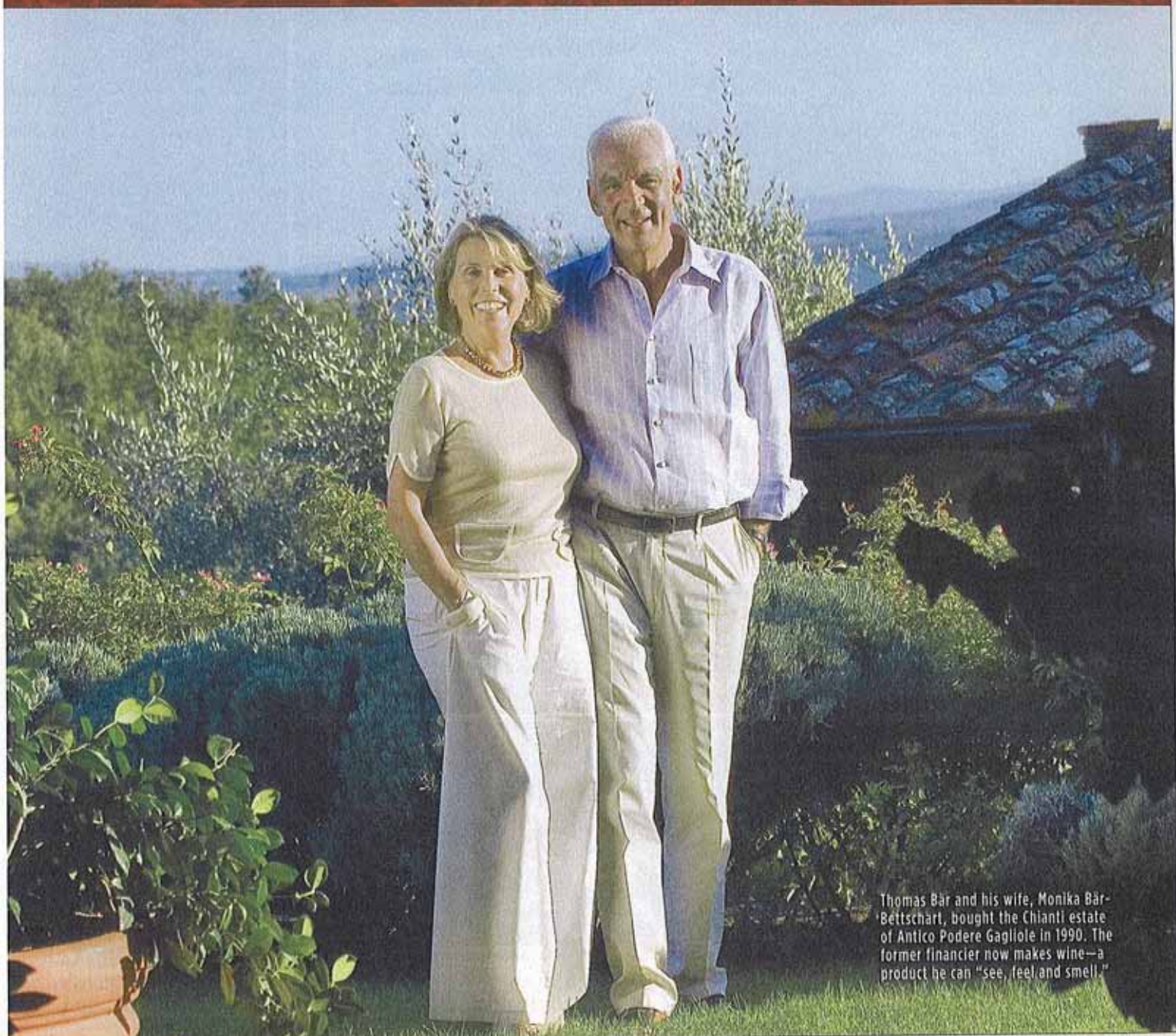


TUSCAN AMBITION

Thomas Bär traded finance in Switzerland for winemaking in Chianti

By Mitch Frank Photographs by Sandro Michahelles



Thomas Bär and his wife, Monika Bär-Bettschart, bought the Chianti estate of Antico Podere Gagliole in 1990. The former financier now makes wine—a product he can “see, feel and smell.”

