

King of the (Tuscan) Hills

Brunello di Montalcino is considered by many to be the **ultimate expression** of Sangiovese, Italy's **most cultivated** red **grape**.

BY CHRISTOPHER MATTHEWS

In the undulating hills nestled around the medieval fortress town of Montalcino, in south central Tuscany, one can only imagine that these lovely contours would bring forth fabulous wine. Happily, reality exceeds imagination in the form of **Brunello di Montalcino**, a regal Tuscan red, considered by many (including yours truly) to be the ultimate expression of Sangiovese, Italy's most cultivated red grape.

"Brunello" is the local name (and a specific clone) of Sangiovese, which by law accounts for 100 percent of the wine; Montalcino is the district, a *Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita* (DOCG), about an hour south of Siena, where the continental climate of Chianti ends, and the warmer, dryer Mediterranean climate begins. The more intense heat, combined with better drained and "warmer" soils of sand and limestone (compared with Chianti's cooler clays), and the Brunello clone's ability to give more color and tannin (from its larger berry), make these wines the darkest colored, most long-lived wines made from Sangiovese...anywhere.

Brunello also takes time: Under the DOCG rules, the "normale" are only released five years after the vintage date, and the "Riservas" after six, with both spending a minimum of two years in oak cask, and four to six months in bottle. Built for the long haul, they reward the patient collector with a harmonious, compelling wine, a complete package of power, complexity and finesse.

It's No Secret...

It's also very discovered: Some 62 percent of total production is sold outside of Italy, with a hefty 25 percent ending up on U.S. shores, at price points ranging from well over \$40 to hundreds, depending on producer and vintage. Indeed, Brunello needs no marketing assistance here. And yet, after spending five days in the Montalcino commune, my belief is that these wines are actually *underappreciated*—the overall level of quality is just astounding.

Styles do vary, of course. Oak treatments, in particular, are a major differentiating factor, namely the small barrique (international style) vs. large cask (traditional) issue, and the eternal new vs. old oak choice. A common, successful thread among many Brunello producers is the use of large-format Slavonian oak casks. Some go overboard on the oak, but for the most part, these wines bond well with wood.



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Location also counts, naturally, in terms of soil composition (varied) and in a meso- and micro-climate sense. For example, wines from the zone's warmer southern end tend to be bigger and fleshier than the leaner, more aromatic wines from the north side. Vineyard altitudes range from around 1,000 to 1,600 feet (with exceptions). Even clonal selection within Brunello comes into play, as Sangiovese, a promiscuous vine, is prone to mutation in the vineyard. In fact, dozens of distinct clones have been identified around Montalcino.

While plenty of stylistic variation exists, in good vintages, these wines consistently stand out, featuring great aromatics, harmonious structure, dark cherry fruit, underbrush notes, a tannic bite and good acidity. Where they really shine is at the table. I would gamble that most Brunellos would win hands-down the "empty bottle contest"—i.e., the best bottle being the first emptied—with any number of equally (or more) expensive California Cabernets over a Tuscan feast of cured meats, Pecorino cheese, fresh pasta (like the local *pinci*) and wild boar stew!

...But It Is Fairly Recent

Montalcino has long been known for viticulture. In 1550, a friar from Bologna, Leandro Albertini, praised "the good wines that come from those beautiful hills..." At the end of the 17th century, King William III of

England was a steady customer of Montalcino wines. But Brunello as we know it now only took root in the 19th century, when Clemente Santi, among others, took a more scientific approach to researching grapes, wines and wine-making techniques.

By mid-century, the Brunello clone of Sangiovese Grosso—as opposed to Sangiovese, the small-berried strain employed in Chianti—had been isolated and duly encouraged. At the end of the 19th century, Ferruccio Biondi Santi, a passionate follower of Garibaldi, the unifier of Italy, turned his considerable energies to cultivating the Tenuta Il Greppo di Montalcino estate, using exclusively the Brunello grape.

Here, the modern ideal of Brunello was born under the **Biondi Santi** nameplate, still the most revered label in Brunello today.

A promising start to the 20th century in Montalcino ran into a phylloxera infestation in the early 1930s and, of course, the Second World War. Fortunately, despite the post-war turmoil and labor shortage, a handful of winemakers began to notice the area's great wine potential in the 1950s, building on the reputation of Biondi Santi. This recognition and slow growth was handsomely rewarded in 1966 with a DOC classification, as well as with the formation of a local *Consorzio* (consortium) to promote producer interests (to which all Brunello producers belong, a first in Italy!).

These actions spurred new and smaller

estates to produce Brunello as well, setting the stage for meteoric growth in the 1970s and '80s, including the transforming arrival of deep-pocketed foreign investors, like U.S. wine importers **John** and **Harry Mariani** of **Castello Banfi**, one of the area's premier estates. Italy's own economic boom didn't hurt either, "when Italians started drinking wine for pleasure, not just calories," according to **Vincenzo Abbruzzese**, the iconoclastic proprietor of **Valdicava**.

In July 1980, Brunello di Montalcino became Italy's first DOC to graduate to the highest wine classification, the DOCG. Success has continually built on success.

