


**RATING:** 90 points**PRODUCER:** Il Marroneto **FROM:** Brunello di Montalcino, Tuscany, Italy**VARIETY:** Sangiovese Grosso**DRINK:** 2008 - 2018**ESTIMATED COST:****SOURCE:** WA, #176
Apr 2008

Il Marroneto's 2003 Brunello di Montalcino is a lovely wine. Tobacco, underbrush, leather and sweet red cherries flow from this medium to full-bodied, accessible Brunello. The tannins are firm, yet beautifully-integrated and the wine offers outstanding freshness as well as fine overall balance. Anticipated maturity: 2008-2018.

This small estate lies just outside the town of Montalcino. The wines seem to be getting better with each passing vintage, and these 2003s are both very strong efforts.

Importer: Riviera Import, Long Island City, NY; tel. (917) 328-8830

**RATING:** 92 points**PRODUCER:** Il Marroneto **FROM:** Brunello di Montalcino, Tuscany, Italy**VARIETY:** Sangiovese Grosso**DRINK:** 2010 - 2020**ESTIMATED COST:****SOURCE:** WA, #176
Apr 2008

The single-vineyard 2003 Brunello di Montalcino Madonna delle Grazie is the best wine I have tasted from this property. It is sweeter, riper and yet more vibrant than the regular bottling, with an extra dimension of complexity in its sweet dark cherries, wild herbs, underbrush and spices. This gorgeous, firmly-structured Brunello needs at least another few years in bottle. The only question is whether the wine's tannic components will outlast the fruit. Anticipated maturity: 2010-2020.

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Montalcino: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

No other region in Italy is as full of contrasts as Montalcino. These gorgeous, rolling hills south of Siena are home to a variety of diverse microclimates capable of yielding expressions of Sangiovese that at their best are among the most unique wines being made anywhere. The producers' consortium, the Consorzio del Vino Brunello di Montalcino, aided by the marketing savvy of the region's largest estates, has succeeded in creating an upscale image for the region in a very short time.

Unfortunately all is not well in Montalcino. Any visitor who spends time here will undoubtedly hear grumbling about a number of troubling developments. It is hardly surprising that Montalcino has been in the news quite a bit recently, as several prominent producers are under investigation for allegedly blending international varieties with Sangiovese in their Brunellos. Reports out of Italy seem to change on a day by day basis, so it is probably best to allow for the facts to emerge before rushing to judgement as these are serious allegations that threaten to destabilize the entire appellation.

One thing is certain. Far too many wines being made in Montalcino today are innocuous. Period. It is impossible for an outsider such as myself to have full knowledge of all of the inner machinations of a region and its producers, and it is probably better that way. I taste wines objectively and without prejudice, under the assumption that they have been made in accordance with regulations. That said, it is impossible to ignore the simple fact that today's Brunellos show a range of contrast, diversity and quality that is frankly alarming. Whether the causes are poorly-situated vineyards that are a result of over-expansion, excessively high yields, young vines, experimental Sangiovese clones, an exuberant use of French oak, or some of the more suspect practices that are allegedly taking place in the region's vineyards and cellars, the reality is that there are too many wines being made today that lack any real distinctiveness and fall far short of the prestige (and high prices) producers think the Brunello di Montalcino designation automatically brings with it.

As Brunello has become more internationalized the Consorzio faces a new problem, for which it is partly to blame, and that is the rise of counterfeit wines being produced in other regions and sold as "Brunello di Montalcino." When your wines taste like they could be made anywhere....guess what....they are easier to fake. Let's hope the Consorzio and the local Chamber of Commerce, (the group whose tasting committee grants DOCG status to the wines) take advantage of this opportunity to finally get serious about guaranteeing consumers an honest product. If they don't, over time consumers will gravitate towards wines of greater regional identity, and Italy is a country that has no lack of fascinating grape varieties and *terroirs*, many of which yield wines of greater personality that also happen to be more affordable.

On a more positive note, the 2003 Brunellos have turned out better than I expected. For the most part the wines offer very good balance. As was the case throughout continental Europe, Montalcino experienced a brutally hot, dry year. Montalcino is a large area that is home to an extraordinary range of terrains and microclimates, so generalizations are always tricky. Broadly speaking, the wines from the northern slopes of Montalcino and the higher-altitude vineyards around town preserved more freshness and aromatic complexity. Older vineyards with deeper roots and more access to water

reserves were clearly advantaged. Many growers reported having to discard burnt, sun-charred fruit in the vineyard and at the sorting table. The grapes were small, with relatively little, yet concentrated juice. Producers did what they could to treat the fruit gently in order to avoid extracting any additional tannins during fermentation. Most producers noted that malolactic fermentations proceeded at a fast pace. Quite a few winemakers I spoke with chose to give their wines less time in oak than normal, while others cut back on the percentage of new barrels, both choices aimed at trying to keep the wines in balance by not adding additional tannin from oak aging. The majority of estates that typically bottle a Riserva plan to do so in 2003 as well.

The simple fact is that for better or worse the 2003 Brunellos show very little 2003 character. That may sound like a puzzling statement, but readers should remember that the vast majority of Brunellos are made by consulting oenologists whose professional training and expertise allows them to make excellent, even outstanding, wines in just about any vintage. Only a small handful of wines show over-ripe or candied qualities to their fruit. The widespread technique in Montalcino of refreshing wines with younger vintages explains why very few wines come across as obviously over-ripe or cooked. A more common problem is the green, unripe tannins that are the hallmark of super-hot vintages where phenolic ripeness is not achieved as the plants shut down because of a lack of water. On the plus side, overall quality is consistent as the wines are very competently made. On the down side, many wines taste alike, and there are few truly superlative wines. I saw several cases where an estate's regular bottling is more successful and better balanced than the top selection. The heat helped fill out some of the wines from less well-exposed sites, but paradoxically left the best-exposed vineyards with super-ripe fruit and problematic tannins. Readers will note a compression of scores around the 89-92 range, which reflects the fact that a large number of wines in 2003 are the result of polished cellar work as opposed to pure expressions of site, vintage and individual producer styles.

In short, 2003 looks to be an excellent vintage for drinking over the near-term, particularly in restaurants or other last minute situations which don't lend themselves to the enjoyment of more important, age worthy wines that might require aeration and/or decanting. In my many tastings of the wines I have found them to show best when served slightly above cellar temperature, which is to say roughly 62-68 degrees Fahrenheit, as I would recommend for Nebbiolo or Pinot Noir. The cooler temperature helps tame the tannins as well as the ripeness in the wines. I don't expect most of the 2003 Brunellos to be long-lived, but since so many wines have been generously refreshed its hard to tell for certain. My best guess is that most wines will offer the finest enjoyment before age 15, give or take.

Readers will also find a number of superb Rossos from the outstanding 2006 vintage on retailers' shelves. Rosso di Montalcino can be made in a variety of styles, from simple, fresh wines made to be enjoyed without much fanfare, to more important versions that are essentially declassified Brunello that producers have deemed not worthy of their top designation. 2006 was a hot vintage, but the last month of the growing season saw cooler nighttime temperatures, which allowed growers to harvest in optimal conditions. The 2006 Rossos have plenty of generosity and ripeness in their fruit, but are also wonderfully balanced.

—Antonio Galloni