

# Builders of BRUNELLO

America's Mariani family has reshaped this Tuscan wine region

BY MITCH FRANK

**I**n 1970, a young American wine importer visited Montalcino's most storied estate, Il Greppo, home to Biondi-Santi wines. John Mariani, with his brother Harry, owned a modestly successful New York-based firm called Banfi, which imported a wide range of French and German wines. But the Marianis were Italian-Americans and wanted to focus more on Italian wines, and in the process improve the image of that country's wines in America. John thought Brunello di Montalcino was the best wine to do just that.

Biondi-Santi's Brunellos were already legendary. Winemaker Franco Biondi-Santi's grandfather is credited by many as the first to bottle the long-lived 100 percent Sangiovese wines. But Brunello was largely unknown in America, and Biondi-Santi's wines were not imported into the United States.

On that day, Franco poured the 1961 and 1964 Brunellos for John. Impressed, John asked if he could import 50 cases. "We shook hands on Banfi representing his wine," he remembers. "He accepted an initial order but, I believe, became embroiled with mandatory U.S. labeling and import regulations, and never shipped."

Seven years later, John returned to Montalcino, but this time to make his own wine. Banfi was flush with cash, thanks to a sweet, sparkling Italian red called Riunite Lambrusco that was selling millions of cases a year in the United States. Over the next decade, the Marianis would invest more than \$200 million to create a new estate, Castello Banfi, buying more than 7,000 acres of land, restoring a 12th-century castle and building a large, modern winery on the southern border of the appellation.

Brunello di Montalcino is renowned today as one of Italy's pre-

mere 25 producers who made 60,000 cases of wine a year, and Brunello di Montalcino was a well-regarded but obscure Tuscan red. Today, there are about 260 producers (including notable outsiders such as Piero Antinori and Angelo Gaja, who followed in the Marianis' footsteps) that together make nearly 600,000 cases of Brunello and 375,000 of Rosso di Montalcino.

Building Banfi, the Marianis used their capital to employ the latest technology in both vineyard and winery, conducting research and sharing the results with their neighbors. At the same time, they launched a lengthy marketing campaign to introduce Brunello to the United States and other markets, calling on the same business savvy they used to sell Riunite. "Montalcino would not be the same without them," says Paola Gloder, proprietor of nearby Poggio Antico. "Whenever I travel to a new market, Banfi has been there first, and that's a good thing."

The Marianis' investment has not gone unrewarded. Banfi produces 50,000 cases of Brunello a year—10 times more than the average Montalcino estate—yet Banfi's wines continuously earn outstanding scores on *Wine Spectator's* 100-point scale. Its most recently reviewed wines, the 2001 estate Brunello and the 2001 Poggio alle Mura, scored 93 and 94 points, respectively. The 1997 vintage of its two top wines, the Poggio alle Mura and the single-vineyard Poggio all'Oro Riserva, each scored 96 points.

Thanks to such results, the Marianis, who believe they were greeted with skepticism if not downright suspicion at first, are now a valued part of the Montalcino wine community. "It took time, but we worked with the community," says John. "I am most proud that where we are located is now the epicenter of fine wines in all



Brothers Harry and John Mariani (seated, left to right) built one of Montalcino's top estates from their Long Island offices. Their respective children, James and



The Poggio alle Mura, renamed Castello Banfi by the Marianis, sits at the heart of their estate, surrounded by olive trees and thousands of vineyard acres. Located at the southern reaches of Brunello, Castello Banfi is also home to a Michelin-starred restaurant and a new luxury hotel.

The castle at the heart of Castello Banfi's Poggio alle Mura estate is an impressive edifice, with a tall tower rising from a massive stone keep, a relic from centuries of warfare between Florence and Siena. Banfi's winery, a few miles downhill, is equally impressive in a more modern way, a hangar-sized building filled with towering industrial fermentation tanks for large-production wines and smaller vats for Brunellos and super Tuscans.

But the real decision-making takes place more than 4,000 miles away, in Old Brookville, N.Y. Since 1981, Banfi Vintners' headquarters has been located in this Long Island township, on a wooded estate in a 1927 mansion built to look like an old English manor house. John's office is at the back of the house, in a room modeled after an old English chapel, complete with vaulted ceiling. Up a spiral staircase are offices belonging to Harry, John's daughter Cristina Mariani-May and Harry's son James. Harry, 70, and John, 75, have been semi-retired for several years, though each is in the office regularly. Cristina, 36, is currently in charge of the company's Tuscan operations, while James, 41, oversees imports.