Thomas Bär doesn't make wine for the money. Not that he would need to. He spent four decades working in two lucrative careers, as chairman of his family's bank in Zurich and as a founding partner of law firm Bär & Karrer; since leaving those positions, he has served on the international advisory board of Goldman Sachs. He isn't hurting for cash.

When he and his wife, Monika, bought Antico Podere Gagliole,

a slice of beautiful Chianti hillside, he could have comfortably retired there and spent his time enjoying a view that stretches to the medieval towers of San Gimignano, some 20 miles away. Instead, at 70 years old, he is devoting himself to a third calling: trying to produce a top super Tuscan.

“As a lawyer and banker I always had a virtual profession—I could never see the product that I actually produced,” says Bär. “As a wine producer, I can actually see, feel and smell what I am producing. At



Antico Podere Gagliole lies on a sunny slope below a steep ridge, on rocky soils. The Bärns have replanted about half the vines with better Sangiovese clones that produce uniform grape bunches. The estate also grows some Cabernet for blending.

the other jobs, you sit in front of the computer. In the vineyard, I get to know each vine.”

Bär certainly isn’t the first wealthy businessman to get bitten by the wine bug. As the joke goes, the quickest way to earn \$1 million making wine is to invest \$100 million. But a lot of those businessmen lose interest or become absentee owners when they see that winemaking requires as much sweat as money. Bär, on the other hand, seems to have invested not just his wallet but himself in Gagliole. “Wine started as a hobby but became a passion,” he says.

His results show a good return on his investment. The second vintage of Gagliole Colli della Toscana Centrale that he made, the 1995, scored 92 points on *Wine Spectator’s* 100-point scale. The 2005 earned 96 points, while his top wine from 2004, a single-vineyard bottling called Pecchia made from 30-year-old vines, scored 95 points. These are not shy wines—they are full-bodied, with powerful tannins and big fruit—but they also show complexity.

“I think Tommy, together with [consulting enologist] Stefano Chioccioli, did a wonderful job planting new vineyards and making outstanding wines,” says Filippo Mazzei, CEO of Castello di Fonterutoli, a top Chianti Classico estate located a few miles east. “He is a perfect gentleman and we are very happy he is our neighbor.”

Not all of Bär’s neighbors are so impressed. While all seem to like him personally, some complain that his wines are too intense and too expensive. “Pecchia is very well-made,” says Alessandro Cellai, winemaker at Castellare, a quality producer just up the road. “But in my opinion, they don’t respect very well the *terroir* or the average price in the area.”

Bär shakes off such criticisms. He knows that excellence can be costly and believes that Chianti needs to elevate its image, not sell it at a discount. “When we started, the Chianti name was ruined,” says Bär. “Twenty years ago you couldn’t give away Chianti

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to your employees.” For him, Chianti’s future lies in producing high-end, luxury wine. “I’d like to be the Le Pin of Tuscany,” he says. “Le Pin, Screaming Eagle—they symbolize handcrafted attention to wine.”

It was love that spurred Bär to buy a farm in Italy. In January 1979, he visited a villa in the Tuscan countryside, just a few miles from Castellina in Chianti. He was there to see Monika Bettschart, an art gallery owner he knew from Zurich. As Bär puts it, “The visit proved to be such a great success that we married a year later.”

Over the years the couple spent many of their vacations at the villa and often walked by Antico Podere Gagliole, which was a short distance away. When Monika heard it was for sale, she persuaded Bär to try and buy it. “I had too much work in Zurich,” he says, “But eventually—that’s how it happens with wives—I bought the property, in 1990.”

Gagliole is located on a curved slope that drops down from a steep ridge running southwest from Castellina. Rows of vines alternate with rows of gnarled olive trees. “Antico Podere” means ancient

farm, and documents in Siena's archives show that a Lombard king bequeathed Gagliole to his son in 994, as a wedding present. It's one of those spots in Tuscany that feels ancient and untamed.

At first, the Bär envisioned the estate to simply be a vacation spot. But in 1991, the couple tasted wines made from their grapes by Fonterutoli, which was leasing the vineyards. "As we tasted and realized what our land could produce," Bär recalls, "Monika and I decided that we wanted to start making our own wine."

