

TASTING REPORTS

Strapping Sangioveses

The 2015 Brunellos are big, brawny and destined for a long life



After conducting an analysis of its Montalcino estate, Argiano produced its first-ever single-vineyard Brunello with the 2015 vintage, the classic-rated Vigna del Suolo.



By Bruce Sanderson

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Producers in Montalcino were thrilled with the 2015 vintage, particularly coming on the heels of the challenging 2014 campaign, which saw a cold and wet growing season. A hot summer with adequate rainfall, no extreme weather issues or disease problems, a good-sized crop and healthy grapes resulted in both relief and happiness on the part of vintners.

There is certainly a lot to celebrate about the new crop of Brunellos. For the most part, the 2015s are powerful Sangioveses—broad, dense and packed with fruit and tannins. The wines from the northwestern and southwestern parts of the denomination tend to be the most tannic and structured. Yet there is consistency among the wines overall, with few that missed the mark with jammy fruit or astringent tannins.

The best versions find a nice equilibrium. At the top are two wines at 97 points that match ripe fruit with lively acidity, elegance and harmony, showing the complexity and richness to offset their firm tannins. The Le Ragnaie Brunello di Montalcino Casanovina Montosoli (\$180) is a new label from vintner Riccardo Campinoti, who bought the vineyard in December 2014, while the San Filippo Brunello di Montalcino Le Lucére (\$90) represents the triumph of the vintage for proprietor Roberto Gianelli. "The grapes were perfect everywhere," Gianelli told me when we tasted the wine

together in November 2018 at his estate. "In each vintage, you usually have some grapes better than others, but in '15, they were all great."

At Le Ragnaie, Campinoti made classic-rated Brunellos from other sites as well. The Brunello di Montalcino Fornace (96 points, \$180) comes from a vineyard located near Castelnuovo dell'Abate, while the Brunello di Montalcino Ragnaie V.V. (96, \$180) is from a high-elevation site just behind the winery, near the highest point in the Montalcino zone, Passo del Lumo Spento.

"Definitely, elevation has been playing an important part in warm vintages like 2007, 2011, 2012 and 2015," Campinoti says. "We can be 400 to 500 meters [1,320 to 1,650 feet] above certain areas [around Montalcino] and that can help a lot to mitigate the extreme heat—and also the temperature shift between night and day is a factor."

Argiano released its first single-vineyard Brunello di Montalcino, the Vigna del Suolo 2015 (96, \$200), after CEO Bernardino Sani and his team did a comprehensive analysis of the soils in the estate's vineyards. This concentrated yet sleek and focused red is harmonious, complex and long, with graphite, juniper, pine and olive aromas and ripe cherry, raspberry, mineral and tobacco flavors.

Valdicava also released a new single-vineyard label from the Montosoli hill, the Brunello di Montalcino Vigna Montosoli (96, \$689/1.5L), with muscular tannins and bright acidity providing the support for the wine's pure cherry and strawberry fruit, shaded by iron, tobacco and tar.

Podere Salicutti also impresses with its Brunello di Montalcino Piaggione (96, \$115), with focused fruit and balsamic notes on an elegant frame. This bottling was always the vineyard-designated Brunello under Francesco Leanza's ownership, yet after Felix and Sabine Eichbauer purchased the property in December 2015, they decided to release three single-vineyard labels from the cellar. The Brunello di Montalcino Teatro (95, \$185) and Brunello di Montalcino Sorgente (93, \$90) round out the year's trio.

"Francesco's Brunello Piaggione was always a blend of the Piaggione vineyard and the Teatro vineyard," Felix Eichbauer explains, with Piaggione comprising two-thirds and Teatro one-third. "But he usually vinified separately for at least two years or shortly before bottling. When we first tasted Piaggione and Teatro separately, we were so touched by their different show of *terroir* that we decided to keep them separate.

"In the past, Francesco had always used the Sorgente vineyard exclusively for the Rosso di Montalcino, mainly because of the age of the vines and its positioning," he adds. "In 2015, he had

kept one cask of 20 hectoliters separate, the first selection of the vineyard, to experiment with longer barrel aging. Since we were very happy with the result, we decided to bottle it as Brunello, and we are quite confident we can continue to do so in the future. We will therefore always make two selections from the Sorgente vineyard—the first for the Brunello, the second for the Rosso."

