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## Le Macchiole's Flagship Messorio Reveals the Graceful Side of Merlot

A vertical tasting of this Bolgheri super Tuscan, back to 2001, shows off Messorio's ageability and promising future



Single-variety reds rule the cellar at Le Macchiole, led by Messorio, a 100 percent Merlot.  
(Maurizio Gjivovich)

By [Bruce Sanderson](#)  
Jun 10, 2021

Le Macchiole, founded by Eugenio Campolmi and Cinzia Merli in 1983, was among the first wave of estates established in Bolgheri following the success of [Tenuta San Guido's Sassicaia](#). Though the couple began with Sangiovese, soon after the

vineyards were replanted to French varieties, initially Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Syrah, eventually replacing the Cabernet Sauvignon with Cabernet Franc.

Merli assumed management of [Le Macchiole](#) after [Campolmi died in 2002](#). Le Macchiole's emphasis is on single-variety wines: the Paleo cuvée is Cabernet Franc, Messorio is Merlot and Scio showcases Syrah. The range is completed by Bolgheri Rosso, a blend of Merlot (50 percent), Cabernet Sauvignon (20 percent), Cabernet Franc (20 percent) and Syrah (10 percent) and Paleo Bianco, a white blend that has shifted from mostly Sauvignon Blanc to 80 percent Chardonnay and 20 percent Sauvignon Blanc for the 2019 vintage.

Over the years, Messorio emerged as Le Macchiole's flagship wine, earning the highest ratings and prices (the [2004](#) earned a 100-point rating on release). The debut vintage was 1994, and Messorio has been made every year with the exception of 1996. I recently tasted eight vintages spanning two decades of Messorio, from 2001 to 2018, in an exclusive virtual meeting with Merli and winemaker Luca Rettondini, who came on board in 2008.

"Messorio" is the local dialect for a scythe used to harvest wheat, an important crop in Bolgheri a generation ago. Merli grew up in Bibbona, just north of Bolgheri, and recalls driving to Castagneto Carducci with her father as a young girl, passing fields of wheat and olives on either side of the Strada Bolgherese.

Bolgheri and the Tuscan Coast is the home of several pure manifestations of Merlot. [Masseto](#) is the most famous, debuting in 1987 and earning a reputation during the vintages of the 1990s that culminated in a perfect rating on release for its 2001 vintage. [Tua Rita's](#) Redigaffi and most recently Baffonero from [Rocca di Frassinello](#) are two other celebrated Merlots from Maremma.

Rather than aim for power, richness and concentration, Le Macchiole's goal for Messorio is finesse and elegance. This is no easy feat, given Bolgheri's benevolent climate and recent warmer growing seasons.

"Merlot is one of the best varieties in Bolgheri, not easy to grow, but the second important grape in terms of acreage after Cabernet Sauvignon," explains Merli. "In the first vintages, there was very little quantity. The idea was to have a different interpretation of this variety, with less body and more elegance." Of the eight vintages we tasted, the 2010 and 2016 best embodied the style Merli and Rettondini are aiming for.

The debut 1994 and early vintages of Messorio came from the Contessine vineyard, one of Le Macchiole's first parcels. As other parcels were planted—Puntone in 1994 and Vignone in 1999—these three sites were the source of the Merlot for Messorio until the 2008 vintage. Contessine was replanted to Cabernet Franc and white varieties in 2009 and is now part of the Casa Nuova vineyard.

Since the 2008 vintage, Merlot from the Puntone and Vignone parcels is the backbone of Messorio. According to Merli, Vignone contributes body and Puntone freshness. A new vineyard called Ulivino was planted in Bibbona, just north of Bolgheri, in 2016. It will become part of the Messorio blend with the 2019 vintage, adding density to the mix.

The other major change has been moving from small, 112-liter barrels and 100 percent new oak to 228-liter Burgundy *pieces* from cooper François Frères with lighter toasting. Rettondini feels the Burgundy barrels complement the fruit without overpowering it. Additionally, the new oak was reduced from 100 percent to 70 to 75 percent. Conical cement fermentation vats were introduced in 2015 to maintain verticality, fruit and freshness.

