

BRUNELLO'S MOMENT OF TRUTH

While the notion of terroir has been both celebrated and ridiculed in some of the world's greatest wine-producing areas, one of Italy's most illustrious denominations has instead chosen to ignore it—until now.

Kerin O'Keefe discovers Montalcino's unofficial subzones

Majestic. Elegant. Powerful. Long-lived. Expensive. Rare. All these adjectives have been applied to Brunello di Montalcino by the world's leading wine authorities, from Cyril Ray to Burton Anderson, but may soon be supplemented by another much less positive—overflowing. Due to massive overplanting, Brunello production is now on the brink of exploding, which has pushed the long-neglected question of Brunello's *tipicità* to the forefront, as Montalcino winemakers search for ways to protect Brunello's identity and prestige from the perils posed by a saturated market. As areas previously considered unsuitable for winemaking are cultivated, many producers feel the time has come to recognize officially Montalcino's greatly varied subzones and to curb vinification techniques that render a more international style.

As newly founded wineries with little or no experience begin making Brunello, these matters have taken on an urgency hitherto unfamiliar in this denomination, the short history of which has nevertheless been marked by nearly continuous expansion. Although invented 150 years ago, Brunello was made and bottled by only one estate until the 1950s. When the wine became a *denominazione di origine controllata* (DOC) in 1966, there were 13 bottlers and 76 hectares (ha) of registered vines. Production steadily increased, and when the wine became Italy's first *denominazione di origine controllata e garantita* (DOCG) in 1980, Montalcino attracted investors from all over the world. Output rose dramatically, leveling off in the 1990s at around 3 million bottles a year. Then in 1997, during what is now being called the golden era for Brunello, producers successfully petitioned to have the appellation's sealed registers reopened to increase production and satisfy a seemingly insatiable market. Unfortunately for Montalcino, this was followed by EU decree 950, whereby those under 40 years old were given land and planting rights to attract a new generation into agriculture. These two developments were duly exploited, and the 6 million bottles released in 2004 could surge to more than 12.5 million bottles in 2009 (an estimate based on the 94,691 hectoliters now aging in estate cellars across Montalcino). As production has soared, demand has plummeted in Brunello's biggest markets, thanks to a weak US dollar against the euro and struggling economies in Germany and Japan.

While shamelessly unchecked overplanting is the main culprit for these worrying figures, the amount of Brunello to be

bottled over the next few years will also depend greatly on how much is declassified to Rosso di Montalcino. This common practice gives firms faster returns, since this second wine is released after one year rather than five for Brunello, but is now at risk. According to Stefano Cinelli Colombini, owner of Fattoria dei Barbi, "This past September we learned that a national law passed in 2000 to protect Chianti Classico, by permitting it to be bottled as Chianti when deemed necessary, is now being applied by some producers here in Montalcino. In a reversed interpretation, our third wine, Sant'Antimo DOC, can now be promoted to Rosso di Montalcino DOC. This is devastating for Brunello, because it means that the common practice of declassifying a certain amount of Brunello every year to make Rosso can now be avoided, since it costs less to make Rosso from Sant'Antimo vines. Declassifying to Rosso is crucial for keeping Brunello volume down and quality high, since wine not up to standard is bottled as Rosso." Colombini adds that many producers are uniting to try to prohibit the law from being enforced in Montalcino. But since the majority of Montalcino's estates are tiny—with 51 percent composed of 3ha or fewer, and another 30 percent having only 3–15ha—the real impact of making Rosso from Sant'Antimo would be made by the large estates, only 1 percent of which have more than 100ha.

Montalcino's recent planting frenzy has seen many start-up wineries cultivate vines in areas generally considered unsuitable for grape growing. Because the resulting wines may not meet Brunello's lofty standards, distinguishing the denomination's unofficial subzones is now being viewed as one way to help consumers find their way through the upcoming deluge. Yet wine producers in Montalcino are sharply divided—the dissenters fearing a classification system that could penalize them. Stefano Campatelli, director of the Consorzio del Vino Brunello, completely rejects the idea of subzones, saying, "It's not because we feel that subzones don't exist, but because there are too many. Recognizing them would only create more confusion." According to Andrea Costanti of the Colle al Matricese estate, however, "Subzones have always been avoided in Montalcino, but now, since there is so much confusion over the types of Brunello available, I'm all for it." Costanti adds, "While many international varieties do well all over the world, great Sangiovese is very much a consequence of its terroir, and it does especially well at higher altitudes."