These are the highlights from the 117 Brunellos from 2015 I have reviewed in blind tastings at our New York office. Of these, 23 earned classic scores of 95 points or higher, while another 88 rated 90 to 94 points. At the very top, the highest-rated wines of the vintage are just shy of the top-scorers from 2013, 2012 and 2010, though this could change with the release of the *riservas* next year. Based on the *annatas* tasted for this report, I give the vintage an overall rating of 95 points.

(A [free alphabetical list](#)

[\[https://www.winespectator.com/articles/brunelloalpha063020\]](https://www.winespectator.com/articles/brunelloalpha063020) of scores and prices for all wines tasted is available.)

For the most part, the top-scoring 2015 Brunellos come either from the northern part of the denomination, from its higher elevations or from the best *terroirs* in the sector around Castelnuovo dell'Abate. These versions are better able to capture the freshness necessary to balance the ripe fruit of the vintage and its dense, sometimes massive tannins.

Though most 2015s strike a good balance between the fruit, acidity, tannins and alcohol, a few are overripe, overly tannic and in some cases alcoholic. The minimum level of alcohol is 14%, with many of the wines clocking in at 14.5% and some even reaching 15% or higher. At these levels, Sangiovese loses its vibrancy, elegance and complexity. Thus, a number of 2015s deliver ample fruit but feel heavy because they lack the balance of the top wines.

The higher elevations also had a better temperature differential between day and night, allowing the Sangiovese to develop its delicate aromas and flavors. "For 2015, we believe that the key to making a great wine was to keep the focus on the fruit and the acidity, which is something we always do," explains Alessandro Bindocci, whose Il Poggione Brunello di Montalcino (95, \$85) retained the vibrant acidity necessary for balance. "We always claim that the acidity is the backbone of the wine, especially for Brunello and especially for great vintages like this, that will likely age for a long time. We are fortunate that thanks to our vineyards at higher elevation, we are able to achieve a great freshness no matter what the weather is like."

The 2015 growing season boded well from the beginning. Winter and spring witnessed regular weather, with average temperatures and rainfall. May and June experienced alternating periods of sun and rain, which benefited the vines during the hot, dry month of July. Though warm, summer was

not overly hot, with some heat spikes rather than a sustained heat wave. There was a little rain at the end of July and again in mid-August that helped to refresh the vines and set the course for the development of the aromas and the quality of the tannins.

The onset of the ripening process, known as *veraison*, came on the early side, before the end of July, with the color of the Sangiovese changing from green to black. This allowed for a long ripening period before harvest. Picking began about the middle of September, after a little rain at the beginning of the month was followed by warm, dry and windy conditions that contributed to healthy grapes.

Though many producers finished harvest by the end of September, others such as Argiano's Sani waited. "The two key decisions for Argiano have been to leave a good amount of grapes and leaves on each plant in order to avoid sunburn and overripening, and not to harvest in mid-September after the heavy *tramontana* wind that dried the grapes a little, but wait for the next rain to come," he recalls. "The vines reacted perfectly, allowing us to harvest in October a classic vintage."

Despite the later harvest, the 2015s are more muscular than the classic style of the 2013s and 2010s. Nonetheless, these powerful wines deliver high quality across the board, the best of them elegant and ageworthy. Brunello lovers will want to lay away a few bottles of this great vintage from their favorite

producers. They are certain to offer pleasure for years to come.

Senior editor Bruce Sanderson is Wine Spectator's lead taster on the wines of Tuscany.

BRUCE SANDERSON'S RECOMMENDED BRUNELLOS DI MONTALCINO

Nearly 125 wines were reviewed for this report. A free alphabetical list is available. WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online Wine Ratings search.

LE RAGNAIE

Brunello di Montalcino Casanovina Montosoli 2015

Score: 97 | \$180

WS Review: Offering complex aromas of rose, truffle, cherry, leather, iron and licorice, this keeps coming at you, delivering ripe flavors and depth. Features terrific balance and a long, lively aftertaste.

SAN FILIPPO

Brunello di Montalcino Le Lucère 2015