

ANTEPRIMA **TASTINGS**

# Benvenuto Brunello – Welcome Brunello

Alessandra Piubello evaluates Brunello di Montalcino 2017 and the 2016 Riserva,

produced in the ancient village of the same name near Siena in Tuscany

**P**erched on a hill at an altitude of almost 600m, the profile of the fortress at Montalcino, overlooking the valleys of Arbia, Ombrone, Asso and Orcia, can be seen from afar. The name of this ancient village is inextricably linked to Brunello since the wine production area coincides with its territory. Located in Tuscany, about 40km south of Siena, the 24,000 hectares belonging to the municipality (3,600 of which are planted with vines) encircle the small town. Olive trees and woods complete an unspoilt landscape which appears to thrive from a spontaneous and true relationship between man and nature. Montalcino hill was formed in different geological eras and the composition and structure of the soil is therefore heterogeneous. The oldest part, geologically-speaking, is situated at the highest point and is mainly composed of alberese limestone and galestro clay, alternating with fine sandstone, marly limestone and fine-grained limestone. Although these soils are not particularly rich, they suit the requirements of Sangiovese vines perfectly and Brunello di Montalcino is made one 100% from Sangiovese.

By contrast, clays rich in mineral salts originating from alluvial debris can be found on

the lower part of the hill. Most of the wine companies are located in the mid-hill area where the wind guarantees the best conditions for healthy cultivation. Although the areas are in extremely close proximity, the different terrains, variable slope exposure, modulation of the hills and differences in altitude all result in considerably diverse climatic micro-environments.

History and culture are more important than the individual producer in Montalcino where typicality is the rule: one municipality, one grape variety, one production procedure. In the collective imagination, it is the uniqueness of the Brunello brand that is perceived, along with a history that exalts the peculiarities of a wine, a territory and a system. 2017 was a difficult year for Brunello di Montalcino DOCG for many reasons. March was an extremely hot month which resulted in early budding of the vines, only to be followed by April frosts that brought budding to an abrupt halt especially in the southern area of Montalcino. Consequently, this led to a reduction in yield in as many as 35% to 40% of the vineyards. The temperature gradually rose in May to above seasonal averages and was accompanied by a drought that reached its peak in the month of August. At this point, the already struggling vines suffered frequently from water stress which put a stop to their ripening. The situation improved in September – a month that is always decisive – when grape ripening returned to normal.

View of the fortress at Montalcino, overlooking the vineyards





From this, it is easy to understand how the highly skilled Montalcino vine growers — adapting as much to climate change year after year — were faced with an extremely difficult harvest which was not easy to manage, especially taking into consideration the different terroirs that make up the Brunello di Montalcino DOCG area. And yet, after 160 glasses of Brunello 2017 at the anteprima tasting, any fears regarding the adverse effects of these difficult conditions were put to rest, and the new Benvenuto Brunello formula was greatly appreciated. The revised edition, now in its 30th year and organized over 11 days, offered tastings to the national and foreign press, sommeliers from top Italian restaurants, bloggers and wine-lovers. It broadened the coverage, multiplied the voices and emitted an echo that resounded much longer than usual.

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Fabrizio Bindocci, President of the Consorzio del Vino Brunello di Montalcino

**T**he 2017 vintage offers lengthy bouquets, ripe fruit with smooth textures and no clumsiness or excessive heaviness. In most cases, the care taken in the vineyard (foliage management, choice of harvest time) and especially in the cellar (super-calibrated extractions and meticulous supervision) were added to the fact that certain soils are better adapted to dry years than others. The wines have a pleasant effect, heralded by transparent colours that are not excessive and confirmed by aromas brought out by a generous, yet never overpowering, alcoholic temperament. The texture is deep and less vibrant than in the vintages that really count but the grain of the tannin manages to avoid over-abrasive or dry tendencies resulting in overall balance and sincere enjoyment. It must be said, however, that enjoyment is not synonymous with depth, which may be guaranteed in the short term, but before long will take its toll on the wine, by draining away the ripe fruit flavours and exposing the real nature of the tannin, creating disharmony.

