



The International Wine Review

June 2012

Report # 31: Brunello di Montalcino

Introduction



The Town of Montalcino

Brunello di Montalcino is truly one of the world's great wines. It was the first of Italy's wine regions to receive the prestigious DOCG status (Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita) in

1980. Brunello di Montalcino is also Italy's best expression of Sangiovese. In good vintages, the wines show beautiful fruit, elegance and power, with the structure to permit extensive aging. Now is an extremely fortunate and highly unusual situation for Montalcino: three five star (as designated by the Consorzio del Vino Brunello di Montalcino) vintages are on the market at the same time: 2006, 2007, and 2010 (Rosso di Montalcino). If one is ever to get serious about tasting the Sangiovese wines of Montalcino, now is the time.

The high acidity and firm tannins of Brunello give rise to slow evolution in the bottle and can show surprising complexity and freshness decades later. Brunello is made only from dry-farmed, Sangiovese grapes and is produced somewhat differently than Sangiovese made elsewhere in Italy, but above all else it is the unique terroir—climate and soils, especially—of Montalcino that yields the special qualities of the wine. However, for that terroir to be expressed in the wine also requires winemaking that respects the natural fruit, and with few exceptions that is what one finds in Montalcino.

In global wine terms, Montalcino is tiny—24 thousand hectares, of which only 2100 hectares of Sangiovese can be used to make Brunello and another 510 can be used only to make Rosso di Montalcino. The Brunello acreage is about one-third the size of Chianti Classico's 7140 hectares and represents just 3 percent of all Sangiovese plantings in Italy.

In this Issue

Introduction	1
Acknowledgements	2
History of Brunello di Montalcino	3
Biondi Santi: The Beginnings	3
Modern History: Expansion and Investment	3
Brunello di Montalcino: The Region and the Wine....	4
The Sub-Regions of Montalcino	4
In the Vineyards	5
Sangiovese, The Grape	6
Vineyard Management	6
Vintages	7
Winemaking	7
Styles and Types of Brunello	8
Single Vineyard and Riserva Brunellos	9
Pairing Brunello with Food	9
The Market for Brunello	10
Tasting Notes and Ratings	11

In this, our 31st report, we explore the Sangiovese wines of Montalcino with particular attention to the Brunellos of the 2006 and 2007 vintages. We look at the 2009 and 2010 vintages of Rosso di Montalcino in a separate article. In preparation for the report we traveled to Verona to taste the new vintages at Vinitaly, after which we went to Montalcino to visit some of the region's outstanding winemakers and learn first hand the challenges of making world class Brunello. We also tasted wines at our offices in Washington and at the Italian Wine Masters tasting in New York. Overall, we tasted almost 300 Brunellos and Rossos; they are reviewed in the final section of this report.

We begin the report with a look at the wine history of Brunello with special focus on the pioneering role of the Biondi Santi family. We then look at the Montalcino terroir and differences

Continued on page 2

Introduction

Continued from page 1

in the sub-regions of the appellation including soil, altitude, and climate. We examine viticultural practices, including clonal selection, and look at winemaking with particular focus on oak aging. In recent years, some winemakers have partly replaced traditional, large Slavonian oak casks (botti) with French barriques. Finally, we give guidance to consumers in terms of the styles of Brunello and how the wines pair with food. While Brunello goes well with much Italian cuisine, it also pairs superbly with international cuisine, especially beef, lamb, and game.

After tasting hundreds of wines and meeting many winemakers, we have a new found appreciation for Brunello di Montalcino and its unique, elegant expression of Sangiovese. We are also struck by how the wines change by vintage. Both the 2006 and 2007 vintages are excellent, but they differ with the 2006's being classical and elegant in style and requiring additional bottle aging, while the 2007's are more evolved yet still highly ageable.

Given the limits on Brunello plantings in Montalcino, prices can be expected to remain high for the foreseeable future. Indeed, there is significant upside potential in terms of prices, especially for five star vintages like 2006, 2007 and 2010. Our recommendation: purchase now, while you can.

In Memoriam. Giulio Gambelli (1925-2011), *il grande maestro del Sangiovese*. Gambelli's career extended from his first job at age 14 working for Tancredi Biondi Santi to 2011, when he was still consulting enologist with several prominent Brunello wineries. Known as the master taster for his exceptional tasting abilities, he played a key role in educating, advising, and consulting with wineries during Brunello's formative period over the last three decades of the 20th century.

Acknowledgements Many people contributed to this report. First and foremost, we wish to thank Stefano Campatelli, Director, and Maria Grazia Iannucci of the Consorzio del Vino Brunello di Montalcino for their outstanding collaboration and support. We also wish to acknowledge the many wineries and winemakers of Brunello di Montalcino that we met at Vinality and who welcomed us at their estates and patiently explained to us their unique terroir and winemaking practices. In particular, Franco Biondi Santi not only spent an extended time with us at his Il Greppo estate but, also, provided us a unique vertical of his Riservas for tasting later. We also thank Lars Leicht of Banfi who encouraged us to write about Brunello and, also, provided advice and assistance in arranging the trip and Dana Rubsam for her help during our tastings at Vinality and afterwards. We also want to thank the authors of three books that we found enormously helpful: Kerin O'Keefe's recent book on *Brunello di Montalcino* (2012), the extensive Banfi tome on *The Pursuit of Excellence* (2008), and Franco Biondi Santi's book *This is My Land* (2010).

Mike Potashnik
Publisher

Don Winkler
Editor



i-winereview.com

Previous Wine Reports

- Issue 1 California Petite Sirah
- Issue 2 Red Table Wines of Portugal
- Issue 3 Grenache Wines
- Issue 4 Syrah
- Issue 5 Malbec: Argentina's Magnificent Malbec
- Issue 6 The Wines of Southern Italy: From Quantity to Quality
- Special Report Portugal: The Douro Boys and Barca Velha
- Issue 7 New Zealand's Exciting Pinot Noirs
- Issue 8 The Wines of Ribera del Duero
- Issue 9 Champagne
- Issue 10 Unoaked Chardonnay: It's More Than Wood
- Issue 11 2005 Bordeaux Crus Bourgeois
- Issue 12 California Petite Sirah - Syrah Update
- Issue 13 The Wines of Rioja: Classical and New Wave
- Special Report Introduction to Sherry
- Issue 14 The World of Sparkling Wines and Champagne
- Issue 15 The Wines of Chianti Classico
- Issue 16 Oregon Pinot Noir
- Issue 17 Sauvignon of the Loire
- Issue 18 Wines of Navarra
- Issue 19 Wines of Greece: Assyrtiko and Santorini
- Issue 20 The Santa Lucia Highlands
- Issue 21 The Chilean Wine Revolution
- Issue 22 Grapes and Wines of the Western Loire
- Issue 23 Ribera del Duero Revisited
- Issue 24 The New Wines of Portugal, Double Issue
- Issue 25 The Wines of Austria
- Issue 26 The Diverse Wines of Argentina, Double Issue
- Issue 27 Sweet and Dessert Wines of the World
- Issue 28 The Wines of Priorat
- Issue 29 The Wines of Monterey County
- Issue 30 The Wines of South Africa, Double Issue
- Special Report South African Value Wines

These reports are available online at www.iwinereview.com