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A Tale of Two Extremes: The 2020 Brunellos and 2019 Riservas

BY ERIC GUIDO | NOVEMBER 26, 2024

After over two decades of stagnation with regards to production guidelines, Montalcino recently announced a litany of changes that will significantly impact the Rosso di Montalcino DOC and Brunello di Montalcino DOCG categories. The official five-star vintage rating system has received an entire overhaul. The cherry on top is the ongoing creation of a new map to be published by the Consorzio del Vino Brunello di Montalcino in collaboration with Master of Wine Gabriele Gorelli. Amidst all this is the release of the highly anticipated 2020 Brunellos and, of course, the 2019 Riservas. Change is afoot, and most of it is very positive, yet there are flaws and a few missed opportunities as well.



A sea of fog surrounding the town of Montalcino.

The Two-Faced 2020 Vintage

Tasting the 2020 vintage, I can't help but be reminded of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. It's always challenging reporting on a vintage like this one because I want to be clear

are certainly necessary, especially for those of us who like to drink young Brunello, that phrase also communicates to consumers that the wines simply won't age well. I've witnessed time and time again that coining a year as a "restaurant vintage" means that retail sales and purchases from collectors and speculators drop off a cliff. That said, although all the things I listed above are true about the 2020s, there's significantly more nuance in this case.

It is a vintage with remarkably high highs and, unfortunately, very low lows. What's more, there's a significant disparity between producers who did a fantastic job and those who made lackluster wines that, in some cases, are very difficult to swallow (literally). This brings me back to the 2020 Rossos and a report ([The Rise of Rosso di Montalcino](#)) I wrote in October of 2022, where I stated, "[The 2022 Rossos] are rich, textural and opulent reds that boast gobs of ripe red fruit and extract. Most 2020s are so beautiful today that it's hard to envision them getting any better, which could pose a problem for the Brunello category." As I continued to sample the 2020 Rossos over the last two years, it became apparent that their combination of high extract, high acidity and high alcohol made them very difficult to taste. On more than one occasion, I found myself unable to get through a single glass. This issue plagues many of the 2020 Brunellos at the lower end of the score spectrum. These are big, decadent wines that lack the balance to age. In many cases, the tannins are surprisingly silky to a fault, where the wines lack the grip and framing structure on the palate that even a restaurant vintage should offer.

So now that we've discussed Mr. Hyde, what about Dr. Jekyll? This is where the 2020 vintage throws the taster for a loop. Amidst all of the high-octane wines that sometimes sear the senses and are best consumed in the near term, there is another level of undeniably elegant and harmonious wines that soothe the palate and the soul. These wines offer sweet, ripe tannins and cooling acidity with a core of balanced fruit. They are graceful yet complex and impactful. So how does this happen?



A selection of standout Brunello di Montalcino from the 2020 vintage.

In some cases, this variation can be attributed to location, but in most cases, producers determined the fate of their wines. Discussing the climate conditions of the 2020 season, one would expect great things. This was the COVID-19 year. Winemakers were locked down and often decided to obsess over their vineyards. Gigliola Giannetti of Le Potazzine commented that her vineyard was like her garden in 2020—perfectly manicured. Andrea Cortonesi of Uccelliera and Voliero described a vine-by-vine approach that wouldn't have been possible without the lockdown. Francesco Ripaccioli of Canalicchio di Sopra explained, "The time that we spent in the vineyard was decidedly superior to any other activity at the winery." Iacopo Mori reminisced, "No planes, no cars, no pollution, it was amazing."

The 2020 vintage was hot, yet it wasn't nearly as dry as 2019 or 2021. In fact, between October and December of 2019, over 600 millimeters of rain fell, with another 115 millimeters in January. This meant that water reserves were very high going into the growing season. Winter brought temperatures below freezing, which helped to reduce disease. The spring was relatively dry, with well-timed rains in April and May. Temperatures rose through the end of May, with an even and healthy flowering, followed by an extended period of dry conditions into the summer. Built-up water reserves kept the vines healthy through this period with lush green canopies. Between July and August, Mother Nature turned up the heat, with average temperatures in the upper 90s and seven days of 102°F intensity. This forced the vines to shut down their vegetative process. But things soon took a sharp turn in a more positive direction. At the end of August, 40 millimeters of rain fell, ushering in much cooler temperatures. In fact, producers in the south saw a cool, extended harvest period. Poggio di Sotto and Uccelliera reported that harvest commenced at the end of September. The month

Success really did come down to the producer. Who was willing to spend time working the canopies to shade their fruit? Who was willing to adjust yields so as not to stress the vines? Who had the courage to let their fruit hang longer than usual to achieve ripeness? Who had the foresight to adjust their maceration times to deal with the high levels of skin and pulp? Who decided to declassify their Riserva juice to bolster their Brunello? The notes and producer commentaries that follow answer all of these questions.

This is not a vintage to skip, nor is it just a “restaurant vintage.” The successful wines of 2020 are absolutely gorgeous. Readers just need to be selective.



Stella di Campalto explains the importance of nature and the role of biodiversity in her vineyards in the southern reaches of Montalcino.

Radiance Reimagined: The 2019 Riservas

The Riserva category is always tricky in Montalcino. In many cases, I question whether the added cost of a Riserva equates to the quality of what’s in the bottle. That said, as I taste older vintages regularly, I often find that the Riservas mature more gracefully than the straight Brunellos. Granted, much of this has to do with the style of the wines

begun to bottle their Riserva simultaneously with their Brunello yet release the Riserva a year later, as required by the DOCG. In these cases, wineries offer consumers a wine made from exceptional fruit that has matured for an extra year in the cellar. There's certainly value in that. Ultimately, the Riserva category will always be about the vintage, the producer and the style. Even in a classic year like 2019, there will be wines that have been too heavily impacted by the stamp of oak.

