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2022 Aia Vecchia "Sor Ugo" Bolgheri Superiore Castagneto Carducci, Italy

About the wine: Sor Ugo is the flagship red from Aia Vecchia, a family estate run by the Pellegrinis, who spent generations growing grapes for Bolgheri's more famous neighbors before deciding, reasonably, that they'd rather keep the good stuff for themselves. After replanting their vineyards in 1995, they established their own winery the following year, and the family estate takes its name from an old farm building on the property (Aia Vecchia translates roughly to "old threshing floor," which is either humble or a very confident bet on how the wine would turn out). They brought in agronomist Daniel Schuster to help select plant material imported directly from Bordeaux and hired Hungarian winemaker Tibor Gal — previously head winemaker at Ornellaia — as consultant. That's the wine equivalent of hiring someone away from a Michelin-starred kitchen to cook your family dinners; Bolgheri clearly takes its "Super Tuscans" seriously. Given the success of the estate's Lagone, the team launched this Cabernet-based Super Tuscan in 2001 as their top label. The 2022 is a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, and Petit Verdot, grown at 80 meters elevation on sand, clay, and limestone soils. It's hand-picked, fermented and macerated in stainless steel for about a month, aged 18 months in barrique, and rested another 6 months in bottle before release — which means by the time it reaches your glass, this wine has had more downtime than most of us get in a year.

Region: Bolgheri sits on the Tuscan coast, and if Chianti is the strict older sibling who follows all the rules (Sangiovese, always Sangiovese), Bolgheri is the one who moved to the coast and started experimenting with Bordeaux varieties, much to everyone's initial skepticism and eventual delight. Bolgheri's coastal location creates a distinctive microclimate of warm days and cool maritime breezes that give the wines freshness and structure, and Sassicaia, born in Bolgheri, became a global benchmark for quality — essentially the wine that put this stretch of coastline on the map and forced the rest of the wine world to take "Super Tuscans" seriously. The area gets warmth and light both directly from the sun and reflected off the sea, while afternoon sea breezes temper the heat, a combination that sounds suspiciously like the ideal conditions for a beach vacation, which frankly checks out. Bolgheri is known for blending international varieties like Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, and Syrah with the local Sangiovese,

producing concentrated wines with ripe berry flavors, firm tannins, and lasting finishes — though Sor Ugo skips the Sangiovese entirely in favor of an all-Bordeaux lineup. Aia Vecchia's own vineyards sit specifically in Bolgheri and Castagneto Carducci, prime real estate in a region that's managed to become world-famous in just a few decades — a blink of an eye by Tuscan standards, where some vineyards have been in continuous use since the Etruscans.

Tasting Notes: Expect a deep ruby wine that leads with its chest: aromas of dark fruit paired with toasty oak notes, followed by a nose that's been described as delivering cherries, menthol, and a hint of rosemary alongside cassis, blackberry, and plum, with growing notes of caramel, toast, tobacco, and leather. On the palate, this is a full-bodied wine that wraps thickly over the tongue with rich density and concentration, backed by strong but ripe tannins that meet a fruity structure in a way tasting notes love to call "balanced" and the rest of us call "dangerously drinkable." Firm tannins carry through to a medium-plus finish that ends on ripe fruit and toasty oak character — basically the wine equivalent of a satisfying mic drop. One review called the vintage plump and expressive right out of the gate, with a relatively soft, open-knit character where all the elements are nicely woven together and supple contours frame the finish, meaning you don't need to interrogate this bottle for hours before it starts talking. This isn't a shy, brooding wine that needs convincing — it shows up ready to impress, with enough oak and structure to reward some cellar time if you have the patience (we don't always).

Food Pairing: This is a big, structured red that wants big, structured food, and it's not being subtle about it. One taster's advice was almost embarrassingly on the nose: it works amazingly well with a good Fiorentina or T-bone, which tracks — a wine built on Cabernet and Petit Verdot practically demands a steak the size of a hubcap. Beyond the obvious, the wine's tobacco, leather, and toasted oak notes make it a natural partner for anything char-grilled or slow-braised: think a peppercorn-crusted ribeye, lamb chops with rosemary, or a hearty Tuscan-style beef stew (*Bistecca alla Fiorentina*, if you want to go full method-actor about the regional pairing). The firm tannins are practically begging to be softened by fat, so reach for something rich — aged pecorino, a mushroom risotto finished with butter, or duck breast with a dark cherry reduction that echoes the wine's own fruit. If you're leaning vegetarian, portobello mushrooms roasted with balsamic and thyme will hold their own against the tannic structure without anyone noticing meat is missing. Just steer clear of anything too delicate; a wine this confident will flatten a light salad or a subtle fish dish without breaking a sweat. Treat this bottle the way the Pellegrinis clearly intended: as the centerpiece of a proper meal, not a background player.

