



Brunello: Italian Red Wine Tastes

Best With Age

by Dan Berger

A diner who was charged with ordering the wine for a table where everyone had ordered meat dishes asked the waiter for a wine suggestion.

The waiter suggested a Brunello.

The diner asked, "Is that red?"

Andrea Gamon, hearing that little tale, was aghast. "Brunello?!" she asked. "Doesn't everyone know Brunello?"

No, Brunello is not a household word in the United States, and especially when its full name, Brunello di Montalcino, violates one of the cardinal sins for wine popularity: Anything over four syllables doesn't sell.

Moreover, this is an Italian wine, and some people fear pronouncing anything so daunting. For the record, it's mon-tal-chee-no, a dark, tannic red wine that is made entirely of sangiovese and is best at age 10 or more.

Gamon, who co-owns a Brunello house in the Tuscan hills, is relatively new to the fact that this esteemed red wine isn't as popular as it ought to be in the United States. And she is a bit surprised that it hasn't become more popular.

"It is made from Sangiovese ..." she says, as if that fact alone should vault all Brunellos ahead of cabernet sauvignon as the world's most important red wine.

Not likely. But sangiovese does make some of the best red wines in Italy, and Brunello di Montalcino is among the heftiest, with substantial tannin and (as the British say) "grip," which refers to the austere nature of the wine when young.

Interestingly, the wine is rarely very alcoholic, which means that its tannins are not as astringent as can be the tannins in higher-alcohol wines. Thus they do right well with meat and other dishes in which there is some protein and fat to compete with the astringency and acidity.

Because a lot of wine is evaluated without food, some reviewers judge it to be bitter and not very likeable.

But there is another huge strike against it. The best of Brunello needs either a lot of time in the bottle or aeration, or both, to deliver the complexities that can be its greatest charms. And the American dinner experience is simply not geared to doing right by Brunello.

"It's much better when it's decanted," said Gamon, whose Pinino Montalcino property

was founded in 1874 and acquired by four partners in 2003.

Easier said than done. Restaurants, even some very good ones, do not love diners who sit around for two hours swirling their wine, waiting for it to “open up.” The game for some wine servers is to pull the cork and pour all glasses as full as you can and hope the people slog it down and vacate the table for the next party.

Turning tables is what they call it, and it’s a pernicious game fed by the American penchant to eat fast and go somewhere else.

Brunello isn’t made for that sort of behavior. “It is best to watch the wine as it develops its complexity,” said Gamon.

Added her husband and partner in the winery, Hannes, “It’s best to decant the wine hours before the meal.”

But even Andrea admitted, “Sure, but even I forget to do that. I should do it in the morning, but I usually don’t remember until an hour before dinner.”

To deal with such issues, most Brunello houses make a younger, lighter version of Brunello that is called Rosso di Montalcino, which sells for a lot less and delivers great sangiovese character without as much of a need for air.

Just released into the U.S. market is the recent release of Pinino, the 2003 Brunello (\$55) that is lighter and more elegant than many and which really benefits from aeration.

The winery’s baby brother, the 2006 Rosso di Montalcino (\$24) is fresher and lively with acid, still demanding some decanting as well as pasta-tomato sauce kinds of dishes. A more intense form of Rosso is Pinino’s 2006 ClanDestino (\$35) is aged in small barrels and has more depth.

The 2003 Brunello sounds like a lot of money. But imagine the time it took to get here. The wine is 6 years old; a top-rate Bordeaux that old would command twice the price.

And it is superb wine, delivering all the character one would expect from a Brunello. (Which is red.)

Imported by TGIF, Woodland Hills, Calif.

Wine of the Week: 2004 Caparzo Rosso di Montalcino (\$25) -- Another affordable version of sangiovese from Brunello, with no new oak treatment and a terrific mid-palate of fruit. Also best decanted for at least an hour and served with beef dishes. It already shows a little of the aged character I so love in older wines like this. Imported by Vineyard Brands, Birmingham, Ala.

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