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BRUNELLO DI MONTALCINO & ROSSO DI MONTALCINO

VINTAGE REPORT: 2016 & 2019 | Emily O'Hare

The annual Brunello tasting held in February in Montalcino was, in 2020, the last public wine tasting in Tuscany before COVID took everyone in the country into severe lockdown. Those of us tasting the highly acclaimed 2015 Brunelli and very good 2018 Rossi had no idea what was ahead of us, but we knew we had fine wine in our glasses.

However, the energy was rather flat. The 2015 Brunelli ticked all the boxes. It's a five-star vintage that is powerful, composed, ready to drink (even so soon after release) and yet capable of ageing.

But we were all rather robotic at the tasting. Admiring, agreeing, writing, scoring, yet maintaining some distance from (before distancing became such a 'thing'), and not captive to, the wine.

This year, things were different on many fronts. All the wine reviewers had to be seated, and sadly there could be no producers present to talk to over their wines.

But despite our sedentary situation, the atmosphere felt electric, jubilant. Brunello di Montalcino from 2016 are potent, mesmerising, hypnotic wines, barely contained by the glasses into which they are poured.

They are exceptionally balanced, impossibly dense and deft. The tension created by this interplay of tannins, fruit and acidity is thrilling.

Sebastian Nasello, winemaker at Podere Le Ripi, explained that the major difference between the two stellar vintages of 2015 and 2016 is that during August of 2016, daytime and night-time temperatures fluctuated dramatically. Days were hot and dry, and nights were cool. This diurnal range meant that during the night the sugar development in the vines slowed and acidity was preserved creating fresher, more aromatically lively wines with greater definition and clarity.

The Rossi from 2019 heightened the excitement and enthusiasm further. The Rosso di Montalcino 2019 are super wines, a delectable, sophisticated wine choice for the customer in a restaurant, or to drink at home.

Elisa Sesti of Sesti - Castello di Argiano sees the Rosso di Montalcino as the messenger, the herald proclaiming whether a vintage will be great. If the Rosso is stunning, then we can look forward to a great Brunello a little later down the line. And by the quality of the Rosso 2019, it is clear that we have much to look forward to in 2024 when the 2019 Brunello are released.

Interesting to note is the growing number of single vineyard bottlings appearing from estates in Montalcino. These crus are valuable to the denomination. I find them to be intimate wines, their subtleties and complexities allow the consumer a greater focus on the intricacies of the Montalcino terroir. And as wine lovers, this possibility to understand a region or wine in greater detail is wonderful.

BRUNELLO DI MONTALCINO

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

Il Palazzone Brunello di Montalcino DOCG 'Le Due Porte', 2016 (\$175)

From a 1.24-hectare vineyard, rich in albarese, 540 metres above sea level and very close to the centre of Montalcino, this is a Brunello full of flesh and crunch with oak that enhances but does not distract. Though the fruit character feels so joyously fresh and uplifting, the current beneath the surface is strong. Tightly coiled tannins impress their potential in the mouth matched with high acidity. This wine has intent to age. An authoritative Brunello.

San Polino Brunello di Montalcino DOCG 'Helichrysum', 2016 (\$110)

Helichrysum is a biodynamically farmed single vineyard in the hamlet of San Polino in the south of Montalcino at an altitude of 450 metres above sea level. Swirling the wine in the glass one is immediately compelled as by fire, as the rim of the wine is the colour of flames. On the palate, a muscular shapely tannic frame is filled with densely rich black fruit, cedar spice and new leather, all of which

sounds very dark, but there is an ethereal quality to the wine that enthralls. Drink now and enjoy - or drink in ten years or more and enjoy. There is already such pleasure to be had. Perhaps best to get a case just to keep an eye on it.

La Màgia Brunello di Montalcino DOCG 'Ciliegio', 2016 (\$160)

That bit in Ghostbusters with the phantom in the library is an amazing scene. My parents told me afterwards that ghosts do not exist, but decades on, I find they do in really top Sangiovese. The ghost is reading a book in a dusty corridor of shelves and tomes, and that perfectly suits this wine. That fabulous slightly dusty note that Sangiovese can have is here on the nose. The ghost leaves the bottle at the nose, for on the palate, the wine is full of life. It has great concentration with fruit arriving from 40-year-old vines with a naturally low vigour. There is a sensation of coolness, weightlessness about the wine, maybe driven by a certain mineral quality.

Le Ripi Brunello di Montalcino DOCG 'Amore e Magia', 2016 (\$175)

I am reminded, when smelling and tasting this wine of a meeting between Master of

Wine, Nick Belfrage and pioneer, legend and (previous) winemaker at Salicetti, Francesco Leanza. Leanza comments to Nick that journalists have misunderstood the soul of Montalcino, which is "elegance, perfume, lightness of touch - not power and depth". Here the perfume of fresh fruit is heightened by the most subtle notes of volatile acidity. On the palate, the wine feels featherlight in touch; the tannins are silky and carefully worked within the elegant body of the wine. On the evidence of this wine, Le Ripi very much understands the soul of Montalcino.

Corte Pavone Brunello di Montalcino DOCG 'Campo Marzio', 2016 (\$100)

Of Corte Pavone's "Seven Dynamic Cru", Campo Marzio is my favourite. At his estate to the southwest of Montalcino, Hayo Loacker used infrared sensors to identify seven distinctly different single vineyard sites - seven cru. Campo Marzio has the oldest vines and enjoys a more stable, balanced microclimate than the other six. The wine is at once sturdy and sensuous. In colour, there are even some deep purple tones to the ruby reds. The texture is firm and polished and the flavour intense with pristine cherry fruit and sage. I think Gevrey-Chambertin lovers might love exploring this wine.