

BRUNELLO DI MONTALCINO

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By Raymond Chan

To many Italian wine enthusiasts, Brunello di Montalcino is the greatest expression of Sangiovese. It is said that Ferruccio Biondi-Santi isolated a superior clone, called Brunello, bottled it and labeled it so in 1888. That in conjunction with the warmer and drier climate of Montalcino has resulted in a Tuscan red wine ahead of practically any other. To ensure this distinction, the process of prolonged maceration and fermentation to exaggerate extraction, and the resultant and necessary lengthy oak maturation has evolved. The legal requirements today are that Brunello and Riserva Brunello can only be released for consumption after 4 and 5 years of age (with a minimum of 2 years in wood) respectively. This of course goes against modern thinking and preferences for fresh, fruit-driven and accessible wine.

Brunello remains a rare and expensive wine. With only 1,500 ha approx. devoted to the style, the demand should be high. However, the demand has been limited by the highly extractive style that demands at least a decade of bottle age to show full potential, and of course the pricing. No wonder Hugh Johnson's description of it as a wine for 'heroic millionaires'!

This tasting of fifteen Brunello di Montalcino wines at Regional was a special one. Few people would see so many at one sitting. And to investigate the finer points became possible, due to the sheer number of different bottlings. My notes follow:

Flight One: 2000 Vintage

88/100 – Robert Parker, 3 Stars. An accessible, earlier maturing vintage

Frescobaldi 'Castelgiocondo' Brunello di Montalcino 2000

13.5% alc., from vines average age 27 years, 32 days maceration and 12 days fermentation in S/S vats, 3 years in casks and barriques. Dark, deep, blackish ruby red. Full, soft nose, with dark cherry aromas, quite ripe, with an earthy, funky element, well balanced. Full-bodied and soft with considerable extract. Earth and dark berried fruit, good cherry flavours and oak. A hint of Brett. Full, alcoholic and long finishing, and the componentry in balance. The second preferred of the flight. 17.5/20

Castello Banfi Brunello di Montalcino 2000

13.3% alc., 10-12 days maceration and fermentation in S/S tanks, 24 months in 50% French oak barriques and 50% Slavonian oak casks. Dark, purple ruby colour with great depth. Fine, aromatic, lifted nose with dark berry fruits, modern, clean and fresh. Very fine-grained, tight and dense on palate, with plenty of extraction. Dark berries, good acidity and freshness, quite youthful really. Not forward at all, this will develop more. At this stage, 17.0+/20

Castello Banfi Brunello di Montalcino 'Poggio alle Mura' 2000

13.5% alc., from the vineyard running down the slopes of Castello Banfi fortress. 12-13 days maceration and fermentation in S/S tanks. 24 months in 90% French and 10% Slavonian oak casks, 60 hl and 120 hl capacity. Unfiltered. Very dark, deep, purple red. Very soft and fine, an elegant and fresh nose, lifted, fruity and modern. High extract, but very rich and luscious, very fine-grained, with lovely freshness and fine acidity. A modern, fruity style that is serious, and will age well. The most preferred wine of the flight by the tasters. 18.5/20

Flight Two: 1999 Vintage

94/100 – Robert Parker, 4 Star. High quality, but approachable wines

Cantina di Montalcino Brunello di Montalcino 1999

13.0% alc., maceration and fermentation for 15-20 days. Aged in Slovenian oak casks for at least two years. Very dark, deep ruby red with a little garnet on edge. Fullish, dark-fruited nose, quite upfront. Solid and soft. A touch of oxidation on palate, solid and robust, with noticeable alcohol. Soft and forward, dense, a little flat overall. 16.5+/20

Gaja 'Pieve Santa Restituta' Brunello di Montalcino 'Rennina' 1999

14.0% alc., 3 weeks fermentation in S/S tanks, aged 1 year in barriques and 1 year in large oak casks. Lighter colour, less dark, some garnet and orange hues on edge. Very fine, mellow, cedary oak and noticeable new barrique spiciness, dominating any fruit. Very fine-grained, there is huge flavours of new oak spice. The lifted oak dominance is attractive and along with the structure, the fruit sweetness is hidden. Flavour profile becomes narrowed. However, the least preferred wine of the flight by the group. My score 16.0/20

Argiano Brunello di Montalcino 1999

14.0% alc., maceration on skins for 14-16 days, aged 1 year in 1 y.o. French barriques and 1 year in large traditional oak casks. Deepish, ruby, garnet colour. Full, aromatic nose with some cedary elements, but becomes shy. Shy on palate, the expression is less. Gentle on palate too, soft and elegant. Not quite the concentration. Very accessible, and lighter weight really. Some hints of earthiness. A traditional style. 17.0+/20

Frescobaldi 'Castelgiocondo' Brunello di Montalcino 1999

14.5% alc., 3 years in oak casks and barriques. Darkish ruby red with good depth and a little age on edge. Full, pure fruit style, quite traditional and robust. Solid, and clean, just starting to show some bottle development aromas. Full-bodied and open with accessibility on palate. Lovely freshness and acidity, quite a big wine. Needs a little more richness to match the structure. A ruggedness to the wine. The third most popular of the flight for the group. 18.0+/20

