

# Brunello di

Tuscany's sweet spot makes the world



# Montalcino

Best Sangiovese-based reds BY JAMES SUCKLING



If you want to understand what great Italian wine is all about, buy a bottle of Brunello. No wine in Italy matches Tuscany's Brunello di Montalcino when it comes to class and ageability. And over the past decade, no other Italian region (with the possible exception of Barolo) has enjoyed so many outstanding vintages and made so many beautiful wines. • Brunello's rise to stardom has been startling in its speed and impressive in its breadth. In the great 2001 vintage, I gave two Brunellos perfect 100-point scores. This would hardly have been possible just two decades ago because the region was hindered by archaic viticulture and outmoded winemaking. Now dozens of producers are making some of the best wines in Italy, and their clear dedication to fine winemaking rivals any in the world.

My perfect Brunellos were the 2001 Casanova di Neri Brunello di Montalcino Cerasuolo and the 2001 Valdicava Brunello di Montalcino Madonna del Piano Riserva. "It is a sign of how special our terroir is," says Vincenzo Abbruzzese, owner and winemaker of Valdicava. "There are so many outstanding wines being made here now. It is a great time for Brunello di Montalcino."



Tradition and modernity have combined in Brunello to make the world's best Sangiovese-based wines. Above: Paolo Bianchini (left), co-owner of the top-rated Ciacci Piccolomini, helps bring in the harvest.

Brunello di Montalcino is one of Italy's most distinctive wine-producing areas. It is located about 70 miles southwest of Florence in an arid area of soft rolling hills planted to grains and olive trees. At its heart, the village of Montalcino perches on what, in context, resembles a towering mountain. The vineyards on its slopes are planted to Sangiovese, the native grape of Tuscany, known locally as Brunello.

No other Sangioveses compare to Brunello di Montalcino. Chianti Classico and Vino Nobile di Montepulciano, its sister appellations, also stake their reputations on Tuscany's principal red grape, but seldom reach such high quality.

Much of the difference is due to climate. Brunello di Montalcino is warmer than its Tuscan neighbors, and produces bolder, richer and more powerful Sangiovese. This allows wine producers in Brunello di Montalcino to pick their grapes typically one or two weeks before vintners in other parts of Tuscany, especially Chianti Classico.

Another reason for Brunello's success is the dedication of its growers. Most of the wine estates are small, comprising 10 to 25 acres of vineyards, and the owners farm their vineyards and make their own wines. Brunellos are essentially handmade wines, with an emphasis on the quality of what is picked in the vineyards rather than what is done in the cellar. In contrast, a sizable percentage of other Tuscan wines come from large vineyard holdings with

absentee owners who have other financial interests besides wine. It's sort of like comparing wine producers in Bordeaux's small, artisanal Pomerol appellation with the larger, often corporate-held châteaux of Pauillac.

"Most of us who make wine in Montalcino are essentially peasants," says Gianni Brunelli, who makes outstanding Brunellos from his 12-acre vineyard. "We have always been vine-growers first."

Local growers, including Brunelli, distinguish between the north and south slopes of the Montalcino hill. The former

is slightly cooler, with fewer hours of daylight than the latter. Therefore, wines from the two are very different: The north makes more aromatic, racier Brunellos; the south produces richer, fuller, more powerful ones. Many of the top names have vineyards in both areas, and so have the advantage of blending.

The nearly 600,000 cases of Brunello di Montalcino made in an average year are divided between *normale* and *riserva* bottlings. The *normali* are released on the market 50 months after the harvest, while the *riservas* come out a year after that. Brunellos are aged for a minimum of two years in wood, either large casks called *botti*, small French oak barrels, or a combination of these, with subsequent bottle aging also mandated before release. These aging requirements have been in effect since 1998; before that, wood-aging periods were considerably longer. The duration was shortened with an eye to making fresher wines.

A lighter Sangiovese called Rosso di Montalcino accounts for another 375,000 cases. Many producers also make super Tuscan reds, which can range from Cabernet Sauvignons and Syrahs to blends of Sangiovese and various other international varieties.

"It's a complex and varied region," says Giancarlo Pacenti of Siro Pacenti, one of the best and most consistent Brunello producers. "Each vineyard produces wine with its own distinct character."

Though Brunello is quintessentially Italian in its structure and flavors, the wines often remind me of Burgundy. Both are reds that seduce you with subtle and complex aromas, then entice you with

a lot of floral and dried mushroom character along with strawberries and other red berries on the nose and palate. Plus, there is fresh underlying acidity.

This character has made Brunello di Montalcino irresistible to Americans, who now buy about one out of every three bottles made. And the category isn't . . . most bottles cost between \$60 and \$100. Some can cost more than \$200.

"Americans adore Brunello," says Dominic Nocerino of Vinifera Imports, a major importer of Italian wines to the United States. "There [has been] a string of excellent vintages and [there are] many outstanding producers. And it's easy to remember the name."

