

WINE News

It's Morning in Montalcino.



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Benvenuto to Our Excellent Stash of Brunello

By Greg St. Clair

Just about a year ago all of our lives changed dramatically, and a new series of vocabulary words entered our daily lexicon: social distancing, N95, herd immunity, and a world of memes and jokes as so many of us sat at home. Yet in the wine world the vineyards keep producing, wine is being made, and thankfully, lots of you are drinking! In a regular year, I would have just returned from Italy and the annual Benvenuto Brunello in the village of Montalcino, the first showing of the new vintage. I would have liked to have gone this year, as 2016 is a stunningly good year, and that event gives me an incredible opportunity to taste a high percentage of the producers. However, it just didn't work out that way this year.

Fortunately, because of Brunello's long, four-year gestation period, I have been able to taste a lot of the 2016 wines from the barrel over the years—not the most perfect substitute, but at least I'm not going into the vintage blind. I will get into the differences and specifics of the 2015 and 2016 vintages in Montalcino, both excellent vintages, but slightly different styles. This issue is predominantly Tuscan. It's hard to cover all of Italy in these four pages, and there are so many wines I would like to introduce you to. So if you ever have any questions, please email me at gregstclair@klwines.com and I'll get back to you ASAP.

2019 Il Bianco Veneto (\$9.99) I have to admit that this isn't the snazziest of packages or most interesting of names. But this wine is great for the price. A producer in Italy's Veneto who sold mostly to restaurants could not sell anything last year because of the pandemic closures. So he blended all of his Chardonnay and Pinot Blanc that usually sell for \$25-plus together, and is selling it at this crazy low price. No wood signature, just rich, complex fruit, body, and excellent balance. You should really try this!



2017 La Massa "La Massa" Toscana (\$19.99) Our perennial favorite "Super Tuscan," this 70% Sangiovese, 15% Cabernet Sauvignon, and 15% Merlot blend is always super drinkable. The perfect crossover wine for California red lovers to explore Tuscany without having to get on a plane (sadly, all of us wish we could!). La Massa is situated on the Conca d'Oro, proclaimed by many wine writers as the best piece of vineyard in Chianti Classico, where its perfect exposure gives the wine perfect harmony. **93 JS**



2015 Castello di Monsanto "Il Poggio" Chianti Classico Gran Selezione (\$64.99) This is truly one of Chianti Classico's iconic vineyards, and this vintage is a sensational year. Monsanto lies at about the midpoint on the western boundary of Chianti Classico. They produce a wine in a more structured and linear nature, but the bounty and ripeness of the 2015 vintage flesh out the incredible power of this wine. It will be long-lived, but worth the wait. **96 JS, 96 DC, 95 WS, 94 VN**



Bringing in the 2015 Brunello di Montalcino

I remember the first time I tasted a bottled 2015 Brunello di Montalcino, instead of a barrel sample. It was at Vinitaly, Italy's annual (until recently) wine fair in Verona. And it was Ettore Spina, the owner of Sesta di Sopra, who brought a bottle even though it would not be for sale until the following year. My initial reaction was just *wow*, everyone is going to *love* this wine. The vintage has a perfumed hesitancy to it. It is not one of those knock-your-head-back wines where the aromas explode out of the glass. Instead, it draws you closer, pulls you in, because it just keeps getting better and better. The vintage on the whole produced wines that had a little more muscle and richness than on average, but that just balances out the structure. There is no fat hanging over the belt here, just supple muscle and density.

Some of you might look at this list of 2015 Brunello and wonder how some of them can be so inexpensive. We started importing directly from Montalcino with the 1999 vintage, and when you buy from the source you cut out one or two middlemen, and pay less. It also has allowed us to bring in smaller wineries who don't have the quantity to supply large national importers. Sesta di Sopra produces 340 cases of Brunello a year, Poggiarellino just over 500 cases a year. This has allowed us to become "players" in Montalcino—with the 2010 vintage, for instance, we sold more than 1% of the entire production of the DOCG.

This is a vintage not to miss. You are going to want to drink them even though they will age very well. Stock up now on the 2015s, as the 2016s will be for your cellar. More details on them in upcoming emails.

2015 Brunello di Montalcino

2015 Il Valentiano "Campo di Marzo" Brunello di Montalcino (\$29.99) *Direct Import.* This wine always gives me a feeling of serenity. The nose is a blend of savory plums and spice, with bits of chocolate and spicy earth tossed in. On the palate the wine shows a lot of umami character, that salted plum flavor, that is a background to the wild cherry and ripe plums. It shows a full and rich body that indicates an agile balance, never overwhelming, with just a touch of tannic backbone. Drinkable now and over the next decade. **93 JS, 92 RP, 92 VN**