Not Just Brunello

Today, there are over 200 producers who bottle Brunello in the Montalcino commune, ranging from large operations like **Argiano**, **Banfi** and **Col d'Orcia**, to smaller, more artisanal newcomers, like **Sasso di Sole**, with many in between. It's a big tent, with a very large, enthusiastic international audience.

But it's not just Brunello. Most notably, there is a younger version of Brunello, the **Rosso di Montalcino** DOC, which is also 100 percent Sangiovese, but only aged one year before release. Designed for early, easy and much less expensive drinking—and to help the producers' cash flow while waiting on the Brunellos!—this is no sloppy second. It is an underrated category of wine that deserves more attention.

Another feature: In years when Brunello-site grapes are below standard (or when the vines are young), they can be used in the Rosso, a win-win "cascade." On the other hand, vines registered for "Rosso" can never be used for Brunello.

Another option for the *Montalcinesi* is the **Sant'Antimo** DOC, named for the beautiful Romanesque abbey south of town. Used for both reds and whites, it's really a catch-all category for Brunello vintners who want to do something other than 100 percent Brunello. Most often, producers blend Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and other international varieties with (or without) some Sangiovese. The virtue: It keeps the Sant'Antimo regulations within the Brunello Consorzio, and gives a nice local spin to the otherwise overdone and misleading "Super Tuscan" concept.

Finally, **Moscadello di Montalcino**, a traditional white dessert wine made from Moscato Bianco (both late harvest or sparkling) has experienced a renaissance in recent years. A high quality **Grappa di**

Montalcino is also produced, a perfect *digestif* after a full Tuscan meal.

Best of Show

Although the food ran a very close race, the highlight of my Montalcino visit was the annual Brunello trade show organized by the Consorzio in February, "Benvenuto Brunello 2007," which took place within the historic *Fortezza* (fortress).

Each year, the event showcases the debut of the new Brunello releases (in this instance, the 2002 vintage, and the 2001 Riservas) and the current releases of Rosso (2005), the Sant'Antimo and the Moscadello. It also awards a star rating (one to five, five being "outstanding") for the most recent Brunello vintage now in the cellars, i.e., the 2006, which will be ready in 2011. Adding to the festive mood, the 2006 vintage received the maximum five stars by an independent, international judging panel, the fourth vintage in a row to receive at least four stars. My main observations from the tastings:

Biggest Surprise: The stunning quality of the 2005 Rosso di Montalcinos. As a group, these wines are just gorgeous, with fresh, pretty red fruit, strawberry jam and some lovely herb notes, all on nice frames. Look for these bargains on restaurant wine

lists, as they are among the best, most versatile food wines. They're also no-brainer case buys! Too many good ones exist to name them all, but here are a few favorites: Casisano Colombaio, Corte Pavone (a biodynamic producer), Fanti, Fuligni, Il Poggione, Mastrojanni, San Filippo (beautiful) and Valdicava.

Favorite All-Around Producers: Considering all categories, a number of houses

Given that the next four vintages to come are rated excellent to outstanding, the current vintage will certainly be neglected. Yet, despite the harvest travails, some vintners made nicely balanced wines, not for long-term cellaring, mind you, but for pleasant current drinking. If prices eventually decline, and they just might, the 2002s could represent some bargains. Some recommendations: Argiano, Castello Romitorio, Cas-

Best in Show: Really a ringer, my top wine of the tasting (among many stellar ones) was Col d'Orcia's Poggio al Vento, a Riserva held back from 1999. Deep garnet to a slightly orange rim, it has notes of game, deep black cherry and porcini. Incredibly clean, with super structure, this is a complete and compelling package.

To conclude, I have three pieces of advice: If you are a serious wine buff and

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excelled with everything they produced. Call them a safe bet for the vintages concerned. From an admittedly incomplete sample, here are my top all-around performers from this year's show: Barbi, Talenti, Tenuta Oliveto and Tenute Silvio Nardi.

The Step-Child Vintage: Only a two-star vintage (the lowest-rated over the last decade), the 2002 "normale" arrived with subdued expectations. A rainy harvest required severe grape selection, resulting in half the normal production. In fact, many houses declined to make Brunello at all.

tiglion del Bosco, La Fiorita, La Gerla, La Togata and Sasso di Sole.

Classic Riservas: The 2001 Riservas are largely deep, dark, big and rich, as you would expect in a good (four-star) year, replete with secondary aromas and flavors of porcini and sottobosco, forest floor. These you can definitely hold, but surprisingly, they are (mostly) approachable now. Whether you choose to age or to drink, some smart picks are: Banfi, Casanova di Neri, Castel Giacondo, Corte Pavone, La Fornace, Tenuta Greppone Mazzi and Valdicava.

collector, become more acquainted with Brunello; If you are a serious foodie, seek out some Rossos for dinner; If you are looking for a great wine destination for vacation, consider Montalcino, one the premier wine tourism centers in the world, surrounded by the unparalleled Tuscan landscape, gastronomy and culture.

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