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Brunello di Montalcino Comes of Age

By Monica Lerner

It's a chilly January morning and half a dozen monks dressed in white robes are singing, filling the hollow interior of the alabaster Abbazia di Sant'Antimo with their melodic, Gregorian chant. It's a Sunday like any other in Montalcino.

A few miles off the dirt-paved road beyond the abbey, vintner Andrea Cortonesi searches the glove compartment of his truck for an extra pair of pruning shears to cut back the previous year's growth on dormant vines. From the property immediately facing the abbey, vintner Filippo Fanti shoos away curious cats determined to explore his yet-to-be-inaugurated winery. From this distance, the town of Montalcino is seen rising proudly from the summit of a hill, basking in Sunday silence.

But in just five weeks' time, the spotlight of the world wine community will be cast on this tiny Tuscan town. Wine journalists and international specialists will arrive en masse to get their first taste of the newly released and highly anticipated 2001 Brunello di Montalcino. Brunello di Montalcino is Tuscany's most important wine. With one in four bottles sold in the USA alone, Brunello is not an Italian success story, but an international one. And, thanks to rigorous regulation governing how the wine is made, arguably no other Italian wine delivers higher quality with such consistency. For the three members of the *Wine Enthusiast* tasting panel who were granted a sneak preview of the new vintage, the outstanding 2001 Brunello di Montalcino is a case in point.

High scoring category

Rarely does an entire category of wine score so well and so evenly across the board. Of the 114 total 2001 Brunellos blind tasted by our panel in Montalcino at the beginning of January, 75 wines, or 66 percent, scored 90 points or higher for "excellent" or "exceptional" on the *Wine Enthusiast* ratings classification. Our panel also tasted 2000 Riserva Brunellos di Montalcino and an impressive 83 percent of these wines scored 90 points or higher.

We found quality levels to be extraordinary for both traditionally styled Brunello di Montalcino and modern interpretations of the wine. The philosophical divide between these two schools is fodder for debate over Brunello's future: Can the wine remain true to its roots, or should it cater to international tastes? This is an especially tricky question with a wine as distinctive as Brunello di Montalcino.

Brunello only Tuscan wine that's not a blend

Brunello is a pure expression of a superior clone of Sangiovese known as Sangiovese Grosso (also called “Brunello”) that produces fuller, richer berries. Brunello is the only Tuscan red wine that is not a blend. Lovers of old-school Brunello look for the delicately ethereal aromas typical of the variety: forest floor, wild berries, violets and balsam (menthol or eucalyptus) backed by higher tannins and acidity for longer cellar aging. New schoolers are attracted to black cherry fruit and toasted vanilla notes from aging in smaller barrels—characters that yield a softer, consumer-friendly and ready-to-drink wine.

Although the *Wine Enthusiast* tasting panel appreciated the stylistic differences between these two schools, we loved both. We adored the overall freshness, balance and power of the wine and its natural kinship to food, especially succulent grilled steaks. The four-star 2001 vintage, in particular, represents a coming of age for Brunello di Montalcino. Recent vintages, like the widely popular 1997 and 1999, catapulted the wine to sudden, and perhaps fleeting, cultdom. But the overall consistency of 2001 firmly grounds Brunello as a wine with the potential to become a household name.

Regarding Riservas

Riserva Brunello di Montalcino is produced exclusively in the best vintages and is released six years after the harvest, instead of five years as is the case with Brunello di Montalcino normale, as the classic version of the wine is known. Riserva wines represent the producer's best selections, or is sometimes sourced from a specific vineyard site deemed superior thanks to its exposure, soil and maturity of the vines. Consequently, Riservas cost about 20 to 30 percent more on release.

