to be there for a new project in which she grafted a vineyard planted with Merlot over to Sangiovese. 'The effect is mind blowing', she said. 'If you replant a vineyard you need to wait at least four years, but when grafting over you have fruit a year later.'

Right after COVID, in 2021 Staderini called it a day at Terreno. He felt he couldn't teach Ruhne anything more.

Terreno, Sillano 2017 Chianti Classico

Deep and still-youthful ruby. A firm, focused nose of red fruit with hardly, if any, tertiary aromas coming through. Just a hint of tobacco. Saline notes over cherry liqueur, raspberry coulis and a hint of nutmeg. Quite seductive. Deep, layered and still so youthful. Juicy, cool and contained, with fine tannins. (WS) **17 ++**

Terreno, Sillano Riserva 2018 Chianti Classico

'2017 was a hot vintage and the vines were stressed. This had an impact on the budding in 2018, which was irregular. The maturation was irregular as well, and you could almost feel the vines' frustration with last year. Irregular flowering, poor fruit set and very low yields [two tonneaux in total].' The wine was aged in third-use 600-litre

tonneaux.

Beautiful, lustrous ruby. Complex cherry with cigar-box notes, a touch of vanilla and the hallmark mineral, saline Terreno notes. Still a little compact – like it is younger than it is – but with aeration this becomes more and more perfumed. Suave, cool red fruit and lots of juice and with fine, gripping tannins. The 15% is hardly noticeable. Cracking tannins. (WS) **17.5**

Terreno, Sillano Gran Selezione 2019 Chianti Classico

‘Overall, 2019 is one of the best vintages, because there were so many different components falling in line: the vines had a good budding, good flowering, and there was a good amount of water in the ground due to the winter rains. And this makes a huge difference. And we had no tragedies of hail, drought, heat, and [there was] slow maturation of the grapes due to large day and night temperature differences. [2019 delivered an] exceptionally generous yield.’ Aged in large Stockinger casks.

Dark ruby. Strikingly different compared with the 2018. This is more perfumed and with a complex oak note underneath. Raspberry and cherry. Still very compact and only at the beginning of its evolution. Finely textured tannins framing a juicy palate. Elegant yet with plenty of substance. Beautifully contained alcoholic content. Has all the parts, but still needs time for it to properly integrate. But this is a stunner in the making. (WS) **18**

Terreno, Sillano Gran Selezione 2020 Chianti Classico

‘A little frost in April, a cool spring but with a good water supply. And then came COVID. I really like 2020. Less production, but the vines have this fluctuation and they won’t produce the same amount every year, and this felt like a correction on 2019.’

Deep crimson. Cool, enticing, perfumed raspberry fruit with a hint of leather. Cool, gentle red-fruit palate, with the perfect dose of integrated acidity and very elegant, almost medium-bodied. The sandy tannins add grip to the finish. Burgundian in style. (WS) **17 ++**

Serena Coccia, Podere Castellinuzza

A stone's throw away from Greve is Lamole, where Chianti Classico's highest vineyards rise over 700 m in elevation. The grapes of one of the oldest of these vineyards, the vines trained in albarello, end up in one of Bibi Graetz's eye-wateringly expensive red wines. A meandering, steep and very narrow road leads to the hamlet of Castellinuzza, where the tiny Podere Castellinuzza estate is located at 500 m (1,640 ft) in elevation. The estate's 3.5 ha (8.6 acres) of steep vineyards deliver barely 10,000 bottles and are such a challenge to work that they are classified as *vigneti storici ed eroici*, historic and heroic vineyards, in Lamole's official vineyard register.



Today Serena Coccia together with her 87-year-old father, who has more than 70 (!) vintages under his belt, runs Podere Castellinuzza. 'My grandfather bought this place after his family had worked the land as peasants for generations', Serena told me as we walked down the sloping

vineyard where in the distance her father was pruning the vines. 'No one wanted to buy here because the work was too hard.' The sprightly 87-year year old made it look like a walk in the park. 'Luckily, my family had a mule.'

