



Tommaso Cavalli, son of a famous father, breeder of champion horses, and now a designer winemaker

A Passion for Wine

“Wine is my baby,” says **Tommaso Cavalli** about his deep involvement with wine production at his vineyards in Tuscany. Set in a picturesque estate of 70 hectares of woods, olive groves and meadows, the vineyard is also home to his successful stud farm. Tommaso is the eldest son of fashion designer, Roberto Cavalli whose name is synonymous with a super-premium vodka, yet he insists that he is a wine person and that wine is his passion. **Brinda Gill** interviewed him when he visited Pune

The inevitable opening question: how did it feel growing up as the son of a famous fashion designer?

I am proud of my father and all that he does. He has immense talent, style and creativity which is not just restricted to fashion. He has inherent good taste. He is a benchmark for us. But I followed my heart rather than my father’s footsteps or fashion. I worked at a stud farm in Florida in the late 1980s. When I returned to Italy in 1989 I mentioned to my father that I would like to breed champions at the family farm at Panzano in Chianti, which my father had purchased in the 1970s, and it was there that I had learnt to ride. My father, who has always encouraged us to pursue our dreams, told me to go ahead.

How did you decide to switch track to wine production?

Much after the stud farm was operating successfully, I showed the property to the famous winemaker Carlo Ferrini who has several award-winning wines to his credit. He said the land had great potential for producing quality grapes. Ferrini encouraged me to plant five varieties of wine grapes – Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Petit Verdot and Alicante – which we did in 2000-2001. It was a reversal of sorts, for when I set up the stud farm the old Sangiovese vines on the land made way for paddocks and now here I was replanting vines! We now have four hectares of vineyards in Panzano. It was a challenge, planting French grape varieties in Chianti Classico country in Tuscany. But I wanted to achieve the elegance of French wines on Italian soil. About the same time, we also planted the same varieties in three-and-a-half hectares in the area surrounding my father’s home in Florence, which is 30 kms away from Panzano. He lives just five minutes from the city centre. So it is a unique vineyard as it is set in typical Tuscan countryside, yet is just minutes away from the city.

How do vineyards in two different locations work out?

Both the vineyards are located in hilly areas although the altitude at Panzano is about 350 to 400 metres above sea level, whereas the altitude at Florence is about 50 to 100 metres above sea level and the climate is warmer. Both vineyards are southfacing, and have about 6,700 vines planted per hectare. However, the soil at Panzano is gravelly and textured, which results in wines with good acidity. On the other hand the soil at Florence is clayey which gives a deep colour and longevity to the wine. The different characteristics of the same grapes grown in two different terroirs, balance the wines. The

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Each vintage of the offerings from Tommaso’s wine cellars carries a different designer label

winery is located at Panzano. We are very fortunate to have an old 11th century church on our property. We use the underground cellars of this church to mature the wine. The temperature and humidity conditions are perfect.

Can you tell us about the style of wines you produce?

We presently have two wine varieties, Cavalli Tenuta Degli Dei and Cavalli Le Redini. (Le Redini, meaning reins, refers to the horses.) In previous years the Cavalli Degli Dei was a blend of all five grape varieties grown at our vineyards. However, in 2008 we decided to produce our second wine. So the 2008 Cavalli Tenuta Degli Dei is made of about 40% Cabernet Sauvignon, 30% Cabernet Franc and about 30% Petit Verdot. Petit Verdot is fantastic in a blend. It gives wine a lot of character. Le Redini is a blend of 90% Merlot and 10% Alicante. Both the wines are very elegant, very fresh and fruity.

How is the production worked out?

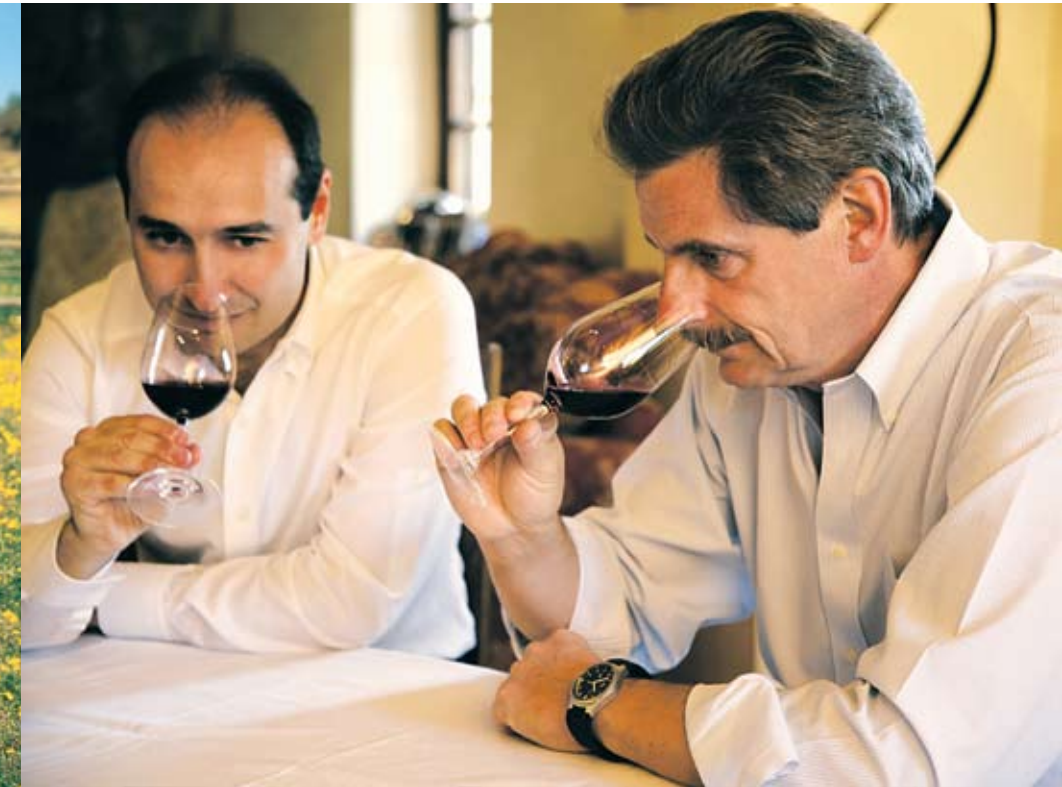
Each of the five grape varieties from both



