Paolo de Marchi believes Chianti should express its origins. If that means vintage variation and a paler than popular hue, so be it, the Isole e Olena owner tells Stephen Brook.

When Paolo de Marchi first came to London in the 1980s to talk about his wines and his ideas, he was a short, rather serious young man with reddish cheeks which carried the brand of a life lived mostly outdoors. Today, his ideas – essentially a fierce fidelity to the typicity of Chianti’s native Sangiovese grape, alongside an enthusiasm for major international varieties – have changed little, but in two decades he has done much in the Isole e Olena vineyard and winery to make those ideas easier to put into practice.

Now in his mid-50s he looks unchanged, other than a few crow’s feet and some streaks of grey hair. His pride in his estate, on the western side of the Chianti Classico zone, is evident at every turn.
of the road. He shows me his highest vineyards, way up to 470m, and the two hamlets that give the estate its name. Isole is where the winery is located. Olena is lower down, an exquisite ensemble of stone houses huddled around a church and campanile.

‘Until World War II, nearly 100 people lived in Olena, sharecroppers who worked on the estate. In the 1960s sharecropping came to an end, and so did the village. Today just a few people live here.’

As we tour the vineyards, or taste the wines, there is one theme to which De Marchi returns again and again: the typicity of Chianti. It is, for him, more than a philosophical or stylistic debate. It has to do with the relation of wine to the land on which the vines are grown.

‘The wine world has changed dramatically over the last 20 years, with the growth of technological wines. I don’t mean the use of new technology. What I mean is taking a preconceived idea of what the consumers want, then styling your wines accordingly. I prefer wines with a sense of origin. Too much manipulation destroys the idea of terroir.

‘Typicity is terribly important. Sangiovese should smell and taste of red cherries. Some wines these days taste of plums. They may be good wines, but are they Chianti? It’s fine to blend in some other varieties – I do it – but not if doing so destroys Chianti’s typicity. A lot of Merlot, for example, is a mistake. I’m not saying Chianti is necessarily a better wine than a Merlot or a Cabernet, but it’s special to this region and we should treasure it.

‘I also like the idea of vintage variation. It’s frustrating for some winemakers, who hate the thought that they will get a low score from important wine writers if the vintage is light, as in 2002. 2002 was not a good Tuscan vintage, everyone accepts that. But the best wines are fresh and quaffable. The region’s tasting committees
have forgotten that Sangiovese is not a deep-coloured wine, and tend to penalise Chianti that is light in colour. But an opaque Chianti can only be produced by adding other varieties or by using techniques such as reverse osmosis. Is such a wine more acceptable than an honest wine that is light in colour and structure because that is what nature has given us in one particular year?’

De Marchi knows that many influential wine writers reward depth of colour, oaky aromas, richness and power, but these are not attributes associated with Chianti Classico. ‘Fortunately I have importers and clients in 40 countries who understand my wines. Our clients are amazingly loyal.’

The Isole e Olena wines have been first-rate for 20 years, and are better than ever. The basic Chianti Classico is a joy: not deep or extracted, but marked by freshness, zest and pure red fruits. Cepparello, once thought of as a Supertuscan but in fact nothing more than an apotheosis of Sangiovese from the estate’s best sites, lovingly vinified in wooden vats, has a similar freshness but greater intensity, depth and longevity. De Marchi’s love of fine acidity and length of flavour also marks the international wines: the delicious, vibrant Chardonnay; the silky, elegant Syrah; the lean, stylish Cabernet.

De Marchi is not a native Tuscan. His family comes from northern Piedmont, and had an estate in Lessona that was well known in the 19th century. But Lessona is a major textile region, and the factories kept siphoning off workers from the farms. There was no future in agriculture. De Marchi’s father knew the owners of Isole e Olena were thinking of selling, so in 1956 he decided to buy it, but continued to live in Torino.

‘I decided to study agriculture, but my father said he still might sell the property as it was impossible to make money from Chianti in those days. I finished my studies in 1976, and at the age of 25 came down here and began to run the property. The manager left,
and I was on my own. Income from the first vintages here did nothing other than pay off interest to the bank.

‘In 1978 I made my first pure Sangiovese – in those days Chianti was legally required to include white varieties too – and bought my first barrels. The first Cepparello was in 1980, and the first Isole e Olena vintage I was really happy with was 1982. We lost about half the crop to hail, but this meant yields were reduced, which improved quality.’

Later in that decade, he began the process of improving the vineyards. The density has gone from 3,000 vines per hectare to close to 7,000, which gives much better quality and improves the longevity of the vines. ‘I want a vine that’s in balance and will deliver about 1kg of grapes. Over the past 20 years I’ve replanted two-thirds of the vineyard and restored the terraces on the higher slopes.’

While he was improving the plant material of Sangiovese, which accounts for about three-quarters of his vineyards, he was also intrigued by international varieties. ‘To be honest, 20 years ago I wasn’t entirely convinced of the full potential of Sangiovese, so I wanted other blending varieties in the vineyards. When I grafted some Trebbiano to Chardonnay in 1985, I wasn’t planning on making a pure Chardonnay. My idea was to blend it with native varieties, but it didn’t work. So I decided to make a pure Chardonnay, and use the other varieties for Vin Santo. The first Chardonnay I actually planted was in 1989. It’s been very successful, so I keep producing it.

‘As for Syrah, I may not have been the pioneer in Tuscany but I think my varietal Syrah in 1988 was the first in Italy. These international varieties were always a sideline here, but I was glad to have them in the ground while I was continuing to improve the quality of the Sangiovese.’
Isole e Olena is very much de Marchi’s creation. Thirty years ago he found a poorly run, poorly planted estate, and within a decade turned it into one of Tuscany’s leading properties. He has lost none of his appetite for work, but is clearly relieved that the next generation is poised to take over.

‘My son Luca studied literature and was never very interested in Isole e Olena. Then I began replanting my old family property in northern Piedmont, called Sperino, and he helped me out. It was then that he started, without telling me, to take oenology courses. He explained that Isole e Olena was my project and essentially complete. He was excited about Piedmont as it was a work in progress to which he could commit himself.

‘In Piedmont I have planted 7ha, mostly Nebbiolo. Beginning with the 2004 vintage, we will make a Lessona from Nebbiolo, and a second wine that blends in other local varieties. It’s fascinating to be working with other varieties – especially Nebbiolo, which is always a challenge in the vineyard.’

Now that he is in his mid-50s, will he slow down? ‘These days I need help on the estate, as there is so much work to do. But I haven’t lost my passion for wine and winemaking. I find that I get more pleasure from building something up now than from running it.’ At Sperino, the construction has only just begun.