The end of the *mezzadria* (sharecropping) system in the 1960s allowed peasants to buy plots of land, but many turned their backs on generations of hardship and moved to the city. 'My grandfather bought it knowing that his adult sons would help work the land. They also bought 7 ha of woods, which were part of the sale.'

While the countryside was slowly drained of the workforce, Serena pointed out that no one from Lamole left. Of the area's 80 ha in total, 40 ha (99 acres) is owned by

Lamole di Lamole, which is part of the huge Santa Margherita group, of Pinot



Grigio fame, while the rest remains in the hands of families who have always lived here.

Recently, global warming and the search for high-elevation vineyards have made Lamole's vineyards prized possessions, and obtaining any land here is complicated because the owners do not want to sell. Yet there are a couple of new

entries, notably Querciabella, which was able to rent rather than buy 8 ha of terraced vineyards, and shooting stars Istine and Carleone, both in Radda, although it is unclear if they rent vineyards or buy grapes.

Coccia joined her father relatively late, having pursued a career in accountancy first. Once she had returned to the family fold in Lamole, she made a couple of radical changes. 'It wasn't always easy because my father is from a different generation, but he had only daughters', she said, smiling. 'My father used to make only one wine because that was the tradition here.' She decided to separate the estate's three different plots, respectively 50, 60 and well over 80 years old.

At first her father was against the idea of vinifying them separately because he wasn't sure he would be able to do it. Ever the accountant, Serena made a spreadsheet with each plot separated by harvest time and assigned a tank. 'When we finally racked off the wines, they really were all different, and this helped to convince my father, who was astonished.'

Their watershed moment was 2014. Until then, the wettest vintage on record had been written off by the Italian wine press before the grapes were even picked. 'This vintage was like a magnifying glass over our plots', Serena said. In the centre of one of their oldest plots there were some beautiful bunches and they decided to make this vineyard the source of their Riserva. As with all Castellinuzza wines, it sees only concrete.

While we walked back to the cellar, Coccia's father waved to us, then returned to his pruning. 'My father has always stuck to *doppio capovolto* [a double arched cane rather than branches tied horizontally], also called *archetto chiantigiano*. According to him it allows for a better spread of bunches and results in looser bunches less susceptible to botrytis, and better ripening as the exposure of the vineyards is north-north-west', she says. 'We are lucky, because we are the lowest point of Lamole [at 500 m elevation]) and, due to the exposure, it is a very cool spot – as cool as at 700 m.'



In spite of its tiny size, Lamole was elevated to UGA due to the relative consistency of its terroir. 'There is a certain style', Serena pointed out, 'and due to Lamole's macigno soils [a greyish crumbly sandstone] it is pretty much consistent throughout. But people are also part of the terroir and I hope that newcomers will maintain the Lamole style.'

Podere Castellinuzza 2020 Chianti Classico

Lustrous ruby with orange tinges. Super-distinct nose of sour cherry and cranberry, with lots of savoury, mineral notes. Great mineral, saline impact on the palate, which displays suave cherry fruit. Long, fine, gravelly tannins. Bags of character.

17 ++

Podere Castellinuzza 2021 Chianti Classico

Certified organic (ICEA).

Lustrous deep ruby. A nose with bags of minerals and stones and hints of liquorice over mulberry and cherry, but more savoury than fruity. Iron notes. Juicy, savoury cherry fruit, with fine, gravelly tannins gripping the fruit, but this is still very young. Takes its time to open up. This one seems to be for the long haul. Slow, aromatic finish. (WS)**17 +**

Podere Castellinuzza, Riserva 2020 Chianti Classico

Lustrous mid ruby with orange tinges. Like an amplified version of the 2020 Chianti Classico 'normale'. Stony, savoury nose with brooding red fruit and hints of brackish seawater and leather. Needs lots of time to open up. Liquorice again. Supple yet still a little embryonic and charged with firm tannins. A real slow burner of a wine. (WS) **17**

Podere Castellinuzza, Riserva 2021 Chianti Classico

Cask sample. Lustrous deep ruby. Firm nose with concentrated fruit, but not open by far. Finely perfumed, balsamic garden-herb note. Changes all the time in the glass. That hint of liquorice again. Suave fruit palate that still needs to unfurl and with coating tannins. Perfectly balanced, while the tannins need more time. Rich in tannins that are almost aromatic. (WS) **17.5**

Podere Castellinuzza, Vecchie Vigne Alberelli Lamole Gran Selezione 2018 Chianti Classico

This is the first vintage they started to label the wine Gran Selezione. From a 0.5-ha vineyard planted ad albarello, or bush vines. In 2016 they began to bottle the fruit from this vineyard separately and they were totally struck by how distinct the wine turned out to be. Aged in large oak cask of 10 hl. Fewer than 1,200 bottles produced – ‘it is all that we have’.