The acid content, by and large, is not very evident and if anything contributes to the breadth of the textures without the verticality and counterpoint that usually allows for the evolutionary potential of a Brunello in more balanced vintages. However, considering the absolute youth of the wines under examination, their appraisal is strictly a static snapshot. Nevertheless, we are dealing with a miracle because on tasting the wines one realises that everything possible was done to go that extra mile. The result is much better than what could have been achieved from similar climatic conditions ten or 20 years ago. Even so, it is obvious that these are not wines destined to grow over time.

There are a few jarring features — over-exuberant alcohol, rough tannins, hints of preserves and glutamate but only in a few cases, which did not spoil the overall pleasantness. There was also no shortage of wines with a more classic register, featuring statuary body



Pulling the cork of the numerous bottles of wine tasted from the 2016 and 2017 vintage at the latest Benvenuto Brunello Tasting

and bearing, endowed with an energy that is yet to unfold, or characterised by widespread grace and finesse, weightless power, tension and rectitude.

In short, what comes through once again is that there was no lack of that multifaceted genius of terroir that is known to be unique in bringing together a kaleidoscopic variety of expressions within the same designation. What perhaps counts more than the climatic conditions is the mediating hand of the winemaker, which directed the grapes and the wine by viticultural and oenological attentiveness despite the difficult year.

**B**runello Riserva DOCG 2016. With an extra year behind them, the 80 or so wines of the 2016 vintage we tasted show that it will keep significantly well, featuring tension, a degree of contrast, tannin quality, complexity and evolutionary perspective. All qualities that place it among the best, at least in the last 20 years. In many cases, the 2016 Riserva wines are decidedly convincing, with a group of producers prevailing over others who appear to be struggling more, partly due to a rather imprudent use of wood.

The wines that particularly stood out include

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Sesti, Poggio di Sotto, Ridolfi, Sanlorenzo, Casanuova delle Cerbaie, Il Poggione, Pian delle Vigne, Patrizia Cencioni, Pian delle Querce, La Lecciaia, Argiano, Camigliano, Capanna and Caprili.

As far as the 2017 vintage is concerned, the wines that impressed us the most are Capanna di Cencioni, which is engaging and juicy on the palate, then Tiezzi Vigna Soccorso, elegant and profound, yet vivid and supremely drinkable. The Brunello di Montalcino 2017 by Uccelliera is intriguing and balsamic while the wines from Casanova di Neri, Poggio di Sotto and Le Chiuse are absolute certainties.

Considerable tannin and intense fruitiness were found in Salvioni's Brunello di Montalcino 2017. Smoky and earthy notes, hints of black tea and an expressive and consistent sip emerged in the Brunello di Montalcino 2017 from Sanlorenzo. Between minty and balsamic, the Brunello di Montalcino 2017 by Sesti is savoury and fruity while the Brunello di Montalcino 2017 from Talenti is pleasant to drink, spicy, dry and promising.

The Brunello 2017 Poggio al Carro by Celestino Pecci is sleek and fine. Pietroso's Brunello is multifaceted in its aromas, and elegant and deep on the palate, while there is good balance and pleasantness in the Brunello 2017 from Canalicchio di Sopra. The Brunello AD 1441 2017 by Castello Tricerchi is lengthy and has a well-defined expressiveness. Ciacci Piccolomini d'Aragona Pianrosso shows thickness, fullness and aromatic stratification. Fattori's Brunello is full and tense on the palate, to then open with vigorous tannins and considerable flavour.

The selections by Corte Pavone, Campo Marzio, Fior di Meloto and Fiore del Vento, despite their differences, are well worth tasting. Fattoria dei Barbi Vigna del Fiore instils lush and tasty, yet never overwhelming tannins on the palate and dynamic length, while the Brunello from Fattoria Il Pino, with its light strength, also gave a good performance. ♦