

the other guy

BY ANTHONY GIGLIO

IF YOU COMPARED BAROLO, Barbaresco and Brunello di Montalcino to the "Three Tenors," which wine would be symbolized by which legendary voice? Seem like an absurd question? I thought so, too, when a guy with a pinky ring asked me that at a wine tasting recently. But then, of course, I had to answer him, and it got me thinking: Each wine, like each singer, has its own nuances and strengths. Clearly, Barolo would be Luciano Pavarotti, the powerhouse "king" of Italian reds. Barbaresco would be Plácido Domingo, the "prince" of vini rossi, not quite as powerful or finessed as Barolo, but certainly a force to be reckoned with. And Brunello di Montalcino would have to be "the other guy," José Carreras, the least known of the three outside of collectors' circles and certified wine geeks (pinky rings notwithstanding).

How wine from the relatively small, little-known area around Montalcino managed to elbow itself in among the ranks of Italy's very best reds in a short time is what makes Brunello so interesting, since as early as the 17th century, Barolo was already found on the table of France's King Louis XIX. Statistically, the growth of Brunello di Montalcino is simply breathtaking. In 1970 there were less than a dozen producers; today there are around 200. And the number of bottles they're filling has jumped from 3.1 million in the 1990s to a projected 7 million bottles of the 2008 vintage.

Yet it was only 40 years ago that the Biondi-Santi family introduced international journalists and wine critics to their age-worthy wines from Montalcino when they opened up some of their oldest bottles—dating back to the late 1800s—to demonstrate that they were still alive and kicking. The event made wine history and marked the beginning of the rise of Brunello's prestige.

Those first Biondi-Santi wines were made by Ferruccio Biondi-Santi, whose claim to fame was distinguishing the wines of Montalcino, the bucolic Tuscan fortress town, from its northern neighbors in the Chianti Classico region. He asserted that the quality of the Montalcino Sangiovese was superior and took advantage of the grape's age-worthy tannins by producing unblended wines—unlike most Tuscan winemakers at the time—that could easily age for 20 years.

To be fair, it was Ferruccio's grandfather Clemente Santi's idea to identify the specific clone of Sangiovese grapes that grow around Montalcino, and to claim them as the town's own, far superior to Sangiovese grapes grown throughout the rest of Tuscany. Back then, in the 1800s, his fellow winemakers in nearby Chianti were blending Sangiovese with white and other red grapes to make soft, easy-drinking wines. But not Clemente: He knew that his Sangiovese could stand alone. So he bottled it unadulterated, highlighting the grape's flavor and its remarkable »

suggested bottles

The 2004 Brunellos have hit the shelves, and this vintage looks to be a promising one. From fruity and lively to bold and brooding, these bottles offer drinkablity now while continuing to blossom with age.



CASTELLO BANFI
Brunello di Montalcino, "Poggio alle Mura," 2004
Everything that the pioneering Marianis do at Banfi is grande, so it's only fitting that their wines follow suit. Their 2004 Brunello is a fragrant bouquet of black fruit rendered vino on the palate, tempered with earthy power and tannic elegance promising a long life. $65.



CASTIGLION DEL BOSCO
Brunello di Montalcino, "Campo del Drago," 2004
The Ferragamo family restored this spectacular Val d'Orcia estate. Since 2004, noted winemaker Niccolò d'Afflitto has worked with locally trained enologist Cecilia Leoneschi to craft modern style Brunellos like this floral wine with a chewy core of prune and notes of vanilla. $75.



CASTELLO ROMITORIO
Brunello di Montalcino, 2004
In 1984, artist Sandro Chia purchased this hilltop estate overlooking the Val d'Orcia. For the last several vintages, famed enologist Carlo Ferrini has amped up what were already lovely wines. This one is powerful, with waves of black fruit and dark cacao in the still-tight finish. $80.



TERRALSOLE
Brunello di Montalcino, 2004
Cross an American classical musician with a Swiss lawyer and you get this bohemian winery run by Mario and Athena Bollag. They argue for softer, more accessible Brunellos like this cherry bomb of red fruit notes, which is juicy and soft in the mouth yet powerful and focused in the finish. $65.