Lustrous mid ruby with orange tinges. Stunning nose of cherry and raspberry fruit with iodine notes and a hint of eucalyptus and oak. Suave red fruit with a hint of oak and with fine, gravelly tannins. Very long, minerally finish. Needs at least another year in bottle. (WS) **17 ++**

Podere Castellinuzza, Vecchie Vigne Alberelli Lamole Gran Selezione 2019 Chianti Classico

Second year produced.

Lustrous ruby. Beautiful, minerally, saline nose with hints of eucalyptus and oak and a layer of subdued red fruit. Liquorice. Lush yet subdued palate sprinkled with minerally, stony notes and firm, tactile tannins. I would wait a couple of years before opening this super-original wine. Endlessly long. (WS) **18**



Susanna Grassi, I Fabbri

The I Fabbri estate is also in Lamole, but in Casole, which is higher up from Castellinuzza. Since the 1600s the estate has been in the Grassi family, but it wasn't until 2000, at the age of 38, that Susanna Grassi took over. Her father had

trained as a nuclear engineer and began working for France's nuclear programme in the 1950s; Grassi spent part of her childhood in Aix-en-Provence.

The family returned to Florence in the early 1970s, after Grassi's father had inherited the estate, but combining the running of a wine estate with his daily work as a nuclear engineer proved too tiring and he soon gave up and rented out the vineyards. 'At that time wines were sold in bulk and wine from Lamole was highly prized for its perfume and elegance', Susanna told me. Subsequently the family moved to Brussels, where Grassi's father became responsible for the Department of Regenerative Biomass of what was then called the EC (European Communities).

For sheer practical reasons Grassi returned to Italy to study economics in Venice. 'From when I was a child it had always been my dream to work with wine, but that dream stayed locked in an external box', Susanna told me last February. Once she had her degree she went in a totally different direction and became a swimwear designer for Italian luxury brand La Perla.

It was a nudge from a friend from university days, who had moved to the United States and fulfilled his dream of becoming a wine importer, that unlocked that box. The friend wanted to buy wine from Grassi's estate but, because the vineyards were rented out, she couldn't supply him. Instead she helped him set up a portfolio of Chianti Classico wines. 'This gave me a big insight into the world of wine trade, which is very different from running an estate', she pointed out.

Dabbling in the wine trade triggered the wish to restart the family estate. ‘It took a couple of years to get the land back and then I threw myself into it.’ Despite having no formal training in either viticulture or winemaking, Grassi set out to re-establish the I Fabbri name, determined to produce wine from the vineyard’s fruit that would express Lamole characteristics.

Those characteristics – their freshness, perfume and minerality – became clearly apparent in 2002, during the inaugural *Festa di Vino di Lamole*, a wine festival organised by the commune of Greve in Chianti (to which Lamole administratively belongs), in order to promote this isolated area.

At that time the only wineries that were bottling wine were Castelli del Grevepesa, a large co-op based in neighbouring San Casciano that Grassi’s grandfather had helped to found, Lamole di Lamole and the freshly minted I Fabbri estate. ‘The Festa di Vino di Lamole gave a mental push, because from that moment on people started to think of bottling their own wine’, Grassi said. But at the beginning of 2008 the majority of producers were merely bottling their *sfuso* (bulk wine). Élevage and ageing was still a thing they had to learn.’