In last year's article, [Buckle Your Seatbelts: 2019 Brunello and 2021 Rosso di Montalcino](#), I described the 2019 vintage in detail. *"Two thousand nineteen is a year of radiance and appeal without any sensation of over-ripeness or lack of complexity. The wines are aromatically intense and full of dimension, with translucent color, fruit typicity and the ability to communicate a sense of place. They are structured and built for cellaring, often showing their best after being open for over two days in bottle...While many 2019s display an inviting personality today, they are balanced for the cellar."* I still agree wholeheartedly with these statements, and many of the 2019 Riservas have only amplified these qualities, adding an extra level of depth and more serious structure without compromising fruit expression. However, due to the consistently high quality of the vintage across the board, I found myself scoring the Riservas in line with many of the best Brunellos of the year, not necessarily higher. This isn't meant to be negative—it's simply up to the consumer to decide where to spend their dollars.



Library vintages at Le Potazzine.

allow them to mature much longer than previously anticipated. Today, many single-vineyard Rossos and Rossos made from declassified Brunello juice punch well above expectations. In vintages like 2018, 2019 and 2021, the Rosso category reached all-new heights, even outperforming some Brunellos in a year like 2018. In many cases, prices have gone up, but those new prices are often warranted.

The Consorzio del Vino Brunello di Montalcino has also noticed this trend. In an attempt to provide the region and its wineries an outlet for taking advantage of Rosso's newfound importance in the market, the Consorzio has significantly changed the rules governing the existing Rosso and Brunello di Montalcino vineyards. These changes added 352 hectares to the current 510 hectares of Rosso di Montalcino without requiring any replanting or new plantings that might disturb the region's biodiversity. They accomplished this by allowing the use of IGT Sangiovese and Sant'Antimo vineyards in the production of Rosso di Montalcino. Moreover, the boundaries between Rosso and Brunello vineyards no longer exist. Instead, wineries will consider a percentage of Rosso that can be bottled annually against their total land under vine. For example, a winery with fewer than 10 hectares of vines receives +15% production of Rosso, while an estate with between 10 and 20 hectares will receive +15% on the first 10 hectares and +10% on any additional hectares. Beyond increasing production of Rosso, these new rules allow winemakers to select the most suitable parcels for Rosso or Brunello di Montalcino depending on the vintage.

I do wish the Consorzio would consider a new classification of Rosso that would help consumers tell the difference between a wine made for early and easy drinking and one intended to function as a "baby Brunello." Hopefully, this will be in the cards in the future.



Federico Radi detailing the resurrection of vineyards at Biondi-Santi.

Then, there is the issue of Montalcino's five-star vintage rating system, which has been problematic since its inception. Consumers, wineries and media have looked to this ranking as a predictor of quality from vintage to vintage. However, anyone closely following the region and its wines quickly realizes the system is flawed. A stunning vintage like 2001 received four stars yet clearly deserved higher. The 2005 vintage received five stars yet clearly deserved lower. I can say the same for 2012 versus 2013, where the latter has proven itself superior. Now, we have 2020—another five-star year... I think not. With a bit of digging, one learns that since the inception of this system, the stars were decided around February of the year that followed the vintage. The wines were embryonic, having only recently finished their fermentations, and the only actual analysis was of the growing season's climatic conditions. At the time of assessment, there was no way to know how the finished wines would perform.

As of this writing, the Consorzio has abolished the five-star system. There will no longer be a rating system at all. It will be up to critics to make those calls. Instead, the Consorzio will present a detailed vintage analysis using a collection of weather data, including temperature fluctuations, precipitation and the frequency and length of droughts. A panel of eight internationally sourced Masters of Wine, led by Gabriele Gorelli MW and Andrea Lonardi MW, will taste the finished wines blind about a month prior to Benvenuto Brunello (which takes place at the end of November). After assembling the data points, the team will "name" each vintage with a phrase that aims to depict the year's quality.

Firstly, this is a big step in the right direction. In a region like Montalcino, reviewers should have access to this data without having to interview dozens of producers in an

ot the northeast does not make sense. Nor does it make sense to consider that a vintage in Castelnuevo dell'Abate in the southeast is anything like one in the north or in the Mediterranean-influenced southwest. Each year, I spend at least two full weeks interviewing winemakers in all parts of the region to decode the Rubik's cube that is a single vintage. There's no other way to do it. I hope these clarifications will manifest one day and that the wineries of Montalcino will fully support them. It would be in everyone's best interests. Until then, however, this new system gives me hope.



A mix of clay, sand and a large percentage of stones in the lower elevations of Castelnuevo dell'Abate.

Last but not least, is a mapping project being undertaken by the Consorzio and Gabriele Gorelli MW that I can only discuss in broad strokes. At this time as I have not seen any drafts yet. Montalcino has long lacked a comprehensive map that defines the various subzones within the broader appellation. I hope the Consorzio will take this opportunity to address what is a serious shortcoming for the region, especially considering the work that has been done in other regions throughout the world in recent years.

I tasted the wines for this article in Montalcino between July and October 2024 through a series of estate visits at over 30 estates and in centralized group tastings.

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