Photograph by CEPHAS / Mick Rock

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Dramatic variations

Montalcino itself is a testament to the importance of terroir. For it is here, in designated parts of the denomination, that Sangiovese, the most widely planted grape variety in Italy, can yield superlative wines. The entire production area is centered around the single commune of Montalcino, 25 miles (40km) south of Siena and 25 miles from the Tyrrhenian Sea. It comprises a vast area of 24,362ha, half of which are still covered by woodland, and resembles a square some 10 miles (16km) across, delimited by the Orcia, Asso, and Ombrone rivers. Within these boundaries, four major slopes rise like a pyramid to peak at 2,188ft (667m), with nearby Monte Amiata protecting the slopes from hail and violent storms. Compared to Chianti Classico, Montalcino enjoys a more Mediterranean climate, where Sangiovese benefits from hotter temperatures and drier weather—perfect ripening conditions for this temperamental variety. It is no coincidence that of all Tuscany's denominations, only Brunello is required to be Sangiovese *in purezza*.

There are dramatic variations in altitude and climate within the large growing area, as well as an extraordinary array of soil types. Montalcino was formed in different geological eras. Younger soils, comprising alluvial deposits from the Quaternary Epoch and clay from marine deposits during the Pliocene Epoch, dominate in the southern lowlands, while further uphill the terrain is mainly clay enriched with calcareous fossil material (Miocene-Oligocene). In the upper part of the territory, the soil is moderately stony, mixed with sand and rich in lime. The well-draining soil here is very old (Cretaceous-Eocene-Jurassic) and can restrain the youthful exuberance of productive grapevines.

Because demand for Brunello has, until very recently, outstripped supply, no serious efforts have been made to study the area's multifaceted growing conditions and their effects on the native grape. Only a handful of estates have conducted independent research, often in collaboration with universities. This dearth of research has encouraged Brunello cultivation everywhere, even though some areas are clearly unsuitable. Giulio Salvioni, an outspoken traditionalist, argues, "Back in 1966, the founders of the original production code prohibited vines above 600m [1,970ft], but they should also have established a minimum altitude to avoid Brunello cultivation practically at sea level." Still others complain about recent plantings on the *crete senese* (heavy clay soils) to the northeast.

To be fair, back in 1966, when the tiny production was

confined to the high-altitude areas near Montalcino, Brunello pioneers could not have foreseen the cultivation of Sangiovese on the southern plains or the compacted clay of Torrenieri. Yet a prudent clause in the original production code did specify that vineyards had to be "on land of Eocene origin," which effectively limited Brunello production to the higher altitudes and most suitable soils. This was later revised, however, to include land up to the Pliocene period, clearing the way for cultivation throughout the entire denomination.

What follows is an unofficial breakdown of major subzones found within the Montalcino denomination.

Southeast Montalcino

The numerous wineries immediately southeast of Montalcino lie in what is the original production zone. The majority of Brunello's 240 growers and estates are located in this hilly terrain outside the town gates, and are almost without exception small-scale. For many years, this subzone, along with a few parcels north of Montalcino, was the only Brunello-producing area. Vineyard altitudes range from 1,300–1,650ft (400–500m), and the steep terrain necessitates manual harvesting. Soil structure here is among the most ancient, dating to the Cretaceous-Eocene period, when these higher altitudes emerged before the rest of the area from the oceans once covering the earth. This thin but well-draining soil, perfect for Sangiovese, is mainly calcareous and sandy limestone. Mineral-rich shale and sandstone formations, as well as marly limestone, are also present in some of the best vineyards, including those at Biondi-Santi's Il Greppo estate 1 mile (1.5km) south of the town, the birthplace of Brunello itself.

