

GRAPES of Glory

Brunello Basics:
The lowdown on Tuscany's most
prestigious wine.

By Patricia Thomson

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Why's Brunello such a big deal?

By universal acclaim, Brunello di Montalcino carries the title of Tuscany's Greatest Wine. What sets it apart is that it's 100 percent sangiovese—by definition. No other Tuscan wine is (except its little brother, Rosso di Montalcino). Moreover, it's sangiovese at its best. A good Brunello offers sangiovese's vibrancy and cherry-berry fruit, then transports you through veils of flavor, be these floral, mineral, earth, tea, or tobacco. Brunello's got great bones, so it has longevity—more than any other sangiovese. And it's got finesse; it shouldn't feel heavy in the mouth or look opaque in the glass.

Sangiovese is finicky. It can be a thoroughbred racehorse, all sleek and powerful. Or it can be a simple, plodding field horse. Secretariat or Daisy. Though native to Tuscany, this prolific grape is the country's most widely planted red, found in 88 denominations. But it's usually blended with other grapes—historically the way farmers could guarantee a drinkable wine no matter what havoc Mother Nature wrought. That blending habit was carried over into today's DOC and DOCG disciplines. Except

here. Because in this 10-square-mile patch of southern Tuscany, sangiovese performs like nowhere else.

Why's that? I thought sangiovese did just fine in Chianti and Montepulciano.

Look at a map and you'll see those are further inland. By car it's not so far, but there's a big difference in climate. Montalcino is more Mediterranean than Chianti. It's only 25 miles from the sea, so it's warmer, drier, and windier. Mild sea breezes flow up the Orcia river, one of three streams outlining the DOCG zone. Looming to the southwest is Mount Amiata, a 5700' spent volcano that offers a shield from bad weather. Montalcino itself rises to 1860'. (One can see why Siena built a massive fortress here, the city-state's final stronghold.) Towards the top, day-night temperature swings produce strong aromatics and enough acidity for age-worthy wines. Montalcino's soil is different, too.

Yeah, I heard Castello Banfi found a whale skeleton on their property.

True enough. This whole area was under sea. But it's complicated. The hill of

Montalcino was created by the collision of European and African tectonic plates. Then the sea came inland, rising to the hill's midway point. Uniquely, it did this multiple times, coming and going over the millennia. That left huge deposits of minerals and marine fossils, like that whale. Where water met land at about 1,000 feet, massive landslides occurred, mixing old hilltop with new marine soils. To be totally simplistic, one can think of Montalcino as a three-layer cake: The top is geologically the oldest, a nonfertile soil of stone and lime. That's where the original Brunello producers planted and where the terrain is best at restraining sangiovese's natural vigor. The middle layer is a marble-cake mixture of landslide rubble, clay, and calcareous marine deposits. The bottom, where Montalcino's newest vineyards lie, is the most alluvial. It's also the hottest, getting downright scorching. For a site-sensitive grape, these subzones make a world of difference in flavor, structure, and alcohol.

Why don't they spell that out on the label?

Politics. Montalcino doesn't have official subzones—and isn't likely to. No one in the



CIACCI PICCOLOMINI'S Brunello, with the town of Castelnuovo dell'Abate in the background.

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PHENOMENA IS the name given to the Brunello di Montalcino Riserva to commemorate a significant astronomical event which occurred during the year of harvest. In this case, it was a total solar eclipse.

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"lesser" locations wants to be stigmatized. And guess who's there? The mega-sized wineries, like Banfi and Frescobaldi's CastelGiocondo. Since voting on the Brunello Consortium is weighted by winery size, they hold the cards.

Didn't Banfi do some kind of clonal research?

Bravo! They did, after throwing in the towel on their original idea: making an easy-drinking sparkler from moscadello, a white grape that was Montalcino's claim to fame from the 16th to 18th centuries.

When they jumped on the Brunello bandwagon in the 1980s, they teamed up with the University of Milan to study sangiovese, which is prone to natural mutations. Starting with 650 clones, they whittled down the "suitable" list to 45 (registered), then 15 (in their vineyards). That research was helpful to everyone.

But they weren't the first to investigate sangiovese biotypes. In fact, the birth of Brunello began with that kind of research in the mid-1800s—what I consider Italy's Age of Discovery for wine. It's when Baron Ricasoli and Count Cavour were also laying

the groundwork for Chianti and Barolo, respectively.

Tell me Brunello's creation story.

Sangiovese has been in Tuscany since Etruscan times. But Brunello begins with Clementi Santi, a pharmacist and gentleman farmer. He was the first to isolate the Brunello clone and vinify it separately. But honestly, he did so much more. Remember, agricultural practices were completely different then. Farmers were sharecroppers; they ate what they grew. So their fields were a mix of everything: vines grew up fruit trees, wheat grew in between, livestock got their timeshare. Santi was highly critical of those practices and planted Montalcino's first proper vineyard.