2015 Mocali Brunello di Montalcino (\$34.99) The Mocali is adjacent to Il Valentiano—it's an inheritance thing—and they both sit up on Montalcino's western slope near the town of Tavernelle. They overlook Castelgiocondo's property. This wine always gets a bit of chocolaty ripeness from the afternoon sun and is a bit beefier than the Il Valentiano. But if you are a California wine fan, this style, with added mid-palate richness, may just be what you're looking for. **92 VN, 91 JS**



2015 Cava d'Onice "Sensis" Brunello di Montalcino (\$54.99) Literally, this winery's name means an onyx quarry—yes, they have one of those in Montalcino as well! This is a bold yet wiry Brunello that comes from the eastern slope of Montalcino. The nose is classic wild cherry, while underneath there's powerful structure and depth. But this wine is more about length. The finish is bright and calls for something from the grill—fresh porcini or bistecca alla fiorentina. **96 JS**

2015 Poggiarellino Brunello di Montalcino (\$34.99) *Direct Import.* I love Poggiarellino. It was one of our early discoveries and consistently provides extraordinary quality for the price. The nose of this wine is bold, saturated, bursting with savory wild cherry, salted plums, mushroom, and leather, and seems to say power incarnate, but in a restrained, country gentleman manner. On the palate the density of the 2015 vintage takes over. It is discreet power, full, yet never heavy—it just shows a subtle energy. The flavors show Poggiarellino's trademark Marasca cherry that emerges from a pool of plummy depth. A long life ahead for this wine that will really begin to open in 2025, but is delicious now. **93 JS**

2015 Castelgiocondo Brunello di Montalcino (\$59.99) The nose of this wine is plummy, riper, with hints of French oak that give the wine sweetness in the nose, followed by an earthy drift that reminds you the wine is from Tuscany. The palate has density and richness, is full-bodied, and shows polished tannins that add to the sleekness of the wine. The flavors are plummy, spicy, and show more fruit-driven character than earth. The finish is polished, long, and has hints of sweet vanillin highlighting the flavors. **97 JS, 96 WE**

2015 La Lecciaia Brunello di Montalcino (\$29.99) *Direct Import.* The nose is classic, full of plum, spice, leather, gravel, and smoke. That might seem a disparate blend for some of you, but it is a heavenly flow of aromatics that escape your glass when experienced. La Lecciaia is in the southeast quadrant of Montalcino with vineyards facing the same direction. On the palate the wine is classic, a long, vibrant flow from front to back that is layered with wild cherry, smoke, and Tuscan brush hidden in a richly textured center and framed by a bit of tannin. The finish shows lots of spice, saddle leather, plum, and a slight tannic grip, but lots of lift. It is remarkably drinkable now but will age well over the next decade. **94 JS, 92 VN**





Flowering fruit trees signal it's time for the vineyards of Montalcino to bud out and follow suit. (Photo courtesy of Col d'Orcia)

2015 Col d'Orcia Brunello di Montalcino (\$49.95)

Col d'Orcia is a classic. It epitomizes the character of the Versante Amiata with its savory, salty character, hints of leather, stone, and that exotic cherry. The nose is full of enticing baked cherry pie aromatics, the kind that fill your kitchen as you wait to dive in. On the palate the tannins are sweet, elegant, and offer a perfect framing for the umami-like flavors. And they age extraordinarily well. **94 JS, 94 VN, 94 WS**



2015 Tenuta di Sesta Brunello di Montalcino

(\$34.99) Direct Import. This is one of my favorite estates in Montalcino, yet I find myself always making excuses because it isn't an *obvious* wine. The wine is gentle, calm, yet so unassumingly charming; simplistic yet incredibly deep. The nose of this vintage gives you all the pure Sangiovese aromatics, wild cherry and plum cut in behind the earthy elements, along with hints of dried roses and freshly cut leather. Yet in recent years the quality of fruit has increased exponentially, and there is now a depth to the wines that was not there before. On the palate this wine is supple, smooth, and flows easily across your tongue. The finish is lively, fresh, and has a lifting finish. Despite all the smooth, supple, round adjectives, this wine is fresh and vibrant. Drink now with two to three hours of decanting, but best after 2025. **94 JS, 94 RP, 94 VN**



2015 Capanna Brunello di Montalcino (\$57.99)

The nose is dark and brooding, showing more mahogany than fruit, and bits of earth and spice. On the palate the wine explodes: full, rich, a complex blend of wild cherry, earth, leather, and hints of soy. The finish is incredible, powerfully structured, but so well balanced it's extraordinary. Capanna sits on one of the best portions of the Montosoli hill, Montalcino's most famous vineyard site, and produces wines of power, displaying powerful structure, incredible depth of fruit, yet superb balance. Consistently one of Montalcino's best wines. **96 JS, 95 VN**



2015 Valdisuga Brunello di Montalcino (\$36.99)

The nose is full of bold, ripe plum accented with wild cherry and touches of wild brush and earth. On the palate the wine shows a fuller body, and evident tannic structure, all enclosed in rich, supple, and smooth fruit. It is well balanced, showing a density that is combined with good length and a reinforcement of its richness. The wine's flavors are bold and straightforward, repeating the dark, plummy signature, while hints of wild cherry and leather begin to emerge in a powerful, weighty statement of fruit. The finish is compelling, balanced, and conveys a flow of consistent flavors throughout. **94 RP**



