



Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

For our features this quarter I have selected wines produced exclusively from Sangiovese. While I can certainly appreciate the enhancements that international varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon can bring to the wines, I also feel that the true soul of Tuscany lies with Sangiovese. The selections look at three regions within Tuscany, two very classic sites and one that is a late 20th century darling. It is an interesting contrast in styles and how growing conditions impact the nature of this variety.

2019 San Giorgio Brunello di Montalcino “Ugolforte” | \$69 per bottle

While the region of Montalcino is not the oldest and the area under vine is certainly not the largest, there is no overstating the importance Brunello plays in legitimizing Tuscany as a source for world class wines. Yet as revered as Brunello di Montalcino is now, when the region was designated one of the first four Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita (DOCG) of Italy in 1980 there were only 53 producers bottling the wines. Since the designation the region has experienced significant growth and today more than 200 estates bottle Brunello. It is not the first time that the town of Montalcino is enjoying an economic boom but it is the first time that it is based on wine.

Like all of Tuscany the origins of the town of Montalcino likely began with the Etruscans, but the name first appears in 814 AD with mention of a church established by the nearby Abbey of Sant'Antimo. Thanks to its high elevation a town evolved around the church with walls built to protect the citizens from the many wars waged between the various city states of present day Italy. For much of history the region was famed for their leather goods. Additionally, the lower slopes around the town have rich top soil so even today there are substantial fields of grain and other cereal crops across the area. Nevertheless, wine is the fuel that drives the engine of Montalcino and is far and away their biggest value crop.

The first mention of Brunello di Montalcino was in 1865, and around that same time a local farmer named Clemente Santi isolated a specific clone of Sangiovese that farmers embraced for their wines. He called the grape “Brunello” due to the slightly brown appearance of the grape. Today the specific clone is called Sangiovese Grosso, which also acknowledges the larger size of the grapes and clusters than other varieties of Sangiovese. Clemente's grandson, Ferruccio Biondi-Santi, later released what is considered the first modern example of Brunello di Montalcino in 1888.

Our feature from the San Giorgio winery is a glorious example of how Brunello can drink beautifully young and age gracefully for more than a decade. The winery is located in the sub-zone of Castelnuovo Dell'Abate, which lies to the southeast of the city. Thanks to the southeast exposure the vineyards are the warmest, driest and receive the most sunlight hours of the eight sub zones of Montalcino. The poor soils also naturally reduce the yield of the vines which also increase power and structure in the wines. For this bottling the grapes are picked over a six week period of time between mid-September and late October. By harvesting over several weeks the winemaking team achieves additional balance in the wines. Typically of the region the grapes are destemmed then fermented in large upright oak tanks with extended skin contact for up to 40 days. Once dry the wine is racked to large Slavonian oak casks for a couple of years, then bottled and held at the winery for a total of 42 months, the legal requirement.

I would suggest decanting this wine for a half hour before serving. 2019 is a lovely vintage and it shows a precocious nose of clove, cinnamon, dried cherry, blackberry puree, milk chocolate and lardo. On the palate it is polished and broad, with a nice core of fruit and long, smooth tannins. Drink 2025-2035.

2021 Fattoria Le Pupille Morellino di Scansano “Poggio Valente” | \$59 per bottle

I will spare you my David Letterman impression, but to quote the great late-night host, “my next guest needs no introduction.” Elisabetta Geppetti, known as the “Lady of Morellino” by her peers, has been producing wines in the coastal Tuscan commune of Scansano since 1982. A few years later Elisabetta would begin the process of re-planting the property's older vineyards, both to native varieties such as Sangiovese, and varieties that had become popular in the

“Super Tuscan” movement, such as Cabernet Sauvignon. In the 42 years that have passed since assuming control of the winery, she has continued to expand the family’s holdings and experiment with grape varieties from across Europe to create a large array of wines. However, Morellino di Scansano remains the core of the Geppetti family’s winemaking, and today not only Elisabetta but all 5 of her children are dedicated to the production of this regional specialty.