UCCELLIERA
Brunello di Montalcino, 2004
Proprietor Andrea Cortonesi is a top artisan of the "nuovo Brunello" movement, practicing organic farming and crafting wines that are powerful yet drinkable when young. The 2004 is a stunning amalgam of red and black fruit peeking out between powerful waves of dark, earthy mocha and smoky nuances. $78.

CHALKBOARD PHOTO BY SIME/COLIN DUTTON

ability to age. When Ferruccio joined the family business, he got the idea to promote Montalcino's Sangiovese grapes as Brunello, a name long associated with wine from Montalcino. In 1888, he bottled the first vintage labeled Brunello di Montalcino.

But while Chianti Classico went on to become the benchmark of Tuscan wines, Montalcino and its wineries languished as farmers left for big cities and landowners sold prime vineyards for bargain prices. Montalcino's fortunes would change, though, after the 1970 Biondi-Santi tasting put Montalcino on the map. Cinzano, the Piedmont-based vermouth maker, bought the Col d'Orcia estate in 1973 and, around the same time, the American Mariani brothers, wine importers John and Harry, began acquiring land that would become the Banfi estate. The Marianis upped the ante significantly for their neighbors by creating a California-style winery that did everything on a grand (read: American) scale, producing a more accessible and approachable Brunello and, most novel of all, welcoming tourists, a practice uncommon in the area at the time.

Inevitably, Chianti royalty moved in. The Frescobaldi brothers bought Castelgiocondo in 1989. Then Piero Antinori, the Tuscan bad boy who set off the "Super Tuscan" frenzy, planted his flag at Pian delle Vigne. Continuing the influx, Angelo Gaja, one of the most prominent winemakers in Barbaresco, bought Pieve di Santa Restituta in 1994. After the big guys moved in, boutique producers followed suit, and quite suddenly quaint Montalcino became the Hamptons of Tuscany.

Still, what's the big deal? Why are these wines so highly regarded? Some would argue that it's their track record, that these wines outshine and outlive their neighbors' wines in Chianti. Stefano Campatelli, the general manager of Consorzio del Vino Brunello di Montalcino, likens Montalcino to a formidable island in the shifting sea of Tuscan wine. "In the middle of the 19th century, Clemente Santi decided to produce a red wine here with just Sangiovese," he says. In comparison, he points out, over time, the traditional blend used in making Chianti proved to be inferior to the noble Brunello di Montalcino, which could not only stand the test of time, but thrived over decades, and is still made solely from the Sangiovese clone isolated by Santi over a century ago.

That grape would be much different, though, if it weren't for the terroir of Montalcino. This specific clone thrives in the higher temperatures and drier climate particular to the area, while the poor soil challenges the vines and concentrates flavors. At their best—after at least a decade of aging, though some would argue much, much more—Brunellos are akin to the greatest Chianti Classicos, but they're fuller in body, richer in flavor and concentration, with more robust tannins.

Another piece of Brunello's cachet is its scarcity. Despite the proliferation of producers, they are limited in how much wine they can make by government regulations, which stipulate that Brunello di Montalcino can be made with only Sangiovese grapes grown in the designated Brunello di Montalcino appellation. Furthermore, to be awarded DOCG status, the wine must age four years prior to release, with at least two years of that in oak barrels or casks. Bottles labeled Riserva must age for five years, the longest minimum aging time for just about any wine in Italy. In total, the entire area bottles just under 600,000 cases annually, making Brunello a truly rare voice among Italian wines. □

baby brunello

Waiting for Brunello to age? Drink Rosso di Montalcino.

A DOC created by the Consorzio 25 years ago to satisfy growing demand, one of the main differences between Rosso di Montalcino and its big brother Brunello is age. A Rosso di Montalcino is made from the same Sangiovese grapes as its DOCG brethren, except perhaps from less prized areas of the appellation, and it need age only one year before release, so winemakers can craft less expensive wines ready to drink today. Don't be fooled by the absence of the word Brunello, though. At about one-third the price, these wines can be exceptional bargains, and many top Brunello producers also make a Rosso.

