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 unstable 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 recorded 550 years ago, Brunello was made and bottled by only one estate until the 1930s. 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, breaching off in the 1990s at around 3 million bottles a year. Then in 1995, 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 990, whereby those under 50 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 2003 could surge to more than 12.5 million bottles in 2009 (an estimate based on the 35,691 hectares 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 Colombo, 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 wines. 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 estates are tiny—with 35 percent composed of 3 ha or fewer, and another 30 percent having only 3.5–13 ha—the real impact of making Rosso from Sant’Antimo would be made by the large estates, only a percent of which have more than 20 ha.

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 is 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 Gostanti of the Colle all’Matricola 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.” Gostanti 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 altitude.”

Photograph by CEPHAS / Mick Rock
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 small commune of Montalcino, 25 miles (40km) south of Siena and 25 miles from the Tyrrhenian Sea. It comprises a vast area of 24,580ha, half of which are still covered by woodland, and resembles a sparse 10 miles (16km) across delimited by the Orcia, Acia, and Ombrone rivers. Within these boundaries, four major slopes rise like a pyramid to peak at a 880ft (268m) with nearby Monte Amiata protec
farther south to Montalcino. Gaetano Neri makes his basic Brunello from Fiasco and other vineyards at his original estate, where the Tenuta Nuova is a blend from vineyards in the San' Angelo in Colle and Sant'Angelo area.

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 Badì. According to average production, these subregions, known collectively as San'Angelo, make 35–40 percent Brunello’s total and if one adds in estates from nearby Camigliano, these three subregions turn out 65 percent. San’Angelo is the hottest area in Montalcino’s entire production zone, with torrid sea breezes blowing inland from the Massa Marittima summertime temperature. 54°F (12°C) is 1°F (1°C) higher than in the more elevated Montalcino vineyards. It is also the driest subzone, where rainfall is on average, 117 inches (297cm) over 18 inches (457cm) in the Sant’Angelo region and even in Sant’ Angelo in Colle and Sant’Angelo Scalo, it is less than one inch (2.5cm) above normal for the area. Clay and sand from the more pristine Poggio estate can reveal the alluvial plains that until the 1970s, were for the most part cultivated with grain and other cereals. Brunello from these areas is more austere, but has the added character of a firmer and more tannic structure.

All the Brunello wine in this issue was tasted by Georgia Hall, Mark Sissons, and Peter McCombie. All scores range from 16.5 to 20, as detailed on pages 210 and 211.
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 family acquired it in 1977, 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 5 million bottles of Brunello produced annually. Bandini’s colossal domain extends over 2,870ha, of which 850ha are under vine, and its 3,900ha of Sangiovese are planted at 330–820ft (100–250m) in the hottest part of the production zone. “Since our wines are naturally more structured as a result of the hotter climate, we can undergo barrique-aging better than Brunello made around Montalcino,” says the estate’s Dante Cecchini, who stresses that its barrique program is, at 370, larger than normal. Bandini’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 Sud, “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 Mariani and Enzo Rivella, Bandini’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 Bandini’s vines were dedicated to Brunello. After planting nearly 500ha 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 Bandini 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 east, while those near Castello di Vinciano facing Monte Amiata are at altitudes of 510–575ft (155–175m). 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 Colacelli, “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 spirit. 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 340 estates, there are already 240 microzones. It would be impossible to divide the territory rationally, and some areas would certainly be penalized.”

Concludes Fanti, whose Brunello is not a terrain-driven wine. Dark purple and impenetrable, with the same concentration as 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 attempting 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 Rondinelli, Costanti, and Soldanella, have joined in later years by other boutique winemakers like Lissi, Sabatini, 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 grand crus, and one can only hope that official recognition will come before the entire denomination is stigmatized by the effects of uncontrolled growth.