All along Grassi strongly believed she could make it work, though now she admits making many errors along the way. ‘But the experience was wonderful!’ A little bit of luck also played a role. She found experienced hands in Marcello, the son of her grandfather’s *fattore*, a feudal term for the person who runs the estate in absence of the proprietor. ‘He knew every stone in the areas and he helped with tending the vines. Then arrived Gentj from Albania without papers, but we helped him get them.’ Marcello and Gentj, who was the same age as Marcello’s son, had an immediate understanding. ‘With them the estate came to life’, Grassi told me. After Marcello retired, Abri, a cousin of Gentj, started to work at the estate.

I Fabbri’s oenological consultant is Marco Chellini, who has roots in the region. ‘He is the interpreter of my idea of Lamole’, Grassi said. ‘My first bottled wine was a Riserva [a wine that gets additional years of ageing]. In those days the market demanded structured, concentrated wines and I needed to sell. But over the years I “arrived” at Lamole, producing wines from high elevation and vinified in concrete tanks. For me, Lamole is about the aroma of small red fruit, like wild strawberry and forest raspberry.’

Not settling for an easy life, Grassi manages 8 ha (20 acres) at 550–650 m (1,800–2,130 ft), divided among four vineyards: Pian del Doccio, Le Terrazze, Terrato and Poggio a l’Olmo. Tending vineyards in Lamole is very costly: the vineyards are on narrow terraces, making mechanisation impossible and posing logistical challenges that multiply the working hours by a great deal.



Luckily the grapes ripen at different times. ‘I remember 2008, a great vintage with great grapes. Normally we harvest all the plots in five to six days. But in this case, it took a month because we were able to wait for each individual lot to ripen to perfection.’ It happened again

Susanna Grassi in one of I Fabbri’s terraced vineyards in 2013 and 2016, two outstanding vintages in Chianti Classico.

When I mentioned the Donne in Quota project Fabbri told me, ‘it is a beautiful project, because I do it with my colleagues and friends. We all tend four very different estates and hence four different stories and we differ in age. But there is no sense of competition.’

I Fabbri, Terra di Lamole 2020 Chianti Classico

Certified organic (QC).

Just mid ruby. Slow to open up, with hints of cranberry, raspberry and white pepper. Super-elegant palate of red fruit, with sandy tannins and nervy, long acidity. Very fresh finish. Ageworthy. (WS) **17**

I Fabbri, Riserva 2020 Chianti Classico

Certified organic (QC).

Lustrous mid ruby. Deep, perfumed cherry and raspberry nose with a hint of black pepper. Still quite tight on the palate, with cranberry and raspberry fruit framed by firm but fine tannins. Really transparent but closes up on the finish. Great ageing potential. (WS) **17.5**

Sophie Conte, Tregole

At 36 years old, Sophie Conte is the youngest of the Donne in Quota, yet she has almost a decade of vintages under her belt. When I met her last February she was limping a little while she took me into the vineyard because of a fractured toe caused by her other passion, rock climbing. Shouldn't she stay off her foot? I asked her. 'That is exactly what my GP advised but they cannot make me do that', she replied, laughing.



Her strong character was instrumental in getting Tregole off the ground in 2014. At that point her family, who bought the estate in 1998, had come to a crossroads due to the sudden death of her father.

Her parents came to Tregole by chance. Her father, an architect, and her mother, an art restorer, were looking to buy a small place

in Tuscany, when they were offered a property hidden at 500 m in a valley with wide views of woods and several large vineyards flanking the slopes on the opposite side of the valley. The silence and purity are as rare as they are intense even for Tuscany. Although the price was higher than he had in mind, her father, whose greatest desire was to live somewhere without neighbours, agreed to the purchase.

The place came with vineyards planted in the 1950s and her father and mother renovated both the gorgeous farmstead as well as the vineyards. They sold the grapes to the likes of Antinori and Cecchi, and a sizeable portion was turned into house wine by her father, who aged it, as was the fashion of the times, in barriques.

Conte herself never even considered taking over the estate. After graduation she travelled in Australia but returned after a couple of months due to lack of funds. Back in Florence she decided to do a Master's in marketing and management of wine estates, the first sign that blood is thicker than water. But while working in the marketing department of San Felice, a large producer in Castelnuovo Berardenga,

she experienced first-hand how labour-intensive wine production is and vowed to never run an estate herself.