John and Harry's father, Giovanni Mariani, was born in America, but went to live with his aunt Teodolinda Banfi in Milan after



John and Harry's father, Giovanni, named his company for his aunt, Teodolinda Banfi, who worked for Pope Pius XI and was remembered in this tribute from the Vatican.

Giovanni founded Banfi in New York in 1919, importing Italian wines and food for customers in the Northeast. He weathered Prohibition by selling "medicinal" bitters and bath salts.

John grew up in the business, spending his summers as a teenager working in the warehouse. In 1955, he began a two-year Army stint, stationed in Germany, and saw European wine culture firsthand. On his leaves, he traveled to various wine regions, including Montalcino, meeting producers and tasting.

The two brothers took the reins at Banfi in 1963, and began putting their ideas into practice. It helped that they worked in a symbiotic fashion. While they look alike—each standing more than 6 feet 3 inches—their personalities are opposite. John was (and still is) the ideas guy, always bubbling with inspiration. Harry, soft-spoken and level-headed, is the practical one who crunched the numbers and made it all work.

Banfi had been importing Beaujolais for several years, and John noted that its fruity style was perfect for American tastes. But Beaujolais could be inconsistent, and John hated wines that were unclean or overdosed with sulfur. He had tasted Lambrusco, a sparkling red made in both dry and sweet styles, while in the service, and thought it might be a good fit in



General manager Enrico Viglierchio, standing on the Banfi estate, once worked for manufacturing corporation 3M but was wooed to Montalcino by a love for wine and the opportunity to work for a family company.

“The traditionalists in Italy would ask us why we dared tell them to make their wines differently than their families had been making them for centuries,” says John. “They told me, ‘This is what we make and this is what you will sell.’ But we kept reciting, ‘That’s not what our customers want.’ We had to pioneer it ourselves.”

The Marianis hired Ezio Rivella, one of Italy’s top consulting enologists, to help scout for land, and they quickly settled on Montalcino. “It was a beautiful area—ideal for viticulture,” says John. Harry remembers a more practical reason: “It was the one place in Tuscany where you could buy large tracts of vineyards.” In 1977, they bought their first 4,500 acres. In 1984, they bought another huge parcel, including the *castello*, and finished building the winery.

Montalcino had an ideal climate for growing Sangiovese, but had never achieved the fame of its neighbors, Chianti and Montepulciano. The local wine industry had been devastated by phylloxera in the 1930s; replanting had been difficult during the Great Depression and World War II.

But just because vineyard owners were looking to sell didn’t mean the locals were happy to see an American company arrive. “The reaction was very negative,” says Harry. “Were we going to commercialize Brunello, or were we going to cannibalize Brunello?”

It helped that the company had an Italian face in Rivella, who had a flawless reputation. And local suspicion started to fade when Banfi’s first Brunellos were neither sweet nor fizzy. The new winery, with stainless-steel tanks and other modern technology, produced clean, high quality wines that were still representative of the traditional Brunello style. Still, some producers grind their teeth when they drive by the behemoth of a winery or see tourists swarming the Castello tasting room. But none will say so on the record.

Rivella walked a delicate line between respecting that traditional style and producing a wine consumers could drink sooner. In those days, Brunello had to be aged for four years, and most of that in wood, before it could be released, and the wines were famous for being tightly wound for a decade or more before they could be enjoyed. (In 1998, the required time in wood was reduced to two years—the remaining two can be in bottle.) While trying to market their new Brunellos in the United States, the Marianis heard reservations from restaurant owners, who said customers were afraid to order young Brunellos, and that restaurants could not afford to cellar wines for a decade.

