

WINE News

*Incredible balance and drinkability
from Montalcino's latest vintage
of the century.*



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2015 Montalcino Is Not to Be Missed

By Greg St. Clair

I am a regular visitor to Montalcino. Since my first visit back in 1982, I usually go once or twice a year to taste the vintage out of the barrel, and thus to have the opportunity to “peek into the future.” When I first tasted the 2015 vintage, the wines showed classic, primary fruit flavors. Even as late as last year, the wines still showed more primary fruit character. But now, they are full-blown savory in character. I must admit, it was a bit of a shock—not in quality, but in direction. In a nutshell, the vintage is stunningly good, and the one characteristic I have consistently talked about, after tasting this vintage in years past, is its ripeness. But now, that word might give you the wrong idea about this vintage’s signature.

So, instead of ripeness, I’d like to substitute the word “density,” because that’s really what we are talking about in these wines. I recently read a critic’s report in a national wine magazine that tells buyers to “beware” of elevated alcohol in this vintage, and then goes on to give 98 points to a wine that is labeled at 15% alcohol by volume (abv). I have tasted this wine, and I couldn’t tell it was that high—it’s so well balanced. (Perhaps a “reader beware” announcement might have been the more appropriate warning there!) If you have questions about this vintage, you can write to me. These 2015 Montalcino wines are spectacular. But first, a selection of great values for everyday drinking from northern Italy.

2018 Blason Cabernet Franc del Friuli

(\$12.99) I love the aromatics of this delicate Cabernet Franc. It’s so classically herbal, wild, and green, yet at the same time there’s a sweet ripeness that gives it a supple, easy flow. This doesn’t taste like California Cabernet Franc. It has a bit of Loire wildness, but also has that stony soil character you get in Friuli. The 2018 is the best I’ve ever had from this winery. Try it with a plate of San Daniele prosciutto and cheese, and make sure it’s at cellar temperature.



2018 Tenuta Rovaglia “Limne” Lugana

(\$13.99) It never fails that every time I drink this wine I get more intrigued: how could something so simple be so mind-grabbing, full of flavor, and be so inexpensive at the same time? It always surprises me. If you’re looking for something that has marvelous minerality and acidity, all couched in a richly textured body, this is your wine. I buy a couple of cases for myself every vintage, and you would do well to do the same. **92 WE**



2017 Schiavenza Nebbiolo delle Langhe

(\$29.99) I’ve sold Barolo for a lower price, but this Nebbiolo *is* stunningly good at this price. It represents everything you’d imagine in Serralunga Barolo, yet not on a monumental scale. It’s drinkable now. That doesn’t mean it can’t age—it’s just very well balanced. Classic in its earth, smoke, rose, porcini, and truffle-filled flavors, this is a wine that’s perfect for braised meats—or, if you like the Italian-style Béchamel lasagna, this is your wine.



Organically Grown on Montalcino's Southern Slope

Uccelliera

Andrea Cortonesi is one of Montalcino's classic producers. The owner and winemaker at Uccelliera is a real man of the earth, but I won't use the word *contadino*, because it has more of a peasant connotation, and Andrea is anything but a peasant. He's more of a *Renaissance contadino*. His winery sits just west, and I mean just west, of the village of Castelnuovo dell'Abate in Montalcino's southeastern corner.

Andrea has added vineyards over the years, so beyond the vineyards adjacent to the winery he farms pieces south of Ciacci Piccolomini, and just east of Mastrojanni, which have different soil types that add to the complexity and structure of his wines. Yet the one thing that confuses a lot of people about the wines of Montalcino is the



Andrea Cortonesi with one of his 40hl botte. This barrel holds about 445 cases of wine!

barrel regimen: *botte* or *barrique*? Most of the world uses *barrique*, those, well, "standard" wine barrels usually sized to hold 225–250 liters. The *botte* are of indeterminate size—it could be anywhere from 10 to 100 hectoliters (hl). Andrea had been a traditionalist, using mostly 40hl *botte*, but now he uses some *tonneaux* (500 liter) to add different textures and character.

The **2015 Uccelliera Brunello di Montalcino (\$79.99)** is a stunning wine. The nose is full of a gamy, wild cherry aromatic, and shows lots of porcini. But it's on the palate where the wine really shows its depth. Layers of a warm, plummy richness spread across your tongue, accented with a superb lift on the finish. This is really good Brunello, and really shows the character of this portion of Montalcino.

In addition to all his work at Uccelliera, Andrea purchased another winery called Voliero that is on the western slope, not far from Talenti. Here, he makes both Rosso and Brunello. The **2015 Voliero Brunello di Montalcino (\$59.99)** has a different character than the Uccelliera. The nose is more spice, leather, and brightness, while on the palate the wine shows a more linear structure. It's more elegant, with a touch of grip in the finish. Andrea's wines all show a delicate hand. As a winemaker, he prefers to let his terroir do the speaking for him. His wines are all organic, and the purity of his fruit really shows through. Do yourself a favor and try one!