Here, among the vertiginous reaches of the production zone, the most elegant and long-lived Brunellos are produced—complex and beautifully balanced, with rich bouquets that develop over time. According to Franco Biondi-Santi, whose grandfather was officially credited with having invented Brunello by the Italian government, "Il Greppo's vineyards are among the highest throughout the production zone, reaching 507m [1,663ft], and the high altitude causes great differences between day and night temperatures, especially during the crucial ripening months. Since the vineyards have south, southeast, and eastern exposures, the earliest morning sunshine lands here in the pre-harvest period and quickly heats up the grapes from the cool evening temperatures. These temperature variations cause slow-ripening Brunello and are essential for developing the wine's perfume." The high altitude also imparts a relatively high acidity, which is the main element responsible for classic Brunello's long aging. In a famous tasting in 1994, Nicolas Belfrage MW gave the Biondi-Santi Riserva 1891 a perfect score of 10, writing, "Would that human beings could be as lively as this at 103!"

Biondi-Santi has been fighting for years to have subzones officially recognized. "When you buy a Château Margaux, you know what to expect. We need a similar system here in Montalcino, because there are now completely different styles of Brunello," says the distinguished winemaker, who, at 84, still runs every aspect of his estate. An icon of traditional Brunello, Biondi-Santi ages both his Annata and Riserva for three years in large Slavonian oak casks, the latter wine produced only in exceptional years and exclusively from vines more than 25 years old. He refuses to use modern enological practices that could change the tipicity of his Brunello and, therefore, shuns selected yeasts, as well as barriques, saying of the latter, "Sangiovese is already so rich in tannins, it doesn't need added tannins extracted from barrique." He does, however, make the most of technology—such

as temperature-controlled fermentation—that has improved the wines without changing their unique characteristics.

In 1971, Biondi-Santi began a long collaboration with the University of Florence to continue at Il Greppo the clonal research started by his father and grandfather, isolating the thicker-skinned BBS 11 that is now planted along with other Greppo clones in most of his vineyards. He was decades ahead of his time, since wide-scale clonal research on Sangiovese began only in the mid-1990s. Biondi-Santi has, in fact, analyzed and kept records of every facet of winemaking at Il Greppo, including careful documentation of temperature and rainfall at his estate since 1976. "In under 30 years," he says, "rainfall has decreased 30 percent, while the average temperature has risen 1°C [1.8°F]. While this generally benefits all growers, it further exaggerates the already precocious vegetal cycles found in the southern subzones. We harvest about two weeks later than Sant'Angelo." In 1996, Biondi-Santi petitioned the Italian minister of agriculture to grant Il Greppo subzone status, submitting exhaustive supporting documentation dating back to the 1800s. The minister never responded.

Other classic Brunellos from these altitudes include those made by Andrea Costanti, who uses aged 350–600-liter French barrels, as well as large casks; Fattoria dei Barbi; Giulio Salvioni; and Cerbaiona, the latter two having vineyards further east at altitudes of 1,150–1,315ft (350–400m). Many winemakers in the original zone are traditionalists who prefer Brunello with marked acidity, balanced with bracing tannins, and who employ large casks that allow the wine to develop aromas of dried flowers and tobacco. While full-bodied and complex, classically styled Brunello is sometimes criticized by a cadre of international critics as being too delicately hued. But as any true-blooded traditionalists will tell you, "If it's black and inky, it's not Sangiovese."

Although illicit blending with other grapes, to make Brunello's luminous ruby-garnet color unnaturally darker, is staunchly denied on all official fronts, 2004's Erga Omnes decree, requiring thorough vineyard checks, should put an end to the rumors, if not to the practice itself. One goal of the so-called modernists is to make Brunellos ever darker, presumably by overextracting during maceration and using barriques to stabilize anthocyanins, producing wine with lower acidity but higher alcohol content. Yet Giulio Salvioni feels Brunello makers will reverse this trend. "Look at the collapse of Super-Tuscan sales. [These wines were] once touted as the future of Italian wine, now they can barely give them away. Winemakers here have noticed, and they want to differentiate themselves by making a wine that can't be replicated anywhere else, by making Brunello without the vanilla and excessive concentration," he says. Already, Gambero Rosso's popular *Italian Wines Guide*, well known for favoring fruit-forward and overripe wines, has awarded Franco Biondi-Santi's 1999 Riserva the coveted Three Glasses in its 2006 edition—a move believed to herald a renewed appreciation of more subtle winemaking.