Another attraction is that the wines are extremely drinkable upon release compared with many other popular reds from around the world, especially Cabernet Sauvignon-based ones. (However, I personally prefer to decant younger Brunellos for an hour or two before serving.) Yet they also age extremely well. Most come into their own about six to eight years after the vintage date, and the best can improve in bottle for 10 or 20 years, sometimes longer. I have had bottles of Biondi-Santi Brunello from the 1950s that were still in wonderful condition.

Brunello's fine tannins and fresh acidity pair wonderfully with food. For example, a top-scoring Brunello from a vintage currently on the market, such as 2001, goes perfectly with hearty food such as grilled meats or game. This is why a large part of the Brunello sold in America is purchased in restaurants.

"Brunello is the most popular Italian wine on our wine list," says Kevin Vogt, wine director at Delmonico Steakhouse in Las Vegas. The list, which holds a *Wine Spectator* Grand Award, offers about two dozen Brunellos, including (as of April) the 2001 Casanova di Neri Tenuta Nuova, *Wine Spectator's* 2006 Wine of the Year. "People just like to drink Brunello, and it goes so well with food," Vogt adds.

I have always been fascinated with Brunello. I remember the first time I visited Montalcino, in 1983. I had borrowed money from my mother to tag along with a group of wine merchants from New York who had organized a tour of Italy's key wine regions. I simply fell in love with the village—its hilly landscape, terra-cotta-roofed houses, hillside vines and friendly people. It and the surrounding area held a mysterious attraction that touched my soul. It's hard to describe, but it was as if I were living in a scene painted by Michelangelo or Leonardo da Vinci. And every sip of Brunello simply heightened the sensation.

Back then, Brunello di Montalcino was still a sleepy wine region. Of course, one star already shone brightly. The Biondi-Santi



Brunello's fine tannins and fresh acidity make it an ideal wine for sipping on its own, but it also pairs perfectly with hearty grilled meats or game. Above: A patron at Caffé Fiaschetteria in Montalcino.



The towering spires of Montalcino rise above the narrow streets of the charming hilltop town, which lies at the heart of the Brunello winemaking region in southern Tuscany.

family had been making a red wine that they dubbed Brunello for more than a century, and the family winery's cellar contained bottles from vintages back to the 1880s.

These wines, such as 1955 and 1964 Biondi-Santi, were legends in Italy, and abroad to some extent. I remember a time when ancient bottles of Biondi-Santi sold for more than most of the prized bottles from France. But like Spain's Vega Sicilia, whose reputation towered over that of its region of Ribera del Duero, Biondi-Santi was more than Brunello di Montalcino. It transcended the appellation.

A few other producers in Montalcino were firmly established in

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the early 1980s, including Fattoria dei Barbi, Conti Costanti and Il Poggione. Some up-and-coming names were well on their way, including Altesino, Banfi, Caparzo and Poggio Antico. But the region was still pretty much nowhere compared with other great wine regions of the world. I think that Piedmont and Chianti were better known than Montalcino, mostly due to the promotional work of Italian vintners Angelo Gaja and Piero Antinori.

"We started as pioneers and we remain that way," says Abbruzzese of Valdicava. "We are still at the beginning of our history—it is amazing to think about it. I am still in my 40s and I have done 20 harvests so far. There is so much ahead and I know we can do even better."

This is why debates over traditional and modern styles of Brunello don't make sense. Until recently, very little winemaking tradition existed in the region. The different styles of Brunello today result more from winemakers' decisions in their vineyards and cellars than anything else. This includes such things as grape yields, harvesting dates, maceration times, and wood choice and barrel size in maturation.



Franco Biondi-Santi was the early star of Brunello di Montalcino. His family has been making wine in the once sleepy region for more than a century.

"The success of Brunello di Montalcino is a recent phenomena," says Abbruzzese, who harvested his first vintage in 1987. His father made wine before then, but sold most of his grapes to Biondi-Santi through the 1970s. Many of Abbruzzese's neighbors did the same. "It's only recently that many of us have understood the true potential of our region," he notes.

Adds Roberto Giannelli, owner of the estate of San Filippo, where he has been making wines for five vintages, "There are many new producers and each one is interpreting Brunello in a different way."

Brunello's natural advantages allowed the best producers to capitalize on a handful of excellent vintages two decades ago, including 1985, 1988 and 1990. But these vintages made excellent wines mostly due to Mother Nature's generosity. The viticulture and winemaking in Montalcino were still behind that of other top wine regions in those years.

"We knew very little," admits Roberto Guerrini, whose family owns Eredi Fuligni, one of the top names in the region. "But we managed to make some very good wines." His 1988 and 1990 are drinking extremely well, but they don't hold a candle to his 1997, 1999 or 2001.

**I**n my opinion, it really wasn't until the 1993 and 1995 vintages that a large number of producers in Montalcino got their act together in the vineyards and cellars. By 1997, the benchmark modern vintage for Tuscany, dozens of producers were well-equipped and understood how to take advantage of the glorious grapes nature delivered to them.

