

21 views | Jul 15, 2019, 10:30am

Wines Of The Week: Two Great Bottles Of Brunello Di Montalcino Riserva



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Brunello di Montalcino is a name that is generally synonymous with quality. Sure, it's susceptible to vintage variation, just like every other great appellation in the world; and of course some producers over-achieve while others are destined to remain less widely known. But in general, Brunello di Montalcino, it's often said, represents one of the peaks of profundity that Sangiovese can achieve.

The other week, I had the remarkable opportunity to visit, on successive days, two of the most highly respected names in the world of Brunello di Montalcino: Biondi-Santi and Castiglion del Bosco. Tasting through the line-up of current releases from each producer, as well as a handful of older vintages, I came away both beyond impressed and deeply optimistic about the future of the venerated appellation.

Any discussion about Brunello di Montalcino by definition begins with Biondi-Santi, since they were the first producer to craft the wine under that name: In one of their cellars hangs a copy of a document from the agricultural exposition of 1869 on which the supposed first reference in writing on an official form appears the name "brunello" (it's in lower-case on the document, I was told, because the powers-that-be didn't recognize the word as anything but a marketing ploy by the producer).

How things have changed in the 150 years since then!

Fast-forward to today, and Biondi-Santi, with their partners the France-based Epi Group, is in the middle of an effort to study and better understand their land parcel by parcel. A two-year-long project like this is rather expensive, and being able to fund it more easily is one of the big advantages of the new partnership. Still, CEO Giampiero Bertolini told me during our tasting, the goal is to steadily improve the wines without losing the character that has always made them such standouts in the appellation. He's looking to keep the inimitable character of Biondi-Santi, but to start an *evolution* in terms of quality, not a *revolution*. "We cannot stay and rely on what has been done in the past," he told me. To that end, 35% of this year's profits will be plowed right back into the estate to continue improving their wines' quality.

Given how brilliantly everything I tasted there was showing—the 1995 Riserva was an otherworldly melange of mint, caramelized stone fruit, cigar humidor, and flowers, each sip seeming to pick up energy and tension, promising decades of further evolution—that's an incredible thought. One of my red Wines of the Week, then, is the Biondi-Santi Brunello di Montalcino Riserva 2006, which is their current-release of the Riserva on the American market. With slight and perfectly age-appropriate bricking at the edges, it hovers above the glass with a distinctly minty aroma, the balsamic and more floral notes rounded out by hints of plums and cherries. They all set the stage for a palate in a brilliant place of early maturity: This is a wine that's savory and energetic, with cherries, mixed plums, and blood oranges kissed by tarragon, licorice, and a touch of forest floor. There's still remarkable concentration to the fruit here, and with its seam of acidity running through the long finish, this promises to evolve for another 40-plus years and well beyond, easily.

My other red Wine of the Week (since I was in Montalcino, it seems appropriate to include two reds this week...and there was no way I could choose between these two) is the Castiglion del Bosco Brunello di Montalcino Riserva Millecento 2012. With a nose of blood orange and mixed citrus oils, melted licorice, sweet spice, and a hint of sage, and flavors that spark across the tongue with generous notes of nectarines, cherry compote,

floral peppercorns, clove, cardamom, and a subtle anchoring of meatiness, this will only get better over the next two decades and beyond.

It's sourced from old vines in the Capanna vineyard, and it's the top flagship bottling of Castiglion del Bosco. Production was limited to just 5,000 bottles, though you can still find it at retail in the United States. Overall, Castiglion del Bosco produces a beautiful range of wines, from their excellent and energetic Chardonnay and generous, plush Gauggiolo Rosso di Montalcino (the 2016 is drinking brilliantly right now with its lush wave of plums, cherries, and spice), to the classic Brunello di Montalcino and the single-vineyard Campo del Drago bottling.

All of them are a testament to the detailed work and diligence of both winemaker Cecilia Leoneschi and the entire team at the gorgeous property. Acquired in 2003 by Massimo and Chiara Ferragamo, the nearly 5,000-acre property (with a bit over 150 acres under vine) was formerly a medieval village. The Ferragamos have kept the inimitable aesthetic of the UNESCO site, while fashioning from it a world-class winery, one of the most gorgeous five-star resorts I've ever seen (it's now under the management of Rosewood Hotels & Resorts), and a Tom Weiskopf-designed golf club (called, simply, The Club, it's the only private golf club in Italy) that's breathtakingly set on nearly 520 acres of rolling Val d'Orcia land; it's beautiful enough to be the subject of landscape paintings for generations of Tuscan artists. As for the food there, it's worth a trip in its own right: The culinary program is helmed by Chef Matteo Temperini, and when I visited on July 4th, I was immediately won over by the quality and elegant simplicity of lunch at Osteria La Canonica...accompanied, of course, by plenty of their wine, and a highlight dish of Independence Day-appropriate rack of local Cinta Senese pork ribs.

Brunello di Montalcino remains a deeply exciting appellation in Tuscany. I've made it a point to taste them as frequently as possible since I've been here, and have come away with the distinct impression that the wines are as remarkable now as I can ever remember them having been. For age-worthy wines that are showing brilliantly right now, even this early in the long

evolutions they have ahead of them, these two Wines of the Week are a perfect place to start.

Biondi-Santi Brunello di Montalcino Riserva 2006

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Biondi-Santi produces some of the most age-worthy wines in Italy. Even today, approximately a century and a half after the first vintage, the family remains deeply involved; Tancredi Biondi-Santi is the face of the brand around the world (Credit: Brian Freedman). BRIAN FREEDMAN

Castiglion del Bosco Brunello di Montalcino Riserva Millecento
2012

With a nose of blood oranges and other mixed citrus oils, melted licorice, sweet spice, and a hint of sage, and flavors that spark across the tongue with generous notes of nectarines, cherry compote, floral peppercorns, clove, cardamom, and a subtle anchoring of meatiness, this will only get better over the next two decades and beyond. SRP: \$220



The vineyards of Castiglion del Bosco, above, represent a fantastic cross-section of the terroirs that have made Brunello di Montalcino such an important appellation (Credit: Brian Freedman). **BRIAN FREEDMAN**



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I am a food, wine, drinks, and travel writer, restaurant and beverage consultant, wine educator, and event host and speaker. I was Editor-in-Chief of Drink Me Magazine a...

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