North Montalcino

Surrounding Montalcino to the north, where the slopes begin to descend, lies another area densely populated with small wineries. The soil becomes predominantly calcareous limestone and clay from the upper Jurassic and lower Cretaceous periods, and different altitudes and exposures create a variety of microzones. At altitudes above 985ft (300m), a number of artisan estates make wonderfully aromatic Brunellos, light in color but complex, including Livio Sassetti at Pertimali, Gianni Brunelli, and La

Capanna. Right outside the town is Alessandro Mori's Il Marroneto winery, with vineyards at 1,315ft (400m), located directly above Biondi-Santi's Pievecchia vineyard at 1,250ft (380m), and Le Chiuse, two of Brunello's historic crus, which yield fragrant and well-structured wines. Mori, who makes classically austere Brunellos that blossom with age, bemoans the trend toward fruit-forward and ready-to-drink versions. "The presence of notable acidity in many Brunellos is disappearing," he says. "What made Brunello famous all over the world is its elegance and its capacity to evolve for years, thanks to its fresh acidity. But now there are Brunellos that are unnaturally flat and lifeless and will not age well. Elegance has been replaced by explosive fruit sensations and excessive alcohol, as winemakers cater to critics' tastes in the hope of receiving high scores."

The area descends then rises again at the famous cru of Montosoli, a rounded hill, with altitudes ranging from 650ft to 1,150ft (200–350m), that is spared the autumnal fog that often invades the lower altitudes north of Montalcino. Single-vineyard Brunellos from Montosoli are more powerful and riper, if slightly more rustic, than those from higher altitudes. While more enjoyable at an earlier age, they generally do not have the essential structure to age for decades. The most famous producer with vineyards on Montosoli is Altesino, which bottles its cru Brunello only in the best years. With north-facing vineyards up to 1,115ft (340m), the higher altitude gives a certain refinement to this cru that is known principally for its muscle. Besides Altesino, which ages the wine in traditional large *botti*, Caparzo and Nello Baricci also have Montosoli vineyards. Caparzo's La Casa, aged in new barriques, is less earthy and floral, with more vanilla and fruit.

Below Montosoli to the east is another prime area for Brunello production, around the vineyard of Canalicchio that rises to 1,050ft (320m). Nearby estates are, for the most part, tiny, family-owned operations whose Brunello is not always easy to find, with the obvious exception of the large Val di Suga Tenimenti Angelini winery. Most winemakers employ traditional cellar methods and produce austere yet earthy Brunellos that normally need a few years to develop. Estates making particularly good terroir-driven Brunello include La Gerla and Lambardi.

Northeast/Northwest

Relatively few estates are situated in the farthest northern reaches of the production zone, but this is quickly changing, thanks to the recent planting boom. Most vineyards north of Montosoli are low-lying, at 650–820ft (200–250m), and prey to both fog and devastating spring frosts. Under these climatic conditions, and without the ventilation enjoyed at higher altitudes, vines risk developing mold during rainy seasons. Most firms here tend to make Brunello by blending the grapes with those from other vineyards throughout the production zone. So, too, does Altesino, where the Brunello is a blend of grapes from its Altesino and La Velona vineyards—the latter near Castelnuovo dell'Abate in the far southeast—as well as from Montosoli, when this is not bottled separately. "We believe that our Brunello is a true expression of Montalcino, since it incorporates grapes from very different areas throughout the entire production zone," explains assistant director Guido Orzalesi. He adds that having vineyards in three different subzones ensures consistent quality, since harvests can vary tremendously between the north and south.

Crete senese once deterred wineries from establishing in Torrenieri to the northeast, though the recent boom finds more firms planting there. The notable exception is Casanova di Neri, founded in Torrenieri in 1971 but which recently transferred

further south to Fiesole. Giacomo Neri makes his basic Brunello from Fiesole and other vineyards at his original estate, while his Tenuta Nuova is a blend from vineyards in the Sant'Angelo and Castelnuovo dell'Abate subzones. The company's cru, Cerretalto, is from a single vineyard in the far east, beneath Torrenieri at a bend in the Asso River, where there are virtually no other vineyards. While Neri enthuses about Cerretalto's unique microclimate, the dense concentration, overstated wood, and vanilla sensations mask any vestige of terroir, instead expressing the preferred winemaking style of the estate's enologist, Carlo Ferrini. Wines coming from new estates with vineyards in the heart of Torrenieri are uninspiring, lacking Brunello's hallmark balance and complexity, and should be consumed shortly after their release.