Antinori 'Pian delle Vigne' Brunello di Montalcino 1999

14.0% alc., maceration for 15-20 days and fermentation in S/S, matured in oak barrels of between 30 and 200 hl for 2 years. Very dark, black hued ruby colour. Quite fine and elegant on nose, fresh modern aromas of dark berries and balanced oak input. A mineral component. Tightly bound with a musky complexity. Very highly extracted, with dark berried fruit flavours and balanced new oak. A modern, seriously extracted, but fine wine. The second preferred wine of the flight for the group of tasters. My score 17.5+/20

Castello Banfi Brunello di Montalcino Riserva 'Poggio all'Oro' 1999

13.8% alc., from 'La Pieve' vineyard, 14-20 days maceration and fermentation in S/S tanks. Aged for 42 months in French barriques. Very dark, blackish red colour. Very fresh, deep fruited modern expression on bouquet, great concentration and depth. Rich, deep, dark berry fruits with savoury complexities appearing. Real lusciousness to the cherryish fruit and concentration on palate. Some new barrique work noticeable, adding a spiciness, but in balance. Outstanding wine. The most preferred wine of the flight by the group. 19.5/20

Frescobaldi 'Castelgiocondo' Brunello di Montalcino Riserva 1999

14.5% alc., from 15 ha of the Ripe al Convento site, the highest point of the Castelgiocondo estate, vines 25 y.o. on average. 30 days maceration and 10 days fermentation in S/S vats, released after maturation in Slavonian oak botti and French oak barriques and 2 years bottle age. Dark, deep black red with a little garnet. Full, spicy nose with herbal complexities, very traditional and robust, but with richness and ripeness of fruit. Full-bodied with huge tannin extraction, but well balanced by the fruit richness and lusciousness. Almost a bitter concentration. Savouriness contributes to the individuality, which not all enjoyed. My score 19.0/20

Flight Three: Older Vintages

1997: 95/100 – Robert Parker, 5 Star. Showing some development, approachable

1996: 78/100 – Robert Parker, 3 Star. Drinking well now

1995: 88/100 – Robert Parker, 5 Star. Tannic wines, maturing slowly

Castello Banfi Brunello di Montalcino 1996

13.0% alc., 12 days maceration and fermentation in S/S tanks. Aged 24 months in oak casks (60 hl and 120 hl capacity), the final 6 months in French barriques. Dark ruby red with some garnet hues. Full nose, quite funky earthy providing complexities. Deeply fruited and robust, with gamey, savoury bottle development on bouquet. Real power and depth on palate, robust with high extraction. Not quite the fruit richness to match the structure, and acidity shows through. Good development characters, but the least preferred of the flight by the group. 17.0-/20

Gaja ‘Pieve Santa Restituta’ Brunello di Montalcino ‘Sugarille’ 1996

14.0% alc., from the Sugarille vineyard, fermentation in S/S with 12 months aging in barrique and 12 months in large oak casks. Ruby-garnet red colour with some orange. Elegant, spicy, cedary oak on nose, very attractive, and now interwoven with the fruit. Plenty of spicy, cedary new oak, very Gaja in style. Tannins are very fine-grained, and the fruit is rather dominated by the oak. Very long on the finish. But is this Brunello? However, the second most preferred wine of the flight by the group. My score 16.5/20

Gaja ‘Pieve Santa Restituta’ Brunello di Montalcino ‘Rennina’ 1996

14.0% alc, from the Rennina portion of the estate, fermentation in S/S tanks aged 1 year in barriques and 1 year in large oak casks. Lighter ruby-garnet colour with orange on edge. Lovely balanced cedary aromas of amalgamated fruit and oak, quite spicy. Elegant on palate, a musky note. Fine-grained extraction, to quite a high level. There is power and depth, and noticeable alcohol too. Fruit secondary to the oak. My score 16.0+/20

Frescobaldi ‘Castelgiocondo’ Brunello di Montalcino Riserva 1995

14.0% alc., from the 15 ha Ripe al Convento site, released after long maturation in oak casks and barriques, and 2 years bottle age. Dark ruby-garnet red colour, with a deep heart. Full and solid, but shyly expressed nose. Fine earthy complexities, quite ethereal. A more elegant wine, not as big as many of the others tasted. Becoming quite integrated and well-balanced. Still with good tannin structure and a juiciness to the fruit, showing the richness. 17.5/20

Castello Banfi Brunello di Montalcino Riserva ‘Poggio all’Oro’ 1997

13.0% alc., 14-20 days maceration and fermentation in S/S tanks, aged for 30 months in 100% new French oak barriques. Dark, deep ruby red colour, youthful appearance. Powerful, rich and ripe, quite primary on nose with dark cherryish and noticeable oak. Luscious aromas. Very ripe, dark berry and plum flavours, primary and very youthful in expression. A modern style. Very high extraction level, almost too much for the fruit. Should develop well if the fruit holds for the structure. The most preferred wine of the flight by the group. 18.5-/20

Conclusions

A fascination tasting, showing a uniformity in degree of extraction, but a diversity in style. The wines ranged from the modern, dark berry, cherry and plum expressions (such as Banfi and Antinori) to the traditional, savoury and earthy styles (of Frescobaldi and Argiano). The Gaja wines were very new oak-influenced. The Riserva wines came through with a little more of everything, as they should have. And vintage variation was apparent. Surprisingly, the balance of the wines ensured accessibility. A great tasting of rare and influential wines. We only wish we had some Biondi-Santi!