Morellino is the name of the local clone of Sangiovese, similar to Sangiovese Grosso in Montalcino. Sangiovese is a very adaptable grape variety and takes on different characteristics depending on where in Tuscany it is grown. In this case, “Morellino” means “little cherries” in the local dialect, a reference to the grape’s tart red fruit flavors, small size, and pink skins. The resulting wines, as you will soon discover, are approachable when young (though still capable of aging) and are often slightly lower in tannin than other Sangiovese-based wines.

This is the estate’s offering intended to be the epitome of Morellino di Scansano. It is produced from their best single vineyard site that was blended into the Riserva until 14 years ago when they realized it should stand alone. While there is some diversity to the soils of the region, most of the estate vineyards are on sandstone. This is the perfect soil for the prolific Sangiovese vines because the warm soil enhances ripeness but with little organic material the vines also naturally restrict yield. The wine is aged in a mix of 500 and 600L French oak barrels, 20% new, for 15 months.

After four very warm vintages the 2021 is a classic year with impressive texture and balance. The color is lighter than you might expect but do not let that fool you, this wine has power! The nose is a beaming combination of dried cranberry and red plum, blood orange and claro cigar. With such a crunchy nose I was surprised that the palate is fairly plush, with plenty of summer berry fruit intermingling with baking spices and tobacco flavors. There is a relatively obvious frame of tannins that hold the fruit back, giving this potential to age for years. Drink 2028 to 2035.

2020 Castello di Bossi Chianti Classico Gran Selezione | \$49 per bottle

While Brunello may be the king of Tuscan wines the most recognizable name from the region is Chianti Classico. This recognition is both a blessing and a curse, as too often the perception of Chianti Classico is seen as inexpensive wine to only be served with pizza and spaghetti. While this is true for the majority of wines from the area, which provide little more than commercial appeal, there are a couple of dozen estates producing some electrifying wines that offer collectors amazing value for their cellar. This bottling is a good introduction to the serious side of Chianti Classico and reinforces the importance of the Gran Selezione category which further defines examples as wines of place.

Castello di Bossi is owned by Marco Bacci, whose family purchased this historic estate in 1983. It is a large estate, 370 acres under vine, located exclusively in the Chianti Classico sub-zone of Castelnuovo Berardenga. They have achieved a lot of success for their wines and this has allowed Marco to purchase estates in other parts of Tuscany, including Montalcino and Scansano. At all of his estates he employs classic, old world approaches in the vineyards but in the cellar there are modern applications to make sure the wines are enjoyable for contemporary consumers. As a result he and his wines are hailed by many critics as the new face of Tuscany. Even their approach to making a Gran Selezione is different from most estates as they expand the idea of what this category can be.

When the Gran Selezione category was adopted in early 2014 it was to appease high quality producers who were looking for a way to distinguish their Riserva bottlings from those of the big producers. The most important distinction is that to qualify for a Gran Selezione the wine must be made exclusively from estate grown grapes. In addition it must be aged longer than typical Riservas, 30 months instead of 24, and achieve a minimum alcohol of 13% instead of 12.5% for Riservas. There is also a requirement that the wine be approved by a panel of experts before being released.

Most producers we have tasted implemented a Gran Selezione using their top single vineyard bottling. Since this estate is pretty large Bacci and his team feel that the character of the property is best represented using top Sangiovese blocks from across their holdings. To age the wine they also take the unusual step of aging only in 500L and 600L French casks instead of the more common 225L barriques or 5000L Slavonian oak casks.

Decant this wine for up to two hours before serving as it needs oxygen to develop. The nose is a brooding combination of dried black cherry and damson plum, rose petals, allspice, espresso grounds, black peppercorns and graphite. It is quite powerful and concentrated on the palate, with obvious tannins and a prickly sense of acidity that keeps the fruit in check. Drink 2028-2038.