Only two large estates are located in the northwest: Casale del Bosco, owned by Tenute Silvio Nardi; and Castiglione del Bosco. The strict laws that protect the area's thick woods, the cooler climate and susceptibility to fog that hinder grape ripening, and the chaotic mix of soils that makes it difficult to isolate suitable clones have all combined to discourage new wineries from locating here. Nardi's Brunello is, in fact, blended with grapes from its Manachiara vineyard 15 miles (25km) south, from which they also make a single-vineyard selection. After carefully analyzing all aspects of her estate, however, Emilia Nardi has planted new clones, on a small rocky vineyard called Poggio Pigna at an altitude of 985ft (300m), that she hopes will express the terroir of Casale del Bosco. "The wines from here can be very refined and aromatic, but never deeply colored and powerful," says Nardi. Barrel samples of the 2004 crus Manachiara and Poggio Pigna, both aged for one year in barrique, revealed very different characteristics. The fuller-bodied Manachiara was darker, with a more fruit-forward nose, while the Poggio Pigna had more intense aromas and was better balanced.

Tavernelle

Descending southwest from Montalcino toward Tavernelle, summertime temperatures become warmer, but estates at altitudes of 985–1,150ft (300–350m) enjoy cooling nighttime breezes. Rainfall is concentrated mostly in the spring and fall, and some snow is common in winter. While much of the soil in Tavernelle consists of marine deposits, clay, and sand from the Pliocene period, soils at the likes of Gianfranco Soldera's Case Basse vineyards—at 1,050ft (320m), near Santa Restituta—are predominantly clay and rock from the Eocene period. Soldera is one of Montalcino's most forthright traditionalists, and his tiny production from the Case Basse estate has been stunning connoisseurs for decades. Wines around Tavernelle tend to be fuller-bodied than those from vineyard areas closer to Montalcino and, depending on cellar practices, can reveal rich primary fruit. "I ferment in wooden vats with no temperature control and no selected yeasts, and I only use *botti grandi* for wood aging that lasts a minimum of four years and up to six. Barriques are only for deficient wines that didn't get enough aromas and tannins from the grapes and need to make up for this lack with oak sensations," states Soldera. Upon release, two or three years later than most Brunellos, Soldera's luminous garnet wines offer a restrained voluptuousness, more floral than fruity, and are among the most expensive Brunellos on the market. Right next door to Soldera is Angelo Gaja's Pieve Santa Restituta estate, with the same altitude and growing conditions, but producing a remarkably different wine: a deep, dense color, with a fruity nose of blackberries and vanilla, lower acidity, and bracing tannins.

Southwest of Tavernelle is the hot and arid subregion of Camigliano, where wines can easily take on overripe characteristics. Even at higher altitudes, the soil is predominantly clay and Pliocene deposits. Large wineries reign here, such as

Antinori's Pian della Vigna estate, with vineyards at 430ft (130m), and Frescobaldi's enormous Castelgiocondo estate at 820–1,315ft (250–400m). Due to their considerable volume, most firms employ very modern vinification techniques, turning out inky-dark and highly extracted Brunellos on the verge of sweetness but with drying wood tannins. They are approachable upon release, but their notable lack of acidity will not allow them to age, while their tannic backbone makes food pairing difficult. Right opposite Castelgiocondo is Folonari's small Tenuta La Fuga estate, at 1,150ft (350m). Aged for two years in French tonneaux, its Riserva Due Sorelle beautifully expresses a roundness resulting from the warmer climate while retaining fresh acidity.

Sant'Angelo in Colle and Sant'Angelo Scalo

Differences between low-lying southern zones and the original growing area, in terms of producer profiles, climatic conditions, and wine styles, can only be defined as extreme. With few exceptions these subregions are dominated by large-scale operations such as Il Poggione, Argiano, Col d'Orcia, and the industrial-sized Banfi. According to average production, these two subzones, known collectively as Sant'Angelo, make 35–40 percent of Brunello's total; and if one adds in estates from nearby Camigliano, these three subregions turn out 65 percent.