Just like that, he had a new career. With the help of an enologist from Montepulciano, the Bär bought cellar equipment and began replanting some of their vines. In 1994, they produced about 350 cases of what Bär calls a "rather rustic-tasting Tuscan red" and found a Swiss importer for it.

He was not content with that, however. For the 1995 vintage, Bär employed consulting enologist Luca d'Attoma to try and improve quality. The results were outstanding: No vintage of Gagliole's red wines overseen by d'Attoma other than the rain-soaked 2002 scored fewer than 90 points. But still Bär was not satisfied. He felt d'Attoma was too busy to give Gagliole the attention it needed, so in 2003 he replaced him with Chioccioli, whose efforts

have contributed to yet higher-scoring reds. At the same time, he retired from Bank Julius Bär—he had retired from his law firm three years earlier—and was able to spend at least half the year at Gagliole.

If Bär felt d'Attoma was too busy, Chioccioli, may seem at first an odd replacement: At 49 years old, the enologist from Greve in Chianti currently consults for 50 wineries in Italy—including Fanti in Montalcino and Tua Rita on the coast near Bolgheri—and two properties in France. But not all of them get the attention Gagliole gets; during harvest and fermentation, he visits the estate at least once a week, and his lab is constantly testing samples of wine. "He is extremely well-organized," says Bär. "That's high praise from the Swiss."

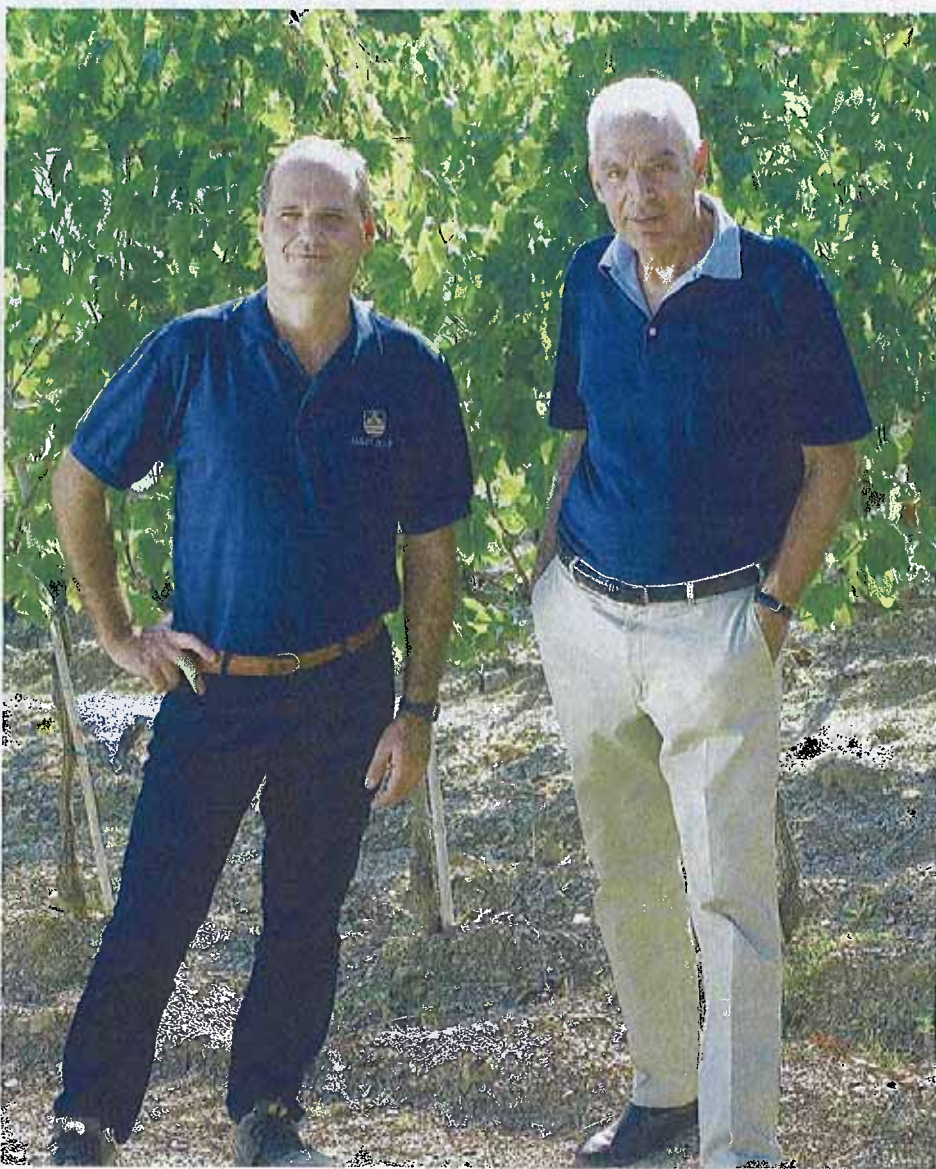
Strolling through the vineyards with winemaker Cesare Panti, Bär and Chioccioli make a contrasting pair: the older Swiss owner, tall and thin, stylishly dressed in a sweater and slacks, and the Tuscan enologist, shorter and more rumped, with eyes that show a mind in constant motion. But they're not as dissimilar as they look. Like Bär, Chioccioli did not grow up in the wine business; his father