To tackle that, Rivella and his staff looked to the vineyards. “Sangiovese is not an easy variety to understand—it has more secrets than others,” says Enrico Viglierchio, Rivella’s successor as general manager as of 2001. “Because it’s more sensitive to its climate, it makes it harder for us to manage sugar, acidity and tannins together.” Although waiting for ripe tannins creates a softer wine that still matures well, the increased sugar levels could wreak havoc



Much of Banfi’s innovation was spearheaded by Ezio Rivella, a talented enologist who focused on making ageworthy Brunellos that are enjoyable in their youth.

cooperative called Riunite to develop a clean, consistent wine. Fermentation was arrested at 9 percent alcohol—leaving plenty of residual sugar—and carbon dioxide added to create a bubbly, sweet wine. Banfi imported 100 cases in 1967. Lambrusco was welcomed at a time when Americans were drinking Lancers and Mateus, sparkling, sweet rosés from Portugal. By 1983, Riunite imports reached a peak of 11 million cases a year. (Last year, Banfi sold more than 2.2 million cases in the United States, a number that’s been on the upswing since 2000.)

**A**fter Riunite’s success, the Marianis were intent on improving the U.S. image of Italian wines, which were considered rustic and unsophisticated. Italian wineries, still in turmoil after land reform had ended a centuries-old sharecropping system, had fallen behind their French and American competitors. In 1965, Chianti had begun a 15-year program of replanting with vines cho-



Winemaker Rudi Buratti (right) produces hundreds of thousands of cases a year for Banfi (barrel cellar shown on left), including small-production Brunellos and super Tuscans.

An answer could be found in better canopy and yield management, but also by choosing the right clones of Sangiovese, which, like Pinot Noir, is highly prone to mutation. In 1982, Banfi launched a 15-year study, with the help of the University of Milan, into just what it had growing. (Chianti Classico growers began a similar study in 1987.) Researchers found 600 different Sangiovese clones in Montalcino. Banfi narrowed the number to 15 with the best qualities, recommended them to the Brunello *consorzio* and began replanting. The first vines went into the ground in 1991, in the plots surrounding the *castello*, which provide the fruit for the Poggio alle Mura. They chose three of the 15 clones for each vineyard, based on the soil and climate conditions and on the flavor profile they wanted from that parcel. It all contributes to better options during blending.

In 1991, when James began working for his father and uncle full-time, Banfi was still only sending a few thousand cases a year to the United States. His first assignment fresh out of business school was to start building a market for their wine.

What that really meant was building a market for Brunello di Montalcino. “First, we had to shorten our message to just one word—Brunello, Brunello, Brunello,” says James. “Without an awareness of Brunello, Banfi would go nowhere. We were the spearhead for Brunello in the U.S. market.”

James traveled America constantly, holding tastings. It helped that the wines were growing more approachable with each vintage. In 1992, the 1987 wines were released. It had not been a good vintage, so James was surprised when Banfi sold 20 percent more wine in the U.S. market than it had from the previous vintage. Americans were turning to red wine. Two years later, as the economy began booming, James sold 4,000 cases of the 1989 vintage. He asked the winery for 10,000 cases of the 1990, and it easily sold out. America was falling in love with Brunello.

to America, whose consumers now buy one out of every three bottles of all Brunello produced. And yet, despite making more Brunello than any other property, Banfi has maintained quality.

Part of that is testament to the company’s innovations. Their newest invention will be used for the first time during the 2007 harvest—hybrid fermentation tanks, one-third stainless steel and two-thirds oak. The steel top and bottom will make controlling fermentation temperatures and cleaning the various valves, gauges and hatches easier, while the oak middle will subtly introduce oxygen during fermentation, stabilizing color and tannins.

But if the Marianis had not chosen such an ideal region, none of their innovations or marketing know-how could have produced a great wine. “If Brunello is famous all around the world, it means Banfi has had an important influence,” says Giacomo Neri, winemaker at Casanova di Neri. “But the result is also thanks to the many other producers who believed in the wine, in the *terroir*.”

As for the Mariani family, generational handoffs are never simple, but Banfi, aided by consultants, managed to transition into its third generation without many problems. Harry still comes into the office, but now as an adviser to James and to his son-in-law, company CFO Marc Goodrich. As for John, he has his own vision of semiretirement. He still travels extensively, pitching Banfi around the world, looking for new markets and constantly e-mailing ideas to the rest of the family. He is still working to improve the image of Italian wines. “John has laid out a road map—always thinking of the consumer first,” says Cristina. “Our challenge is to keep figuring out how we are going to implement it.”

Cristina took over management of the Montalcino estate in 1997 from James, who shifted to running the import business. She has focused on making Castello Banfi a true destination for Brunello fans. In March, she opened a small luxury hotel on the estate, Il Borgo, alongside the Michelin-starred Ristorante Castello Banfi.