Having a chemistry background, he analyzed the soil and identified the best plots on his Il Greppo estate. He also let the grapes fully mature and tried longer fermentations and barrel aging—all pretty radical, upending how people thought about sangiovese.

Santi published papers and won awards at agricultural fairs, including two silver medals for his "*vino rosso scelto (brunello) del 1865*"—

the first Brunello mentioned by name.

By the 1870s, he'd linked arms with Galassi, Anghirelli, and Costanti, other gentlemen farmers who banded together into the Enological Society of Montalcino. Meanwhile, a Siena commission made a breakthrough: They proved that the grapes known as brunello, sangiovese, and prugnolo gentile were all sangiovese, despite appearances. Then Clementi Santi's grandson, Ferruccio Biondi Santi, came along. He's considered the true father of Brunello.

Biondi Santi...I've heard that name. They make really expensive Brunello, right?

Indeed. The current vintage, 2010, will set you back over \$100. If you want to splurge, you can still buy the 1955 for 5,700 euros (\$6,156). Biondi Santi is the family that showed the world Brunello can really age. Which takes us back to Ferruccio.

After fighting alongside Garibaldi, he rejoined his grandfather and homed in on sangiovese. Perhaps fearing the scourge of phylloxera, he identified the estate's most disease-resistant vines and propagated those



WORKERS HARVEST grapes in Montalcino.

PHOTO BY PATRICIA THOMSON

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SESTI'S 2006 PHENOMENA pairs well with a variety of food.

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into a new generation of offspring. While Baron Ricasoli was garnering fame for his sangiovese-canaaiolo-malvasia Chianti blend, Biondi Santi cast his die with the pure sangiovese. He aged it in oak casks, put it in glass bottles, sealed it with cork—all novelties in this isolated farm region.

His enologist son, Tancredi, took over in 1917 and kept the innovations going, always pushing towards excellence and age-worthiness. Miraculously, he managed to keep operations going through both World Wars—the only estate in Montalcino to do so. Between the wars, he created a *cantina sociale* in the center of town and offered use of his cellar and winemaking gear. But all that good work was undone when phylloxera finally hit Montalcino in 1930. By 1950, it was the poorest province in Tuscany. Now it's the richest, after its turnaround starting in the 1970s. But Tancredi's hand is still felt today in the DOCG rules, among Italy's strictest.

What rules?

In particular, Tancredi and son Jacopo insisted on long aging at the winery. Brunello cannot be sold until January in the fifth year after harvest. (Add one more for Reserva.) That's the longest mandated aging for any Italian wine. During that period, it must remain in oak for a minimum of two years and in bottle for four months.

Jeez, that's a long time to tie up your capital.

Precisely why Rosso di Montalcino was invented. Released a year after harvest, it gives the winemaker cash flow and us something to drink while waiting for our Brunello. And it's delicious: as young and lovely as the girl from Ipanema.

Hmm. But how long is that wait for Brunello?

It depends on the vintage and winery. But typically Brunello hits its sweet spot after 10 to 15 years. So try to hold it in your own cellar for another five to 10 years after release.

Bottom line, how do I know which Brunello to buy?

That's the \$64,000 question. There are more than 200 wineries. Most

are small: 80 percent are under 15 hectares; in essence, boutique family farms. First you've got to figure out your taste: Do you prefer a classic style? Something opulent and spicy? Your sommelier or wine shop can point you to examples. On a budget? Explore Rosso di Montalcino first. This will show a winery's style. Chances are if you like their Rosso, you'll like their Brunello. To dig deeper, learn the subzones. They're not official, but they're real. Read about them—and everything else Brunello—in Kerin O'Keefe's excellent book *Brunello di Montalcino*.

Can't you name names?

Okay. Just know that I tend to favor the classicists. High up near town, there's Fattoria dei Barbi, one of Montalcino's most historic estates. In the middle tier—the land of landslides—I go for Il Maronetto, Capanna, and Le Chiuse. They're as true and honest as Brunello can be; no messing with barrique or over-extraction.

Further down the north slope is Casato Prime Donne, owned by the formidable Donatella Cinelli Colombini (sister to Barbi's Stefano Cinelli Colombini); here the fruit really sings. Going southeast towards Castelnuovo dell' Abate, there's Mastrojanni, Ciacci Piccolomini d'Aragona, and Collosorbo—purists all.

For a more succulent, modernist style, try Fanti. Then in the Sant' Angelo subzone, there's ethereal Sesti, flavor-packed Talenti, and well-priced Col d'Orcia.

Any final tips?

Stock up on the 2010s, now out. The vintage is rated 5 stars. When drinking Brunello, let it breathe several hours, then serve with a nice juicy steak, winter pot roast, or earthy risotto with porcini. That's when its true magic is revealed.

Patricia Thomson (@dolcettours) splits her time between Brooklyn and Piedmont. When she's not writing, she's running wine tours in Italy through her company La Dolce Vita Wine Tours.



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