

# Decanter

## Tuscan STRONGHOLD

*Castello Vicchiomaggio, located in the heart of the Chianti Classico region, represents the heart of Tuscan winemaking.*

*Susan Low reports from this ages-old estate*

**A**t first, Tuscany seemed nothing but a blur. No one had told me that John Matta, the owner of Chianti Classico estate Castello Vicchiomaggio was also a race car driver. Nonetheless, my senses soon adjusted to the sheer speed with which they were taking in the rapidly passing Tuscan landscape. As we drove from Pisa airport, the landscape changed from flat, almost featureless estuary land to softly undulating hills as we entered the Chianti denomination.

Continuing east-ward the hills became progressively craggier and bumpier; by the time we reached the Chianti Classico region, the hills had become full-grown mountains, and the roads were so twisting and contorted that they resembled so many strands of cooked spaghetti. It is a place where the geometrical fact that 'the shortest distance between two points is a straight line' can't be proved, because there are no straight lines – apart, of course, from the ramrod-straight cypress trees, but they bend a lot when the wind blows.

Atop one of the highest and craggiest mountains, just near the town of Greve, stands Castello Vicchiomaggio, its tall, square, terracotta-topped tower visible for miles in the distance. It stands surrounded by cypress trees, which lends it an ancient, certainly anachronistic, fairy-tale atmosphere. And ancient it is. Vicchiomaggio was bought by John Matta's father in 1966, and proof of the estate's existence dates back to AD 957, though there is reason to believe the estate was in existence before then. Back then the name was Vicchio de Longobardi; the name was changed, and the property rebuilt and greatly expanded by the Medici family during the Renaissance.

Though the idyllic peacefulness is now a major attraction to the Tuscan countryside, it wasn't always thus. In the distant past, the area between Florence and Siena was the scene of frequent fighting and territorial skirmishes between the two neighbouring states. Castello Vicchiomaggio, which is almost equi-distant between Florence and Siena (though somewhat closer to Florence), was built as a fortress to protect the Florentines from the invading forces of the Siense. The massive tower in the central part of the castle was used as a look out.

The Treaty of Fontcrutoli of 1208 was set to determine