

Brunello. A Wine for the Ages

Charles Scicolone (February 03, 2008)



Last year I was privileged to speak at the Consorzio Del Vino Brunello di Montalcino vintage tasting at I Trulli Restaurant. Guests included members of the press and many Brunello producers.

We tasted a wide variety of Brunello, from 1997 back to 1979. They were all four- and five-star-rated vintages (five stars being the highest rating as given by the Consorzio). The 1979 from Il Poggione and La Gera were showing very well as were the Tenute Silvio Nardi and the Col d'Orcia both from 1985. The standout from the older vintages was the 1979 Villa Poggio Salvi which was still full of life and had many years ahead of it. I consider the 1997's to still be too young to drink. Wines made from the sangiovese grape can last a very long time.



The town of Montalcino sits on a hilltop overlooking the vineyards. It is 1,850 feet above sea level. It gets its name from the holm oak or holly, known as ilice or leccio in Italian and ilex in Latin, a tree commonly found in the hills around the township. (Montalcino = "monte" + "ilice", or "mountain of holly".) The holm oak is the symbol of the Consorzio. It is also the symbol found on the city's crest. Montalcino and the surrounding area is rural though it is only about 40 minutes south of Siena.

The production zone lies within the hilly region of the Chianti Senese district. The climate is Mediterranean and it is hotter and drier than the Chianti Classico area. The lower slopes where the grapes grow are made of clayey soil and marl. The higher slopes where the better grapes are grown are made up of a combination of limestone, marl, and galestro, the classic yellowish stone of Toscana. The grapes ripen ten days later in the area around the town of Montalcino than they do in the area around Sant'Angelo in Colle and Sant'Angelo Scalo because of the difference in elevation.

Brunello is synonymous with the name Biondi Santi, the family who first produced the wine in 1888. In Montalcino, 150 years ago, the typical wine was white and the most revered wine was the Moscadello dessert wine made from Moscato grapes. Most wine back then was a mixture of different grapes. Producers used the governo method the same way they did in Chianti (adding roughly 10% dried-grape wine must to the wine during vinification). Brunello gets its name from the brownish color of the grape (brunello is a diminutive of bruno in Italian, meaning "brown"). The wine has become known as Brunello and the grape has become known as Sangiovese Grosso. It was not until Ferruccio Biondi Santi started not only to bottle the wine on a regular basis but to make it just from Sangiovese Grosso that Brunello was truly born. There are still bottles of his 1888 and 1891 Brunellos in the cellar at the Biondi Santi estate. The next oldest vintage at the winery is the 1945. Up until the 1960s, few winemakers bottled Brunello and certainly no one kept the older vintages. In the 1970s, there were roughly 25 producers in Brunello.

In the late 1970's, an American company, Banfi, bought property in Montalcino, making them the largest continuous land-holder in Italy. Banfi in Montalcino is known as Castello Banfi. Their researchers studied clonal selection and soil types and were willing to share this information with any one who was interested. Banfi's presence has helped to attract more producers to the area and today there are more than 200 of them.

In the 1960's, following Ferruccio's lead, the DOC law was passed that required Brunello to be aged four years in cask before being bottled. That was reduced to three and a half years, then three years, and now according to the law, regular Brunello has to be aged for two years in cask and four months minimum in bottle. The wine must not be released before the January 1 after the harvest: so, for example, the 2003 was released in January of 2008. The Riserva must also be aged at least two years in cask and six months in bottle but cannot be released for five years. The 2002 Riserva, for example, will be released in January of 2009. 2002 was a difficult vintage (2 stars) and some producers did not make Brunello. Even fewer made a Riserva. Brunello can only be sold in a Bordeaux-type bottle.

The Brunello Consorzio is the only consorzio in Italy with 100% membership. Franco Biondi Santi (Tenuta Il Greppo) was the last producer to join the Consorzio. Franco, who makes wine the



same way his grandfather Ferruccio and his father Tancredi did, is, of course, a traditionalist. He went along with the Consorzio when they changed the rules on aging in wood but he now thinks it may have been a mistake. Franco prefers to age his wine as his father and grandfather did. Some of the members of the Consorzio want to limit it to one year in cask and introduce other varietals such as cabernet sauvignon and merlot. Franco thinks this also is a big mistake. I, like Franco, hope this does not happen.

Brunello is one of the great wines of the world. It can last for 30 years or longer. Franco Biondi Santi recommends that you open his 1997 at least four days before you drink the wine. He believes that the Riserva will last for 100 years. 1997 was one of the great vintages in Montalcino. When it was first released I was able to taste the 1997 Biondi Santi at a tasting with other noted 1997 Italian wines. There was no contest. The current vintage is the 2001 Annata (non Riserva) and sells for about \$190 per bottle.

Ruby-red when young, Brunello becomes lighter in color as it ages, developing more depth of flavor and body. It has good acidity, good fruit, and tannins which allow it to last a long time. Personally, I would not look at a bottle of Brunello unless it was at least ten years old. Actually, I would look at it but that doesn't mean I would drink it!

My favorite dish with Brunello is bistecca alla fiorentina from the excellent Chianina beef. The combination is so good it is almost as if the wine becomes the juice of the meat. Brunello is also excellent with game; try it with cinghiale, wild boar, any style.

Every bottle of Brunello that is now produced has a sticker with a special code on the neck of the bottle. If you go the web-site of the Brunello Consorzio at www.consorziobrunellodimontalcino.it and fill in the boxes with the code, information about the wine is provided including the alcohol content, acidity level, number of bottles produced, and the address, telephone number, and even a direct link to the producer's website. It is like an electronic identity card. As Stefano Campatelli, director of the Consorzio has said "...It ensures the customer of the authenticity of Montalcino wines." This identity system is also used for Rosso di Montalcino and Moscadello di Montalcino desert wine.



On January 28th of this year, the annual Brunello tasting was held in New York. The current release of Brunello is 2003 (rated four stars by the Consorzio). It was a very hot growing season not only in Montalcino but all over Italy. I expected to taste very big, fruity, high alcohol wines lacking in acidity that would be ready to drink very soon, but this was not the case. The majority of the wines were very balanced with a lot of tannin. There was a lot of fruit but it was balanced by the tannin which should make these wines last a long time. However only time will tell! Some of my favorites were: Castello Banfi; Fattoria dei Barbi; CastelGiocondo; Col D' Orcia; Conti Constanti; Il Poggione; Lisini; Luce (their first Brunello vintage); Poggio Antico; Tenuta Carpazo; and Poggio Salvi. Unfortunately the Brunello from Franco Biondi Santi was not there.

I am off to Paris having been the highest bidder for a Cancer Care for Kid's auction on a apartment in Paris. Believe it or not there is an all-Italian wine store in Paris!

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