2015 Sesta di Sopra Brunello di Montalcino (\$59.99)

Direct Import. I have tasted this wine many times from when it was still juice until its release, but it was in April of 2019 at Vintaly that I was bowled over. The completed and bottled wine was amazing. The nose of the wine is incredible. It has a deep, mesmerizing effect. It's a cauldron of wild herbs, wild cherry, plum, and a hint of sauvage. On the palate the wine rolls across your tongue, treating you to a lush richness where a savory intrigue emerges and adds to the wild cherry, plum, and herb. It's plush, yet buoyant, and keeps your attention focused. The finish is vibrant. There is a freshness and lift on the back end that makes this wine exceedingly memorable. **95 JS, 94 RP, 94 VN**



2015 Altesino "Montosoli" Brunello di Montalcino

(\$94.99) Pre-Arrival. This is the finest Montosoli Brunello I have ever tasted from Altesino. The nose is full of wild cherry, spice, and a touch of Tuscan brush. On the palate the wine shows weight and richness, but with a vertical acidic structure that stretches it out over your tongue. Outstanding balance, focus, and a super long finish. If you've ever been a fan before, this is the vintage to buy! **97 JS, 96 RP, 96 VN**



Chianti, the Hard Way

I met Piero Lanza a long time ago, but he seems so much older now—it must be me! His winery is in Radda in Chianti, which is the highest elevation of the communes in Chianti Classico, and his 29 acres of vines are planted at about 1,600 feet. Piero was one of the first I remember to switch to organic viticulture in Chianti Classico. He uses no fungicides or pesticides, and is a great believer in “green manure”—that’s planting cover crops amid the vines. Piero also introduced new clones of Sangiovese that produce smaller grapes, adding to the wine’s concentration. All of this was not easy, and it is not an easy place to grow grapes, but his dedication has paid off. His vineyards give some of the best expressions of Sangiovese in Chianti Classico. He has a magnificent spot—his vines are planted in Galestro, an exfoliating marine schist that is ideal for its ability to tame Sangiovese’s vigor. This adds to the purity, concentration, lively acidity, and intoxicating aromatics that his wines have, and give them remarkable life and vibrancy.



Piero Lanza.

The **2018 Poggerino Chianti Classico (\$19.99)** comes from a vineyard planted in 1994, and a portion in 2004, and is 100% Sangiovese. Piero ages the wine in a combination of 20–25hl Slavonian oak casks and 5hl French oak tonneaux. This combination gives a bit of supple balance to these high altitude wines and makes them eminently drinkable, even at an early age. **90 WS**

Structured, brooding, and dense, the **2017 Poggerino “Bugialla” Chianti Classico Riserva (\$39.99)** comes from a 100% Sangiovese vineyard planted in 1973. This wine sees no tonneaux, just the 20–25hl Slavonian oak casks, where it spends 18 months and then is bottled. This is a powerful wine, but the concentration has so much lift and freshness, it is amazing. **95 VN**



Just Two More... OK, Three

My editor is going to kill me, because this page is supposed to be about one winery. But I have two more wines that you all need to try.

The **2019 Blason Friulano Isonzo del Friuli (\$11.99)** comes from an old vine vineyard and is just sensational. Yes, \$11.99. I’m sorry, I know—if it were more expensive you might think it would sound more interesting, but this is about as good as Friulano gets. Friuli is the Italian region farthest east up against the Slovenian border, and Friulano is their national drink. When Romans do an espresso, that’s when Friulians have a *tajut*, or cut of Friulano. This wine is full of white peach aromatics, with a vibrant, salty interior, and sees no wood. Super balance, great palate weight, and the ideal accompaniment to sautéed fish dishes.

To pair with the Friulano is one of Friuli’s great mysteries, Cabernet Franc. You see, they call Carmenere Cabernet Franc, as well—confusing, I know. This **2019 Blason Cabernet Franc Isonzo del Friuli (\$11.99)** is one of my favorite drinks. First off, you must drink it cellar temperature, and the ultra-spicy, complex herbaceous character really gets elevated. This isn’t a sweet, plump Cabernet Franc; this is vibrant, nervy, and an outstanding food wine. Try it with a roasted chicken.

I’m really going to take heat for this, but since we’re in Friuli, the **2019 Bortolusso Franconia Friuli-Venezia-Giulia (\$14.99)** is a revelation. Franconia is the name for Blaufrankisch in Italy. This supple, spicy, and decidedly delicious wine needs to be on your table. Cellar temperature as well for this wine!

(Editor’s note: Not a problem, Greg, and I just might have to pick up a bottle of that Franconia—sounds like just the ticket for a springtime red, with a little toma, some sopressata...)



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