Our highest-scoring Riserva is Giacomo Neri's 2000 Cerretalto Brunello di Montalcino (96 points). Rich, intense and extra smooth in the mouth, the wine lives up to the Riserva mystique with confidence and character (despite the fact the word “Riserva” does not appear on the bottle). Grapes for the wine come from the Cerretalto vineyard east of Montalcino. Winemaker Neri explains that the 19-acre vineyard lines the flanks of a natural south-facing amphitheater overlooking a small stream. Yields are very low, resulting in better concentration and balance. “What I love about this wine is the fact you need to wait many years before it realizes its potential. My 1993 and 1995 vintages are ready to drink now,” says the 40-year-old, whose recent Cerretalto vintages include 2001, 2000, 1999 and 1997.

Two producers can be credited with Brunello's phenomenal success thus far—two that occupy opposite ends of the Brunello spectrum. The first is Biondi-Santi, whose founder, Ferruccio Biondi Santi, “invented” Brunello in 1888 by becoming the first to bottle it. Biondi-Santi isolated the celebrated Brunello-Biondi-Santi-11 clone at the Il Greppo estate to make elegant wines for long cellar aging. The second is American-owned Castello Banfi, which has used intelligent marketing, high volumes and a modernist, stylistic approach to bring Brunello overseas. Banfi is Brunello's leading ambassador, and although it produces 60,000 cases of Brunello a year, the wine's quality is always top-notch.

Nevertheless, Brunello remains an expensive wine at \$50-plus and draws mostly connoisseurs and collectors. Unlike many New World wines that cost as much but are released one or two years from harvest, Brunello's price tag reflects the burden of holding the wine off the market for four years. According to the DOCG disciplinary that governs winemaking, Brunello di Montalcino must be released no sooner than the fifth year after the harvest. In 1980, the rules required 42 months wood aging, but that number has since been lowered to 24 months (with the remaining time in bottle). This modification allows for increased flexibility and stylistic variables.

For example, 32-year-old enologist Cecilia Leoneschi, who works for *Castiglion del Bosco* (a new venture owned by Florence's Ferragamo family that will soon include an on-site luxury hotel), prefers to age only in small French barrique for the minimum time required and then leaves her wine for the remaining time in bottles. "We want immediately enjoyable wines upon release," she says. Then there are middle-of-the-road producers like Altesino's Claudio Basla, who uses a combination of French barrique and larger oak casks (20 percent barrique for four months and 80 percent casks for three years for his normal Brunello). "Every producer chooses a style, and I want to make an elegant wine but one that isn't just an expensive gift," he says. Traditionalists prefer to age exclusively in larger Slovenian casks for longer periods so that refined wood flavors are dosed out slowly and guardedly. Gianfranco Soldera, a Brunello purist and not a man to mince words, ages "as long as it takes until my taste buds tell me it's ready." At the time of writing, his 2001 Brunello di Montalcino was still resting in oak casks.

Producers are afforded cash flow security in the form of a second, lower-priced wine named Rosso di Montalcino that can be marketed one year after the harvest. The relationship between Rosso di Montalcino and Brunello is perfectly symbiotic, and in a sense, Rosso di Montalcino is a guarantee of higher quality in its big brother, Brunello. In off years, producers sell declassified Brunello as Rosso di Montalcino and stay in the market. Consumers also win because they are buying a wine that may have been born Brunello, at a much lower price point.

II Territorio

To the citizens of Montalcino, the secret of Brunello is in the deep spirituality and history of the region. Beautiful and strategically positioned on medieval trade routes linking archenemies Florence and Siena, Montalcino was regularly ravaged by battles and sieges throughout its history. The residues of a turbulent past lasted well into the mid-1900s, when the town was immersed in profound poverty. Legend says Montalcino's fortunes finally changed thanks to two divine miracles. The first was the Madonna who shielded the town from her enemies, and the second was the grapevine that turned the local economy around.

Montalcino owes a lot to Brunello. Twenty percent of Brunello is sold in the town's vicinity and has sparked an explosion in wine tourism, also measured in the rapidly increasing number of hotels and restaurants. Walk down Montalcino's tight alleys and the retail landscape seems focused on wine bars and tasting rooms. You have to wonder where its residents go for dry cleaning or hardware. Wine wealth is injected into all segments of the economy and reinvested into itself. New wineries are sprouting like mushrooms: I visited 10 producers over a four-day period and six of these were in the process of building expensive, state-of-the-art facilities.