Sant'Angelo is the hottest area in Montalcino's entire production zone, with torrid sea breezes blowing inland from the Maremma pushing summertime temperatures 5.4–7.2°F (3–4°C) higher than in the more elevated Montalcino vineyards. It is also the driest subzone, where rainfall is, on average, 19.7 inches (500mm) a year, rather than 27.5 inches (700mm) for the entire area. Clay and sand from the more recent Pliocene era dominate the alluvial plains that, until the 1970s, were for the most part cultivated with grain and other cereals. Brunellos from these

farthest southern reaches are much darker in color and higher in alcohol, with noticeably lower acidity and greater immediacy than the comparatively austere style up north. Excessively low yields, overripeness, and overextraction can further exaggerate this already fuller style. Altitude is once again a crucial factor. Boutique winery Lisini has vineyards starting at about 985ft (300m) rising up to 1,315ft (400m), just below the hilltop hamlet of Sant'Angelo in Colle, where the soil is calcareous and there is a longer tradition of winemaking. Lisini's deep-garnet, round Brunellos reflect their southern scale but are balanced with good acidity thanks to higher vineyards. Also here is Col d'Orcia's Poggio al Vento, from a single vineyard at 1,150ft (350m), which wonderfully balances grace and power.

In years with exceptional climatic conditions, such as 2002 and 2003, the differences between Brunellos from Sant'Angelo and Montalcino can be dramatic. While the higher reaches near Montalcino were devastated by torrential rain during the pre-harvest in 2002, the southern vineyards suffered far less, having already been picked when the worst of the rain came. Conversely, 2003 proved to be an exceptional harvest for the areas around Montalcino, while vines down in the lower sites suffered severe heat and water stress, many grapes turning to raisins. "The 2003 Brunellos from the south will be more concentrated than usual and higher in alcohol," says Col d'Orcia's enologist Pablo Harri, who prefers his Brunello 2002 to 2003—the exact opposite of what winemakers closer to Montalcino will tell you. "Grape selection was crucial, because tannins often did not mature perfectly, since the plants were too stressed. Through rigorous hand selection before, during, and after the harvest, we achieved good quality, but we discarded 50 percent of our grapes." Almost without exception, estates in Sant'Angelo would like to see irrigation made legal, to combat the broiling summertime temperatures. "They don't need

TASTING NOTES

La Cerbaiona 2000 Brunello di Montalcino

Dark but luminous garnet. Complex nose of truffles, violets, and earth. Gorgeous bright cherry flavors, with perfect balance between tannins and acidity and lingering finish. **18.5**

Salvioni 2000 Brunello di Montalcino La Cerbaiona

Intense ruby red, with primary violet scents and a hint of truffle and vanilla. Austere with tart cherry fruit and bracing tannins. Needs a few more years in bottle but will age wonderfully well. A quintessential Brunello di Montalcino. **17.5**

Tenimenti Angelini 2000 Brunello di Montalcino

Dark ruby color with garnet reflections. Alluring floral scents with a hint of talcum powder and tart berry flavors. Sharp acidity and tough tannins make for a firm austere structure and long cellaring. **17.5**

Gianni Brunelli 2000 Brunello di Montalcino

Translucent garnet hue, with delicate fragrances of earth and berries. Firmly structured with sharp acidity balanced by solid tannins. Still youthful and aggressive—a great candidate for long cellaring. **17**

Il Marroneto 1999 Brunello di Montalcino

Classic Brunello with refined floral bouquet and woodland berries. Great acidity and solid tannins on the palate, balanced with vibrant fruit and a long finish. Will age beautifully. **18.5**

Fattoria dei Barbi 1999 Brunello di Montalcino Riserva

Very dark garnet, with lovely floral and berry aromas with a hint of truffles. Sharp acidity and tannic backbone, with long cherry finish. Will age beautifully. **18**

Poggio di Sotto 1999 Brunello di Montalcino

Enticing and characteristic aromas of violets and cherry, with licorice nuances. Succulent fruit, balanced with distinct acidity and firm tannins. **18**

La Gerla 1999 Brunello di Montalcino Riserva

Deep ruby with garnet reflections. Floral and berry aromas dominate, with a hint of black pepper. Firm structure with brooding tannins gives great aging potential. **17.5**

La Fuga 1999 Brunello di Montalcino Riserva

Deep garnet, with lovely floral and cherry scents. Concentrated woodland berry flavors, kept in balance by bright acidity and silky tannins. Enjoy now. **17.5**

Lisini 1998 Brunello di Montalcino Ugolaia

Intense aromas of violets and lily, with lively acidity balanced with ripe dark fruit and firm but developed tannins. Enjoyable now. **18**