Sesta di Sopra

We started importing Brunello di Montalcino directly in 2004. Earlier that year I had been to the annual Benvenuto Brunello, where the Consorzio Brunello di Montalcino puts together a great presentation, and an opportunity to see most of the producers. This year, for example, there were 143 producers present out of the 205 bottlers. And it was at the 2004 Benvenuto that I first tasted the Sesta di Sopra Brunello di Montalcino. It was one of my wines of the vintage, and being that I had never heard of them, I wrote to them asking who their importer was. They wrote back saying, "We don't have one; would you like to be our importer?" We were actually their first client, and it has become a family affair ever since.

They are the complete opposite from Andrea Cortonesi. Ettore Spina was an international banker for 40 years, living in Rome. When he retired, he and his wife, Enrica, both Piemontese by birth, moved to Montalcino. Their tiny estate produces 340 cases of Brunello from one 30hl barrel—that's tiny! Yet this little jewel sits above the Terra Rossa stretch of soil across Montalcino's southern slope, and is planted in Galestro, a limestone-based marine clay that is one of the best soils for Sangiovese. It's just exfoliating shale, and is very hard for the vines to grow in. That's one of the best possibilities for Sangiovese—this vine is extraordinarily productive, and when its vigor is reduced, it yields grapes of extraordinary character. Sesta di Sopra is all organic.

Their **2015 Sesta di Sopra Brunello di Montalcino (\$59.99)** is sublime. I must admit that I always have a soft spot in my heart for this winery, but I refuse to recuse myself from making a judgment—it's just

delicious! The nose of this wine is full of salted plums, Marasca cherry (the real Maraschino cherry—thank you, Luxardo), and shows lots of umami character. On the palate the wine is dense, yet it's also so suave, smooth, and luxurious that it just

cruises across your tongue. It is so flavorful, with all of that Marasca cherry, plum, iron, and spice. The finish is well balanced, with excellent lift that brightens and freshens. **95 JS**



Ettore Spina in front of a 30hl barrel—that's his entire Brunello production for one vintage, about 335 cases of Sesta di Sopra Brunello.

As Luck Would Have It: Great Montalcino Finds on the West

Albatreti

I remember vividly the first time I tasted an Albatreti wine. It was the 2010 Brunello di Montalcino. I was with Mike “Guido” Parres at the 2015 Benvenuto Brunello, where we tasted through everything. When the Albatreti wine came up, we tasted and immediately looked at each

other with the same thought: this wine was stunning! We’d never heard of it, and I couldn’t remember if we hadn’t got the glasses mixed up, so we asked to taste it again. Same results. So, we got up and walked over through the alphabetical listing of producers, and way, way at the end we meet Gaetano Salvioni, looking a bit like a Buddha version of Santa Claus. His first vintage was 2009, but he had limited success selling it, mostly because he also owns the local “big box” store selling washers, dryers, refrigerators, and a slew of electrical gadgets. We imported his 2010, and several vintages later I asked him who his first clients were. He said, “Well, you weren’t the first, but you were the first to pay!” Gaetano has had his vineyard, which sits just west of the town of Montalcino at a fairly high altitude, for a long time, and he treats it like a garden.

We’re currently on the **2013 Albatreti Brunello di Montalcino (\$39.99)**. Even amidst all of these glorious 2015s, this wine is stunningly good. Gaetano’s wines always show an extraordinary savory quality, and are just filled with umami flavors. The nose is stellar, showing lots of Marasca cherry, Tuscan brush, leather, rosemary, and Middle Eastern spices, while on the palate, the wine has real weight and a textural richness. Here the leather, porcini, earth, oyster shells, smoke, rosemary, dried meats, spice, and that wild Tuscan brush really take center stage. **90 VN**

I love these wines and I have several vintages in my cellar. But while I was in Montalcino, Gaetano and I dined together, and he brought the 2009 vintage, which I had never tried before. It was glorious, and had a decade or more of life left in it. It was so fresh and had that classic, savory Albatreti signature. This 2013 is a wine you should try. (And if you are wondering, if you know a bit about Montalcino: yes, Gaetano’s cousin is the “other” Salvioni in town!)



Gaetano Salvioni shows off his 2009 and 2015 vintages. The artwork on the label is an award-winning painting he painted 40 years ago.

Castelli Martinozzi

I’ll be honest. As a retailer, when a wine gets big points from a wine critic, I have to respond, because I know the public will want that wine. I hadn’t tasted Castelli Martinozzi in a long time when they got a big score from James Suckling last year, mostly because their distribution and importation has left a little to be desired. But you never know when opportunity falls into your lap. With my being in Montalcino frequently, I’ve been lucky enough to gain many friends, and occasionally it delivers. One of my Montalcino friends who is now helping Castelli Martinozzi with their exports contacted me to see if we’d be interested in importing.