Filippo Fanti has a new winery in the works and is also president of the Consorzio del Vino Brunello di Montalcino, the powerful producers' association. "We now make 6.8 million bottles of Brunello," he says, "but within the next 12 to 24 months we will grow to 9 million bottles and I am confident the market will absorb it." Not everyone shares his optimism; many are worried that Brunello volumes are growing too fast. Sales in 2004 reached \$175 million (on all Montalcino wines, including Brunello). Recently, as many as 10 new wineries have been inaugurated per year, bringing the total up from a mere 25 producers in 1975 to 240 today.

Protected against excessive growth

Fortunately, through regulation and the very lay of the land, Brunello is protected against excessive growth. Brunello di Montalcino was the first wine in Italy to earn prestigious DOCG status for stringent quality-control guidelines. The territory is well defined and compact at 4,700 acres of vineyards, with virtually no room for expansion. Brunello also benefits from what many recognize as the best producers' association in Italy. The Consorzio boasts 100 percent membership (each and every bottler in the territory pays dues and is an active member) and represents a uniquely unified and dynamic bunch.

Environmental conditions also set Montalcino apart. Located 70 miles south of Florence, the thickly forested Montalcino area is drier and warmer than Chianti and fruit regularly reaches maximum ripening for fuller, more powerful wines (often over 14 percent alcohol). Proximity to the sea allows for better ventilation and cooler evenings, while Mount Amiata to the southeast forms a natural barrier against harsh weather and hail. The town of Montalcino is perched 1,800 feet above sea level, with higher altitude vineyards prone to greater day and nighttime temperature extremes, which can evoke crisp acidity in the wines. The lower quadrants of Brunello's territory, surrounding S. Angelo in Colle to the south, are flatter and warmer, resulting in more robust wines. Soil types are mixed and range from limestone to red clay. The 2001 vintage stands out thanks to rain-saturated soils that spurred spring growth, a long hot summer and dry harvest. Yields were down 10 percent due to sudden frost after bud break but the loss helped achieve higher-quality grapes.

From its vantage point on the highest peak in this part of Tuscany, Montalcino remains awash in golden light until the final moments of the day. The wine shops have closed, the monks have retired to their abbey quarters and darkness soon blankets an expanse of dormant vineyards. It's the end of a day in Montalcino. What the next day will bring is anyone's guess.

Uccelliera: All Along the Watchtower

Ask about Uccelliera around Montalcino and you'll probably be told how hard its owner, Andrea Cortonesi, works: "He's a hands-on guy," or "He's always in the vineyard." So when I called Cortonesi to request an appointment, I was not surprised to be told that our interview would take place as he finished pump-overs in the winery. Uccelliera is named after an ancient watchtower located on this site where falcons or other birds may have been housed during medieval times. As you approach the property near Castelnuovo dell'Abate you see that it's a work in progress. A



Andrea Cortonesi

new winery and tasting room are being built and roosters strut aimlessly about the construction site. The tasting room terrace overlooks a beautiful parcel of vineyard that counts towards Cortonesi's 16 total acres. Between leased land and his own, Cortonesi's vineyards are divided into three groups, at 500, 800 and 1,100 feet above sea level, respectively. Each has different soils (from red clay to grey sand), varying plant density, vine age and exposure. "My Brunello is a blend of all three vineyards, depending on the weather and the vintage," says

Cortonesi. "They are like my three children and I could never show a preference for one over another. But I can determine which gives more complexity and structure or which gives more perfume and acidity." In his refurbished winery, Cortonesi uses temperature-controlled fermentation and both French barrique and traditional casks for aging. He does everything himself, from pruning to promotions: "I believe that the best irrigation in winemaking are the drops of sweat off your brow."