Conti Costanti 1998 Brunello di Montalcino

Very fragrant, with enticing scents reminiscent of woodland spices and incense. Tannic backbone balanced by sharp acidity will allow this to age for years. Sleek but classic. **18**

Biondi-Santi 1997 Brunello di Montalcino Riserva

Legendary Brunello in the making. Vibrant ruby hue, with a fragrant bouquet revealing rich berries, roses, and a hint of vanilla. Luscious crushed cherry fruit, balanced with bracing acidity and firm tannins. Long finish. Still developing; will age for decades. **19.5**

Altesino 1993 Brunello di Montalcino

Ruby with garnet highlights. Lovely cherry nose with hints of leather and vanilla. Bright fruit with silky tannins. Enjoyable now. **16.5**

Col d'Orcia 1985 Brunello Riserva

Dark garnet color, with initially closed bouquet that slowly reveals scents of tar and tobacco. Still very fresh, with a

long licorice finish. Will maintain for at least another decade. Wonderful. **18.5**

Il Marroneto 1981 Brunello di Montalcino

Deep luminous garnet, with lovely bouquet of violets, rose petals, and cherry. Exceptionally bright and intense, with youthful, fresh, cherry-strawberry flavors. Will continue to age gracefully. Superb. **19**

Biondi-Santi 1975 Brunello di Montalcino Riserva

Hallmark Biondi-Santi. Deep but sparkling garnet color, and intense bouquet of spice, pepper, and tobacco. Rich berry- and fig-fruit flavors balanced by great structure. Incredibly youthful, will continue to age for decades. Glorious! **20**

Lisini 1973 Brunello di Montalcino Riserva

At first very closed, but slowly reveals a classic bouquet of leather and tar. Fresher-than-expected, with dried-fruit flavors. Has completed its journey, but great expression from a difficult vintage. **16.5**

Biondi-Santi 1955 Brunello di Montalcino Riserva

Well deserves its lofty reputation. Dark garnet, with a rich and complex bouquet of tar, cedar, and tobacco. Velvety tannins and a long, lingering, nearly sweet finish. Still evolving. A masterpiece. **20**

irrigation at the smaller estates farther north toward Montalcino, but here we risk vines dying during excessive drought and heat,” continues Harri. Despite its scale, Col d’Orcia carries out an entirely manual harvest, followed by careful grape selection. The estate was cultivating grapes even before current owner Francesco Marone Cinzano’s family acquired it in 1973, and the philosophy remains traditional. The Brunello is aged for three years in large oak casks; the Riserva, for up to five.

Although Col d’Orcia is the number-two estate in terms of volume, its overall Brunello production of nearly 300,000 bottles is dwarfed by Banfi, the largest producer by both area and output, with nearly 1 million bottles of Brunello produced annually. Banfi’s colossal domain extends over 2,830ha, of which 850ha are under vine, and its 300ha of Sangiovese are planted at 330–820ft (100–250m), in the hottest part of the production zone. “Since our vines are naturally more structured as a result of the hotter climate, they can undergo barrique-aging better than Brunello made around Montalcino,” says the estate’s Dante Cecchini, who stresses that its barriques are, at 350 liters, larger than normal. Banfi’s three Brunellos are geared to the American market: dense purple, with very high alcohol, bracing tannins, and not much evident acidity.

Besides low altitude and suffocating heat during the ripening season, severe soil erosion also challenges Sangiovese here. According to Professor Edoardo Costantini of Florence’s Istituto Sperimentale per lo Studio e la Difesa del Suolo, “Since the soil dates from the Pliocene era, it is very rich in marine deposits and therefore has a high salt content found underneath the top layers. Where the soil around Sant’Angelo Scalo has been drastically manipulated, the high salt content has been brought up to the surface. From a strictly geological point of view, this would not be an ideal condition for vines.”