Another reason that I hadn’t tasted them in a long time is that they’re one of a handful of wineries who don’t belong to the Consorzio, and hence never show up during my tastings there. I had tasted a few vintages in the past, but despite the ideal location, the wines always lacked a little. When I say location, I mean location, location, location: their vineyards sit near Soldera’s Case Basse, Gaja’s Pieve Santa Restituta, Caprili, and Maté, a veritable Murderers’ Row of quality and fame. So, I went to visit the winery for the first time and meet owner Federico Nannetti. I have to admit, it was a little tricky, as there were no signs and I was looking for a couple of castles, at least—from the name Castelli Martinozzi—but it turns out they were two family names who joined together and created the one name. No castles.

I tasted through the wines and was really shocked at the quality increase since the last time I had tasted their wines. It turns out, they’ve hired Paolo Caciorgna, who happens to be one of my favorites, as their consulting enologist. He’s Sting’s winemaker, as well.

The **2015 Castelli Martinozzi Brunello di Montalcino (\$39.99)** is beautiful. The nose is full of dark Marasca cherry with hints of Tuscan brush (*garrigue* in French) and Middle Eastern spice. It has a long, linear feel to it, and is very supple, round and smooth. The same dark cherry character leads the way on the tongue with a sultry, savory character. The wine shows excellent balance, and a long and elegant finish that goes on and on. This is a super value wine for the vintage. **95 JS**



Federico Nannetti in the cellar with a barrel full of 2018 Brunello di Montalcino.

Another Fabulous Four from Montalcino in 2015

Costanti

Whenever I am in Montalcino I make a stop at Costanti, as I use their wines as a guide to the vintage for all of Montalcino. The Consorzio even monitors one of their vineyards for the same reason—I'll have to keep better secrets. Andrea Costanti is a purist, and I find that his wines are some of the most classically styled and flavored in Montalcino. When I tasted Andrea's **2015 Costanti Brunello di Montalcino (\$94.99)** I was blown away. I tasted the Riserva as well, and these wines are absolutely amazing. Just to be clear, they are over 15% abv—I only mention this because he just got 98 points from *Wine Enthusiast*, whose critic mentioned this was a problem in the vintage. Well, I guess it can't be too much of a problem—or maybe it kept him from getting 100 points! Andrea's wines are usually destined for the cellar upon release, but this vintage is so good you can drink it now. **98 WE**



Andrea Costanti muses over his 2015 Brunello—it was one of my wines of the vintage, not to be missed!

San Polino

Purity of fruit is what I always think of when I taste the wines of San Polino, which is located close to one of Montalcino's oldest wineries, Fattoria dei Barbi, in the southeastern portion of Montalcino. San Polino is a Biodynamic winery, and it's the adherence to these somewhat mysterious methods that makes their wines so special. We could talk about winemaking, but the real work for any wine producer is grape growing, and Katia and Gigi Fabbro are among the best. The wines are classic, linear, aromatic, and so pure. The **2015 San Polino "Helichrysum" Brunello di Montalcino (\$74.99)** is so good, I bought six bottles myself. That should give you a hint—it was one of the best of the 2015 vintage that I tasted. **97 JS** The **2015 San Polino Brunello di Montalcino (\$59.99)** has similar characteristics to the Helichrysum, but is just slightly less aromatic and shows a little more tannin. But it's sensational in its own right. **95 JS**

Siro Pacenti

Giancarlo Pacenti is a focused individual, and Montalcino's leader in using barrique. For my money, he's nailed it. Aging Sangiovese in barrique is not easy. It's one of the most susceptible to having its character overwhelmed by the effects of a French forest, yet Giancarlo, who has a degree in mathematics, seems to have the right formula. The **2015 Siro Pacenti "Vecchie Vigne" Brunello di Montalcino (\$119.99)** received a 100-point score and "Wine of the Year" from James Suckling. Seamless, polished and extraordinary, this is one of the best examples of barrique Sangiovese I've ever tried. It's a blend from old vine vineyards to the northeast of the town of Montalcino, and old vine vineyards below Castelnuovo dell'Abate. **100 JS**

The **2015 Siro Pacenti "Pelagrelli" Brunello di Montalcino (\$52.99)** comes from the vineyards near the winery and shows lots of linearity with hints of barrel spice. It's a powerhouse. **95 RP**

La Fortuna

Across the narrow valley from Siro Pacenti, the La Fortuna winery has been one of our direct imports since 2004. When I first met Gioberto Zannoni and his son, Angelo, Angelo was fresh out of winemaking school with all sorts of ideas to change things up. However, Gioberto tempered that a bit with some real-life experiences. Just like Siro Pacenti, the **2015 La Fortuna Brunello di Montalcino (\$34.99)** is made from two vineyard sources, almost carbon copies of Siro Pacenti with a north and south blend. Unlike Siro Pacenti, La Fortuna uses *botte* for their Brunello and ages the wine for three-and-a-half years, the traditional length of time. The wine is decidedly different, with none of the vanilla toast, but instead, waves of wild cherry and Tuscan brush; while on the palate the richness of the southern vineyards plays out with a dense yet supple power. **95 JS**



With Montalcino in the background, Giancarlo Pacenti shows off his head-trained vines.

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