Casato Prime Donne: The First Lady of Brunello

If every winery has a unique characteristic that sets it apart regionally, Donatella Cinelli Colombini, who heads Montalcino's Casato Prime Donne, boasts a quality that makes her stand taller in a wider world of wine. Hers is the

first Italian winery to be managed by an all-female staff in a notoriously male-dominated business. Colombini carries her Prime Donne ("first ladies of wine") banner beyond the boundaries of wine. This energetic and vibrant lady is a wine producer (with a second, 800-acre property in Trequanda, Tuscany), a public servant (as tourism advisor for the municipality of Siena), head of Tuscany's Women of Wine group, and a community leader (she sponsors a prestigious awards event dedicated to influential women). With 46 acres of property amidst the gently rolling hills north of Montalcino in the direction of Buonconvento, Colombini has developed what is best described as a winery with a female touch. Family portraits hang in the cellar. In the vineyard, she has created a 1.5-mile walking trail with modern sculptures mounted in panoramic points. "I strongly believe in the potential



Donatella Cinelli Colombini

of wine tourism,” she says in a soft, measured voice. “I seek to create a wine experience so that visitors can understand this world.” But Casato Prime Donne does have one man in the house and his name is Carlo Ferrini. Among Italy’s most celebrated enologists, Carlo has shaped a lush, layered and complex wine that embodies the best of modern, New World-style Brunello (the 2001 vintage scored 95 points on the Wine Enthusiast 100-point scale). “He is the dragon and the seven women who work here are the doves,” says Colombini. “We created a new wine in his honor called Il Drago e le 7 Colombe.”

Fanti: The Success of Unity

Filippo B. Fanti wears two hats: The first is as a wine producer with 740 acres, of which 123 are planted to vine, facing the sun-drenched Abbazia di Sant’Antimo. The second is as president of the spectacularly effective Consorzio del Vino Brunello di Montalcino. That makes him an expert on the specific, the general and a little Tuscan personality



Filippo Fanti

twist known as campanilismo. Campanilismo is defined as the visceral, almost obsessive, self-importance assigned by the competitive municipalities across Tuscany and measured by the always-oversized church steeple of each. This my-church-tower-is-bigger-than-yours attitude created deep divides across the territory. But Montalcino is an anomaly because it has successfully moved beyond this stubborn mentality. “We have Brunello to thank,” says Fanti. “If we had a wine crisis there would be discord. Success unites us, it does not divide us.” For this reason, Fanti has made unity his battle cry. “It is of the utmost importance that all producers, from the smallest ones to the biggest ones remain focused on the same goals,” says the man who is serving his third three-year term as president. With his Consorzio hat on, Fanti is also in a position to comment on Brunello’s evolution. “Some people say that winemaking styles have changed but I think it’s a matter of changing winemaking technology like plant density in the vineyards and modern systems in the winery. If Brunello were blindly following the market, it would have to address various tastes: Italians like tannic wines, Germans like them fruity and Americans prefer them soft and round.” With his producer’s hat on, Fanti will soon inaugurate a new winery that will help him reach his goal of 21,000 cases per year, up from 12,500. He removes seed to tame Sangiovese’s tannins and renders the wines even smoother with oak barrique.

Castello Banfi Brunello’s Ambassador

There are wineries, and then, there are SuperWineries: Producers that single-handedly raise the stakes for everyone and become an emblem of a region. Castello Banfi is Montalcino’s SuperWinery. Ask around town, and the citizens of