Tommaso enjoying the fruits of his labour with his iconic fashion designer father, Roberto Cavalli



The stud farm at Panzani in Chianti where Tommaso first started growing vines



Tommaso and expert winemaker, Carlo Ferrini, ensuring that the wine meets their exacting standards

vineyards is picked, vinified, and aged separately. This is maturation in micro lots. The harvest in Florence takes place slightly before the Panzano harvest. The grapes are transported in small refrigerated trucks – to prevent natural fermentation from setting in – to the winery at Panzano. Once at the winery, the grapes are carefully examined twice; first imperfect bunches are removed, and then all leaves and stems are removed. The selected grapes drop by gravity-feed into temperature-controlled steel fermentation tanks.

The vinification takes about 20 days during which the cap (layer of skin and seeds at the top) is gently pushed down many times every day for optimal extraction of flavour and colour. Then, once again through gravity, the wine flows to the hall below into French oak barrels for malolactic fermentation. It is matured in barrels for 14 months. After the wine has matured it is time for the blend.

After tasting each of the wines, we decide on the blend. It is a magical moment for us, bringing together different grape varieties from two

The gold vine leaf motif on the bottletop is a tribute to Tommaso's grandfather, Giuseppe Rossi

vineyards. During tasting, one can feel the personality of each grape. After careful consideration, bearing in mind that vintages vary from year to year, the wines are blended to offer a truly unique quality wine. Once the blend is ready, the wine is aged in oak tonneaux for another four months. After that it is bottle-aged for 12 months. This process is followed for both wine varietals. This means that the vintage of 2007 is in the market in 2010. Our first vintage was in 2004, when we produced just a few thousand bottles that were distributed only in Tuscany in November 2007. The wines were launched in the international market in 2008, with vintage 2005.

Does the Cavalli name make a difference?

Well, the Cavalli label will either make people buy the wine, or hesitate about buying it. My father is my best client and loves the wine. He has given his name to the bottle and each vintage features patterns from his collection on the two side stripes of the label. So the label of every vintage has a different look – from leopard print to zebra print, butterfly print and roses. The logo of the winery, a vine leaf motif, is a detail from a painting by the artist Giuseppe Rossi, my

father's father.

All I can say is that the wine holds deep respect for the vineyards, for the earth. It is a premium wine with its own personality and character. Good wine is made in the vineyards rather than in the cellar. There are many people investing in vineyards, but for producing good wine you need knowledge and passion. Our wine maker Ferrini is very talented; he has a Midas touch. And our aim is to always maintain quality so we reduce the yield of our grapes to about one kilo per vine and keep our wine production restricted. It was 24,000 bottles in 2006, 34,000 bottles in 2007, and 28,000 bottles in 2008.

What is the alcohol percentage of the wines?

The alcohol percentage is about 13% due to the warm summer, but thanks to the acidity the alcohol is balanced. If you simply look at the label you may be led to believe that the alcohol is too high, but the wine is well-balanced due to good acidity.

Are you pleased with your wines?

Ours is a niche product, quality oriented, of limited quantity.

Ours is not an industry, it is artisanal. We are getting better every year. And each year as the vines get older, they produce better quality grapes. I want to produce wines that are a pleasure to drink. I am obsessed by quality. There is lots of good wine in the market, so ours has to stand out.

Our wine has been appreciated by international wine critics.

What are your thoughts about the Indian market?

The Indian market is important for us. It is one of the fastest growing markets for luxury products. Indians are travelling a lot and are aware of trends, fashion and the growing wine culture. Our wine pairs well with Indian food as your food is a bit spicy and our wines have good acidity. We are very interested in marking our presence in the Indian market.

What are your personal thoughts about wine?

Wine is the most democratic product in the world as it depends on personal tastes and circumstances of tasting. A quality wine is beautiful. However, there are no absolutes in wine; it is always changing and in sync with nature. ♦

Cavalli wines are imported by Aspri Wines and Spirits

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