Her father's death in 2014 became the catalyst, as her mother told her she would have to either take over the running of the estate or she would have to sell. Conte had very little time to ponder, and oenologist Stefano Porcinai encouraged her to take over Tregole, promising he would help her. He is now her consultant oenologist.

Tregole consists of 4 ha (10 acres) in five plots and, except for 0.6 ha (1.5 acres) of Merlot planted by Conte's father in 2005, Sangiovese reigns supreme with the oldest vines going back to the 1950s and which Conte considers a precious DNA source for Tregole when replanting vines. Soils consist of galestro and alberese (another sort of limestone) interspersed with calcareous clay veins. This complex composition changes from one row of vines to the next.

In her tiny cellar ('I don't need more space; here I can do everything by myself') Conte tries to interfere only when strictly necessary. 'I aim to make a wine with freshness and perfume that reflects this place', she explained. Anything that would put too big a stamp on it is avoided, so out went the barriques and tonneaux. Conte ferments in concrete and ages her wines in two Austrian oak casks, which have a much subtler impact on the wine than the small French oak barrels.

I knew I was onto something when a few years ago I tasted Tregole's Chianti Classico Riserva from the warm 2015 vintage and again the straight Chianti Classico from the equally warm 2017 vintage. With 2022, an even more torrid and testing year, Conte did the hat-trick again with her Chianti Classico *normale*, a wine that shows fantastic balance and freshness. Conte's huge talent and fearlessness come through in any of her wines. In a recent interview she did confess that the only thing she is frightened of is climate change and whether it will have a negative impact on the elegance and freshness she pursues in her high-elevation vineyards. Only time will tell.

Tregole 2022 Chianti Classico

Bottled 28 January 2024. Certified organic (ICEA).

Deep, lustrous ruby. Deep, open and inviting cherry nose with a hint of exotic spice and a suggestion of eucalyptus. Juicy, sappy cherry, with crunchy tannins. Fills out the palate. Fantastic balance and freshness. (WS) **17.5**

Tregole 2020 Chianti Classico

Lustrous mid ruby. Classic Chianti Classico with cool, full, perfumed cherry and with the typical Tregole exotic spice notes and a hint of pencil lead. Succulent sour-cherry and raspberry fruit, with fine but firm, slightly drying tannins – ‘I was still crushing the grapes, now I only destem’. And yet the fruit has such depth, without being heavy, that this will age gracefully. (WS) **17**

Tregole 2016 Chianti Classico

Dark lustrous ruby with brick-stone rim. Notes of tar, cherry and liquorice mingle with hints of herb. While, at first, there seemed to be an oxidised note, it went away with aeration. Still firm. Beautiful lightness of touch yet plenty of length and depth and lots of freshness. (WS) **17**

Tregole, Riserva 2020 Chianti Classico

Beautiful, lustrous deep crimson. Deep cherry with hints of orange, eucalyptus, exotic spice and a touch of oak. Underneath, there are vibrant mineral notes and crumbly tannins. Amazing balance and freshness. (WS) **17.5**

Tregole, Gran Selezione 2018 Chianti Classico

Very wet at the end of September. Conte waited to harvest after there had been 10 whole days without rain. But the three solid days of rain in September did have an impact. In some vineyards, the maturation of the grapes slowed down, and there was one case of a vineyard with a little botrytis.

Lustrous ruby. This has just been opened, after the first bottle showed TCA, while the previous wines were all opened hours ago. So these wines need to be decanted before service. Still very tight and compact but subdued, perfumed raspberry and blood orange, and hints of wet stone. Has a certain coolness to it. Just a touch of tobacco leaf. Savoury, saline-tasting tannins and supple fruit that is still a little closed. Lots of class. (WS) **17.5**

Tregole, Riserva 2012 Chianti Classico

30 months in barriques and a blend of all vineyards. Bottled in 2015.

Deep ruby with narrow orange rim. At first, notes of figs and the eucalyptus is there again. Lush, suave palate with plenty of freshness and real bite on the finish.

Beautifully sculpted, coating tannins on the finish. (WS) **17 ++**

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