

THE SANGIOVESE FILES

After 30 years of research, Castello Banfi – and the world – can now savour the fruit of their labour.

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YOU know you're in for a treat when a wine brand uncorks its flagship wine and brings down its resident chef from Italy to design a meal to go with it. That was the scenario at Senja Restaurant when Castello Banfi's wine dinner played out over three days late last year. Chef Domenico Francone took diners on an Italian culinary journey through five paired courses.

Dinner began with Castello Banfi's Vigne Regali Principessa Gavia Gavi 2013. "This is an everyday drinking wine that is perfect for this weather," says Guillaume Blanchard, Castello Banfi's regional manager for South Asia. Made entirely from Cortese grapes, the wine was clean and crisp, and finished with lemon notes. This was beautifully matched with a Seabass Cannolo with Celery and Rock Melon; the wine

enhanced the seafood's delicate flavour.

The next pairing, San Angelo Pinot Grigio Toscana IGT 2012 and potato and lobster *agnolotti* with tarragon pesto, also fared well. Upon swirling the Pinot Grigio gently, it released a honeyed bouquet, with ripe pear, peach and apple. A sip revealed fruity, citrusy flavours that tempered the creaminess of the pesto sauce.

Castello Banfi's Chianti Classico Riserva 2011 had a rich bouquet of plums, black and red cherries, and a hint of leather that translated to its taste. A blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Canaiolo Nero and Sangiovese, the deep ruby red liquid displayed well-balanced tannins and a slight acidity. Served with a plate of house-made tagliatelle with fresh winter vegetables and creamy Pecorino cheese sauce, the wine's acidity balanced the creaminess of the sauce, but slightly overpowered its delicate flavour.

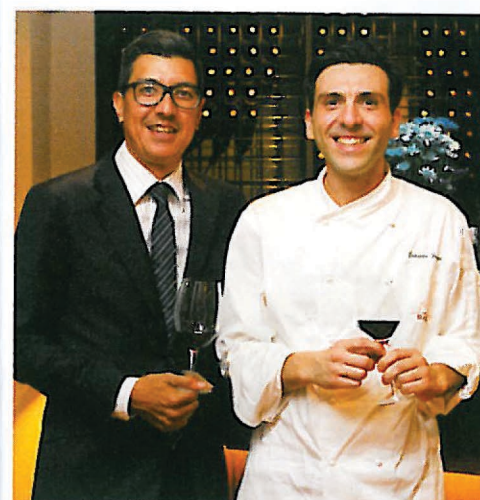
The highlights of the evening then arrived: the Brunello di Montalcino 2006 and the estate bottling of Poggio All' Oro Brunello di Montalcino Riserva 2004. A showcase of Castello Banfi's prized Sangiovese, both full-bodied wines were elegant and complex, with soft tannins. On the palate, the 2006 wine exhibited berries, dried flowers and a lingering hint of spice, while the 2004 was rich with plums and dried fruit. Both wines were excellent matches for the Black Angus tenderloin served with sautéed spinach, fresh Porcinis and Brunello di Montalcino sauce.

Our meal was capped with the Vigne Regali Rosa Regale DOCG 2013 and a milk chocolate *crocante* (brittle) with caramel biscuit ice cream – a stunning match!

THE GENESIS

For those unacquainted with the family-owned Italian brand, Castello Banfi is acclaimed for its research on the Sangiovese varietal, not to mention its outstanding wines. The research has had a hand in elevating the Brunello di Montalcino globally and in the creation of the Super Tuscan wines. Castello Banfi has also been named "International Winery of the Year" and "Italian Winery of the Year" for an unprecedented four and nine times respectively, at Vinitaly.

And to think, Castello Banfi was founded only some 30 years ago, when the Marianis, a family of American wine merchants, bought the



From top: Guillaume Blanchard and chef Domenico Francone.

As always, dessert was a crowd pleaser.

Banfi's line-up of wines for the night.



Montalcino property in Tuscany in 1983.

Guillaume explains, "Sangiovese is one of the most important varietals grown in Tuscany. This is the single component used in Brunello [di Montalcino]. The Sangiovese has many different clones, and each will express different characters when grown in different soil compositions, climatic conditions, gradients. Identifying the perfect clone to suit your location allows you to create a better wine."

The Mariani family, who also own Banfi Vintners in the US, began studying their Italian estate. They discovered more than 600 Sangiovese clones, a much broader family than typical French varietals. This variability is even reflected in the names given to the grape: within Tuscany alone, it is called Sangiovese in Chianti, Brunello in Montalcino, Prugnolo Gentile in Montepulciano, and Morellino in Maremma.

CASTELLO BANFI'S GRIPES (or grapes)

Back then, there had been not been much research on Sangiovese. Plus, many of the studies conducted were focused on finding higher-yielding clones. Going against the grain, the Mariani family's research was aimed at clone selection, in an effort to improve grape quality.

From the 600 clones, 15 were selected for planting. According to a Banfi brochure: "Because experience has shown that the strength of Sangiovese lies in its diversity, we have chosen to maintain polyclonal vineyards, in which a combination of the 15 selected clones are planted to obtain Sangiovese's complementary characteristics..."

The Mariani family also unearthed the full potential of their land with what they call the "constellation of single vineyards".

"This means we have many different 'vineyards' in one location, each with a different sub-soil. We have 29 *terroirs* on our estate, with different soils such as clay, chalk, limestone and sand, and vineyards with different altitudes and micro-climates," says Guillaume.

Castello Banfi began planting its Sangiovese grapes with optimal soils, a move said to create a wine with more complexity. But it found that the Brunello obtained from clonal selection demanded a longer time in the wood. The winery began maturing its Brunello in French oak, and developed a unique process for preparing barriques that involved longer seasoning of the wood staves and a slower-than-usual toasting period.

In 1997, it toasted the first result of this meticulous labour: Brunello di Montalcino Poggio alle Mura. Today, it continues to make exceptional wines. 🍷

Castello Banfi wines are imported and distributed in Malaysia by AsiaEuro Wines and Spirits (Tel: 03-7883 2828).