made billiard tables. In fact, Chioccioli didn't drink much wine until he got his first job in the industry, as a young enologist for Ruffino. He learned very quickly, however. And having grown up outside the wine business, he is able to see that tradition is not always the most crucial thing.

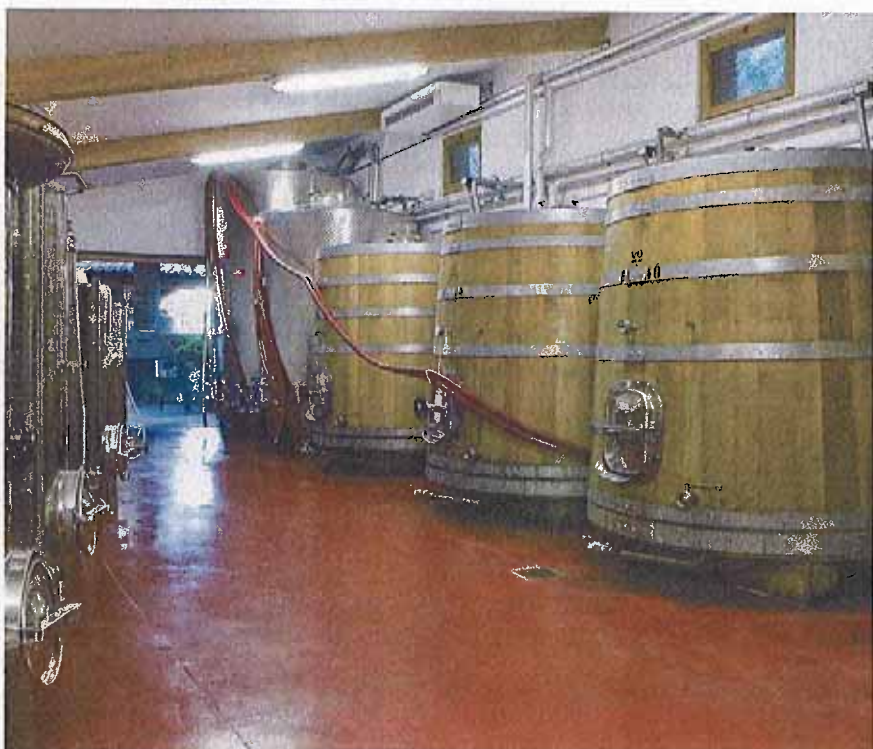
"Having an owner like Thomas is very important because he believes in keeping the good part of tradition and changing what doesn't work," says Chioccioli. "Sometimes I prefer an owner from outside Tuscany; sometimes a Tuscan owner knows what he needs to change but doesn't have the courage."

When he first visited the estate in 2003, Chioccioli met with Monika, tasted several vintages, and toured the winery and vineyards. "I fell in love with Gagliole and its landscape," he says. "It is one of the best in Tuscany to achieve ripe Sangiovese."