Montalcino seem eternally grateful to Castello Banfi for putting them on the enological map. More than any other, American-owned Castello Banfi has introduced the world to Brunello and Brunello to the world. It is the wine’s most enthusiastic and effective ambassador thanks to clear appreciation of both winemaking and marketing philosophy. “My father, uncle and grandfather worked as wine merchants since 1919 and knew what consumers wanted. They also saw that back then, American consumers weren’t going to Italian wines,” says Cristina Mariani-May, who is the young face of Castello Banfi today. What she represents is an immense property topped by a beautiful 11th-century castle and hamlet—7,100-acres, 2,400 of which are planted with vineyards. Banfi produces 50,000 cases of normal Brunello and 7,500 cases of their Poggio alle Mura Brunello. Approximately a third of the production is sold in the U.S.A. Despite those large numbers, Banfi’s quality is consistent and excellent—another rarity. “We did clone research in our vineyards and made efforts to raise the standard of not just our wines, but of Brunello in general,” says Cristina. “We also had the infrastructure and knowledge of sales and distribution to market our brand.” Banfi Vintners, one



Cristina Mariani-May

of American's leading importers of wine, was founded by Cristina's grandfather, John Mariani, Sr. Thanks to their efforts they fine-tuned their winery techniques to make a softer, modern Brunello.

The Longevity of Biondi Santi

In the spring of 1944, rumors spread that the fighting front of WWII would rip directly through Montalcino. Franco Biondi Santi and his father, Tancredi, laid bricks throughout the night to wall up the small room where their bottles of



Franco Biondi Santi

Riservas dating from 1888 to 1925 would be stored safely from the troops. "If we had not saved those bottles, the world would never know the extraordinary aging ability of our Brunello," says 84-year-old Franco Biondi Santi. "Longevity sets us apart."

Today, the soft-spoken gentleman of old school extraction who presides over the celebrated Tenuta Il Greppo vineyard and winery produces a key from his coat pocket and fiddles with the rusted padlock that safeguards his family legacy. He gently lifts a bottle of Brunello di Montalcino from 1888—the very same year the wine was "invented" by his grandfather—and holds it against a dimmed bulb to display the vivacity of its ruby color that has remained intact over more than a century of aging. An hour later he sits down with the Wine Enthusiast tasting panel for an exclusive tasting of six wines dating back to the outstanding 1955 vintage. And by the end of the evening, his point is well made: Thanks to high acidity, careful aging in near-neutral oak casks and a rigorous recorking program (in which older bottles are topped up exclusively with wine from the same vintage), very few wines in the world—and perhaps none in Italy—can match Biondi-Santi Brunello di Montalcino's graceful longevity.

89 Biondi-Santi 2001 Brunello di Montalcino; \$83. An excellent performance from a wine that has not yet hit adolescence on the Biondi-Santi timeline. Delicate cherry and berry fruit carry smoothly over tightly woven acidity and tannins.

93 Biondi-Santi 1999 Riserva (Brunello di Montalcino); \$300 (\$264 upon release). Violets, forest berry and almond notes make up a completely harmonious nose. Tight tannins, firm structure and a beautifully long finish suggest the wine could age an additional 20 or 30 years.

92 Biondi-Santi 1988 Riserva (Brunello di Montalcino); \$738 (\$105 upon release). The wine's age and evolution are becoming evident. Monochromatic fruit tones are replaced with a wider aromatic assortment: forest floor, dried rose petal, anise seed and tar. Exceptionally complex and delicate.

95 Biondi-Santi 1983 Riserva (Brunello di Montalcino); \$522 (\$57 upon release). An incredible wine from a stellar vintage that has only just entered its zenith. Lively, expressive and generously layered with blue flowers, Indian spice, black licorice, resin, prunes, clove and vanilla nuances. Tannins are smooth but firm. Recorked in 2000.

90 Biondi-Santi 1970 Riserva (Brunello di Montalcino); \$438 (\$12 upon release). Delighted the panel with almond paste, maple syrup and snappy citrus-spritz on the finish. Compact and tight in the mouth. Recorked in 1987.

94 Biondi-Santi 1955 Riserva (Brunello di Montalcino); \$5,520 (\$5 upon release). At 51 years of age, the aromatic intensity has not diminished in the least (even when you sniff your emptied glass). Dusty tannins and graphite tones ride over an extra-long, spicy finish. Recorked in 1978 and 2000.