To understand why Sangiovese is now planted in these extreme conditions, it should be pointed out that when the American Mariani brothers bought land here in 1978 and began literally moving hills and bulldozing woods to plant vast tracts of vines, Brunello was not the focus of their ambition. Their original plan was to cultivate a massive amount of Moscato, since both the Marianis and Ezio Rivella, Banfi’s enologist and director until 2000, were convinced that sweet bubbly white wines were coming back into fashion. In Burton Anderson’s 1980 book *Vino*, he wrote that Rivella, a native of Piedmont, had earned a reputation as “the wizard of white wine,” and that only about 10 percent of Banfi’s vines were dedicated to Brunello. After planting nearly 350ha of Moscato clones from Asti, the project turned out to be one of the most expensive and large-scale flops in Italian winemaking history. Not only did American tastes swing away from light whites and toward powerful reds, but the Asti clones did not perform well in the much hotter climate of Sant’Angelo. Sangiovese and other international varieties were later grafted on to the rootstocks once bearing Moscato, which explains why Banfi now has so many hectares of registered Brunello vines growing at such low altitudes. To its credit, it has done an admirable amount of research to find the clones that can perform well in its environment and now uses a blend of three clones—Jansus 50, Jansus 10, and BF 30.

Castelnuovo dell’Abate

Southeast of town, along the crest of the hill coming down from Montalcino, is the hamlet of Castelnuovo dell’Abate, one of the most multifaceted subzones. The best vineyards face south, southeast, and west, while those near Castello di Velona facing Monte Amiata are at altitudes of 650–1,475ft (200–450m). Although benefiting from warm temperatures, it doesn’t suffer

the scorching heat of Sant’Angelo to the west, since hot sea breezes are blocked by the slope rising up above the abbey of Sant’Antimo, and the Ombrone River below generates cooling winds at night. The subzone also has a complex mix of soil. According to the University of Perugia’s Professor of Geology Roberto Colacicchi, “Castelnuovo dell’Abate has an unusual combination of ancient and recent soil deposits.”

Piero Palmucci’s Poggio di Sotto estate is here making organic, traditional Brunellos combining power and *tipicità*. Characterized by their shining garnet color and floral nose, the wines can be enjoyed young but should continue to age well for at least 15–20 years, thanks to the subtle acidity imparted by the high altitude. “I would love for Castelnuovo dell’Abate to become an official sub-appellation, so consumers could know that this Brunello is made in one of the sunniest parts of Montalcino, where Sangiovese matures perfectly,” says Palmucci. Nearby is the Fanti estate, owned by Filippo Fanti, who is also president of the Brunello Consorzio. “I definitely am not in favor of subzones,” he says. “In my opinion, since there are 240 estates, there are already 240 microzones. It would be impossible to divide the territory rationally, and some areas would certainly be penalized,” continues Fanti, whose Brunello is not a terroir-driven wine. Dark purple and impenetrable, with the jammy concentration so loved by certain American critics, the wine has taken the so-called modern approach to extremes, its atypical color and oaky vanilla nose masking not only the wine’s provenance but also the grape. Unsurprisingly, Robert Parker’s *Wine Advocate* gave Fanti’s Brunello 1999 a score of 92, for the wine is very much in its preferred style. Yet even the influential guide questioned Fanti’s blatantly unorthodox version of Brunello, noting “Good as it is, it is rather perplexing [...] not a wine that seems to have much to do with Sangiovese and Montalcino.”

Summing up

Although it seems unlikely that subzones will be recognized officially anytime soon by the Italian Ministry of Agriculture or the Consorzio, more and more Montalcino winemakers are trying to educate consumers about their individual terroirs and cellar practices that determine the wine’s style and aging capability. As Brunellos of different types and varying quality continue to hit the market, the best strategy will be to buy from well-known estates of proven quality—and to keep an open mind when trying new labels.

Since very little Brunello is sold in bulk, barrel prices do not have much influence on the market. However, new wineries desperate to cash in after planting vineyards and aging their wine for more than four years (Brunello is released five years after the harvest) are selling at drastically lower prices, causing even greater consumer confusion. Estates making notoriously expensive Brunellos, such as Biondi-Santi, Costanti, and Soldera, have been joined in later years by other boutique wineries like Lisini, Salvioni, and Poggio di Sotto. While these producers have not raised prices this year, you can be sure they will not lower them, either.

Nor should they. Their handcrafted Brunellos from magnificent terroirs are world-class wines that cannot be replicated anywhere else in the world. The best Brunellos, with structures that will allow them to age for decades, should be distinguished from the mass-produced Brunellos and from those being made on less suitable terrain or with cellar practices that distort the wine’s unique characteristics. Other countries would surely have protected the fate of these grands crus, and one can only hope that official recognition will come before the entire denomination is stigmatized by the effects of uncontrolled growth. ■