The reason for that is the location. Gagliole sits 450 meters above sea level and is susceptible to temperature swings and cool breezes, but the southwestern exposure guarantees plenty of sunlight. The soil is a mix of clay and limestone, and it's filled with galestro rocks, chunks of schist that allow for good drainage. The rows of vines stand on narrow, 3-foot-wide terraces. Bär has replanted about half the vines since he bought the land, primarily using three clones of Sangiovese. Chioccioli likes these clones because they consistently grow medium-size bunches. "The problem with Sangiovese is a lot of variety in bunch size," he notes. "Good bunch size means a good



Winemaker Cesare Panti (left) crafts Bär's three reds—the Sangiovese-Cabernet Colli della Toscana Centrale, the single-vineyard Sangiovese Pecchia and a Chianti Classico called Rubiolo.



The winemaking regimen at Gagliole includes fermentation in oak for the Toscana IGT and Pecchia, while the Chianti Classico is fermented in stainless steel. Total production of the three wines is about 2,500 cases a year.



Top Italian enologist Stefano Chioccioli began consulting at Gagliole with the 2003 vintage.

ratio between skin and juice.”

The rocky soil keeps the vines from growing too vigorously. After two green harvests during the summer, six to eight bunches ripen on each vine. Thanks to the sunny exposure, the Sangiovese and the small amount of Cabernet Sauvignon usually ripen by the end of September. The cool nights ensure that the sugars don't get ahead of the acidity and tannins.

The grapes are hand-harvested in the morning hours, then brought to a long sorting table, where 10 people go through them. Next, they're transferred to the winery, a gleaming, well-lit series of rooms carved into the hillside. “We combine Swiss cleanliness with Italian artistry,” says Bär. “When we started here, our friends thought the more spiderwebs and dust you had, the better the wine. Now the winery is cleaner than the kitchen.”

For both the Gagliole IGT (90 percent Sangiovese, 10 percent Cabernet Sauvignon) and Pecchia (100 percent Sangiovese), the grapes ferment in large oak vats, common in Bordeaux but not so common in Chianti. (Bär's second wine, a Chianti Classico called Rubiolo, is fermented in stainless steel.) Chioccioli and Panti cool the must in the oak vats to about 55° F and allow it to macerate for three to five days, then raise the temperature to 77° F to start fermentation. Usually they rely on ambient yeast, only adding cultured yeast in difficult vintages like the scorching 2003.

After the wine is fermented, they let it sit and macerate with the skins for 25 days, then they microoxygenate for a week, pumping tiny amounts of oxygen through the wine. They believe the lengthy maceration helps extract as much flavor and color as possible, while the oxygen helps polymerize the tannins into long chains, creating a soft mouthfeel. The wine is then transferred into French *barriques* (30 percent to 50 percent new oak, depending on the vintage) for malolactic fermentation, and aged for 14 to 18 months.

With his dog, Lucky (so named because he was adopted from a local shelter), lying nearby, Bär sits down for lunch with Chioccioli and Panti and offers some insight into his business plan. Gagliole is protected by Italian landmark laws, so he cannot rip out other vegetation and plant more vines, even if he wanted to. It took him nine years to secure permission to build the winery. He won't buy grapes because he doesn't trust most Chianti growers to trim their yields.

So his production is small: 2,500 cases in a normal year, half of which is Rubiolo. On average, he produces between 1,000 and 1,200 cases of Gagliole. He bottles wine from the Pecchia vineyard separately in good years only, making 250 cases at most. He's planning on bottling some Pecchia separately from the 2006 vintage. He used its fruit for the Gagliole IGT in 2005.

The wines are not cheap. The 2004 Gagliole sold for \$80 on release, while the Pecchia sold for \$160. The 2006 wines will probably be pricier when they hit the market. The winery exports 99 percent of its production; Italians do not tend to buy wines at that price point. Not everyone in Chianti thinks that's the best policy.

But Bär sees nothing wrong with his prices. After all, he is striving for quality, and it costs money to obtain quality. “We want to raise the quality and, eventually, the price,” he says. “I like Hermès handbags, how they are all stitched in France. They could sell twice as many, but they'd have to compromise quality.”

Besides, if money were all Bär cared about, he'd have stayed in Zurich. Instead, he spends long hours in his vineyards, helping to keep each plant tightly pruned. He constantly tastes from the barrels in his cellar. People tease him, pointing out that he could be relaxing on his terrace, enjoying the view. But for Bär, the satisfaction of producing something in which he can take pride is far more rewarding. □