

A Star Among Tuscan Wines

Brunello di Montalcino 1999

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Brunello is synonymous with Montalcino (a small city in the Tuscany region of Siena, Italy). The Sangiovese Grosso (a clone of Sangiovese) that is grown there is so distinct and unique, it has its own name—Brunello. Brunello (the grape) di (from) Montalcino (the region, based around the town of Montalcino) wines are rated as some of the best of Italy. The reputation of the wines of Montalcino have stood on Sangiovese alone since the work of the Biondi-Santi family in the mid-nineteenth century when cuttings were taken from the best vines in their vineyards, and a wine was created solely from Sangiovese Grosso.

The majority of Brunello vineyards radiate out from the hilltop of Montalcino, this elevation is considered a key element of the character of Brunello. While the cooler climate of the northern-grown grapes produces the

most aromatic and firm wines, the longer hours of sunlight in the southern region give the grapes more opportunity to ripen, resulting in some of the most concentrated and exuberant Sangiovese-based wines in Italy.

The compulsory aging of the wine is four years with a minimum of two years in an oak cask or barrel. However, the wine cannot be sold until its fifth year, allowing for considerable flexibility for aging in barrels and/or bottles. Brunello di Montalcino Riserva's require an extra year of aging, causing the minimum aging period to be three years in wood

and an extra year in bottles.

Brunello's stardom among Tuscany wines resulted in an enormous rise in the number of small producers, increasing from only a handful of estates in the 1970s to over 170 today; although, only a few dozen dominate the marketplace in terms of size, prestige, or both. While the 1999 vintage did not quite reach the extraordinary zenith of the quality shown by the 1997, the 1999 (recognized as one of the best years) is a must-have vintage for wine collectors. It has an impressive richness of fruit, great concentration, powerful tannins, and great aging potential.

Although the wonderful harmony of fruit, tannins, and acidity make most Brunello's very close to drinking when they are released, Brunello's from top vintages usually still need a couple of years of bottle aging before they show their best—the excellent 1990 is still drinking well.

The basic quality of today's Sangiovese is far superior to that of the Sangiovese harvested ten to fifteen years ago as producers pay closer attention to everything from advanced canopy management to crop thinning. For the most part, oenologists today are striving to make modern-style wines by preserving the fruit and freshness with the more balanced use of oak by replacing some of the vats made of Slovenian oak, called botti (that hold almost 2.5 gallons), with new 60-gallon barrels of French oak.

In our market, we are very fortunate to have a great selection of Brunello's 1999 finest producers available, retailing between \$55 and \$125 a bottle. And don't forget to keep some room in your cellar for the release of the 1999 riservas this fall!

—Peter Blattmann

A regular contributing writer to Calgary Living magazine, Peter Blattmann's full-time duties include conducting gastronomic tours of renowned culinary centres and famous wine regions throughout the world. More info on these pursuits can be found at www.gourmet-experience.com

CELLAR NOTES

Castello Banfi Brunello di Montalcino 1999

CSPC 378257

\$65. GST incl.

The incredible concentration of dark fruit—plums, cherries and blackberries follow through to an extremely rich full-bodied palate in this wine with a thick and silky tannin structure. The long layered finish has notes of tobacco, roasted coffee, and black olives. Enjoyable now with aging potential up to 10 years.