"For Brunello, and all of Tuscany, 1997 was an unexpected miracle," says Lamberto Frescobaldi, whose family owns the Brunello estate of Castelgiocondo. "We had an April frost that naturally reduced the grape crop, and then the miracle at the end of the season was the sunny days and cold nights which gave us grapes that were perfect. The wines made themselves. The grapes were so damn beautiful. The quality was made by nature and the producers who knew how to make their wines."

By 2001, a year that had perhaps had slightly less potential quality than 1997, 1990 or 1988, the region was at the forefront of vineyard and cellar management in Italy. "We understood that great wine is made in the vineyards," says Giacomo Neri, of Casanova di Neri. "That's why the quality is so consistent now."

No modern vintage for Brunello di Montalcino has had such high overall quality as 2001. I tasted about 200 wines from the vintage, including *normali*, riservas and single-vineyard wines. As I mentioned before, 2001 delivered two perfect wines (as well as the 2006 Wine of the Year); however, it also produced more than 140 wines with scores of 90 points or higher. Moreover, nearly two dozen of these scored at least 95 points. The all-star roster of 2001 Brunello di Montalcinos includes wines from Altesino, Capanna, Casanova di Neri, Ciacci Piccolomini d'Aragona, Eredi Fuligni, Fanti, Gianni Brunelli, La Gerla, La Poderina, La Rasina, La Serena, Lisini,



The Siro Pacenti winery is part of the vanguard of Brunello producers that have led the region to new heights of quality and consumer appreciation in a relatively short amount of time.

Marchesi de' Frescobaldi, Pinino, Podere Salicutti, Sesta di Sopra, Silvio Nardi, Siro Pacenti, Terrasole and Valdicava.

Given the string of good to outstanding vintages over the past decade, consumers can buy Brunello just about at will at the moment. The only exception is the very weak 2002 vintage. Many of the top names didn't even bottle Brunello, and those that did made only good quality wines at best. Most were mediocre.

The top vintages currently on the market include 2001, 1999, 1998 and 1997. The 2000 is also very good, but the wines have less structure than others. "We have been very lucky with the weather," notes Abbruzzese. "We have about one weak vintage in every 10 now."

Most top Brunellos need four to eight years of bottle age after their release to mellow. The most drinkable years now are 1997, 1998 and 2000. The 1990s and 2001s are very structured, with rich fruit and powerful tannins, but are also enjoyable if decanted an hour or two before serving, to soften the tannins.

Tuscany, as well as Italy as a whole. It produced wines with wonderful harmony, whereby the ripe fruit, fine tannins, generous alcohol and fresh acidity are in near perfect balance. I have tasted at least three dozen of the top names in 1997 over the past 18 months and nearly all of them are now coming into their own, with a classy, subtle, rich fruit character. I will conduct an extensive blind-tasting of the top 100 or so 1997 Brunellos this summer for later publication in the magazine.

There's talk that 2004 or 2006 could be the new 1997 for Brunello di Montalcino, but I have not tasted enough wines from barrel to judge. However, it's definite that some outstanding Brunello is in the pipeline, or more accurately, in the barrel. Stay tuned.

"2004 is another amazing harvest," says Frescobaldi. "I have never seen such a harvest of both quantity and quality. [Is it] better than 1997? I would say so. We are going to have to see in 10 years. Maybe they will have more depth and weight?"

Many of the wines from older vintages such as 1990 and 1988 are still drinking very well. I opened a bottle of 1988 Castello Banfi Poggio all'Oro while writing this story, and the wine was very balanced, with beautiful silky tannins and a long, fruity finish. It developed wonderfully in the glass, showing dried flowers and cherries and hints of fresh mushrooms in the aftertaste.

**T**he U.S. market seems to love just about any wine from Montalcino. It imports about 200,000 cases of Brunello each year, according to figures from the Consorzio del Vino di Brunello di Montalcino. This doesn't include how much Americans drink while on holiday in Italy and elsewhere in Europe, or how much

Brunello is sold in other countries and then finds its way to the United States via the gray market.

The region's biggest producer, Castello Banfi, exports thousands of cases of its Brunello and other wines to the United States each year. Banfi is American-owned and continues to produce excellent Brunello in impressive quantities. For example, it made close to 50,000 cases of its 2001 Brunello di Montalcino, and about 15,000 cases of that went to the U.S. market. This ensures that consumers from New York to Kansas City to San Diego can try a bottle of Brunello. (See "Cream of the Crop," page 49.)

"Brunello has become *the* collectible from Italy now," says Leonardo LoCascio, president of Winebow, a key Italian wine importer in the United States. "People now collect all the different producers as well as different vintages. It's even more collectible than Barolo."

With a string of outstanding vintages and dozens of quality producers, wine lovers have a treasure trove of Brunellos to choose