We tasted the wines non-blind from oldest to youngest, beginning with the 2001 vintage, a cool year whose crop was reduced 30 percent as a result of frost during the first week of September. At the time, Rettondini says the work in the vineyards and cellar emphasized ripeness and concentration. **Le Macchiole Toscana Messorio 2001** was aged in new 110-liter barrels. It reveals a lovely bouquet and flavors of ripe black cherry, cedar, iron and a touch of herbs, backed by dense, slightly dry tannins (93 points, non-blind). "The yields were very low because we were looking for concentration. It's a completely different approach compared to now," says Merli.

By contrast, she says, **2004** was "a great vintage, a perfect season," with rain when needed. It shows more finesse than the 2001, featuring beautiful flavors of black currant, black cherry, wild herbs, licorice, tobacco on a balanced, firm and fresh profile (98 points, non-blind).

An uneven growing season marked 2008, with 20 days of rain during the flowering, then again the first week of September when picking of Merlot began. A new sorting table was employed to select the best fruit. Fermentation and maceration occurred partly in oak vats, while the new oak for aging was reduced to 75 percent.

The Le Macchiole team succeeded in crafting a powerful, rich **2008 Messorio**, boasting ripe black cherry, plum, licorice and wild herb notes. Its tannins are still assertive, yet this is fresh and balanced in a riper style (95 points, non-blind).

The **2010** hails from a cool year that witnessed a cold winter and late spring and rain in June and July. Though lighter in weight, Merli says the goal was to conserve the aromas. It's very pure, intense and linear, offering black currant, black cherry, licorice, iron and tobacco aromas and flavors. Firm, long and complex, this has a fine future ahead (97 points, non-blind).

**2013** was another cool year, with large swings of temperature between day and night during summer. Vineyard management now included leaving more leaves on the vines and increased yields to delay ripening. Flowering was delayed 10 days, and uneven, reducing the yield. Fermentation took place in stainless steel tanks and concrete vats; aging was in 70 percent new oak and 30 percent second-year barrels. A hint of bell pepper marks the aroma, but there is ample black cherry and black currant fruit allied to a dense, finely woven structure and long finish (96 points, non-blind).

In 2016, the consistent weather featured a cool spring and warm but not hot summer, with big swings between day and night temperatures. Harvest was a week to 10 days late, and fermentation took place entirely in cement vats and maceration was about a month, 10 days longer than average.

The **2016 Messorio** was my favorite among the more recent vintages, featuring plenty of blueberry and cherry flavors, very pure and elegant, balancing richness and energy on a linear frame (98 points, non-blind).

"[2017 was] not the perfect vintage as '16," says Merli, "but I'm convinced it has great potential." Rettondini admits that 2017 was difficult to interpret. He tried both quick extraction at high temperatures and slower extraction before deciding on a medium extraction over 25 days. "Merlot in a dry vintage is very hard to achieve elegance and freshness," adds Merli.

The sample I had was not the best; it was broad, offering slightly cooked plum fruit, savory notes of eucalyptus and bell pepper with aggressive tannins and an overall rustic feel (89 points, non-blind).

Fortunately, I recently blind-tasted a second bottle of the **2017 Messorio** for an official *Wine Spectator* review (see the [June 9 Insider](#)), and it reveals a beam of black

cherry and blackberry accented by wild rosemary, thyme, iron and oak spice flavors. Most important, it's balanced and graceful (94 points).

The 2018 was corked, so I will have to wait until spring 2022 to taste it when it is released in the U.S.

Messorio is a superb expression of Merlot that reaches its pinnacle in vintages that align with the style of finesse that the Le Macchiole team desires. It reaches its peak somewhere between 10 and 20 years after the vintage and, as the 2001 shows, can evolve even longer.

Though grapevines now blanket the fields where wheat once grew, Messorio represents both Bolgheri's recent past and the future potential of the region as one of Italy's top winegrowing areas.