

WINE

Make it a Double in Montalcino: 2011 Brunello and 2010 Riserva

BY KERIN O'KEEFE

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Perhaps the biggest disadvantage that faces the just-released 2011 Brunellos is that they come on the heels of the widely acclaimed 2010s. Awarded four out of five stars by the Consorzio del Vino Brunello di Montalcino, the 2011s won't be remembered as a historic vintage.

Overall, the wines have an immediate, juicy appeal that exceeded my expectations from what was a difficult, torrid growing season. **The best show some staying power**, and more than a few display unexpected complexity.

Erratic weather conditions show the challenges growers faced in 2011. According to the Consorzio's harvest report, "the vegetative stages of the vines developed very early: a full [15] days earlier than the recorded average of this territory, due to high temperatures during this period."

The heat led to precocious bud break at the beginning of April, at least

10 days earlier than usual. May and June were extremely rainy, with only sporadic spells of warm, sunny weather. July also had several rainy days.

The weather flipped in mid-August, when temperatures soared through the beginning of September. Thanks to the elevated temperatures, sugar content in the grapes rose dramatically.

As a result, the 2011 Brunellos are full-bodied and concentrated, with high alcohol levels and moderate acidity. Having tried more than 150 examples from the vintage, I found a number of wines that declare 15% abv on their labels, with a few clocking in at 15.5%.

While some of these high-octane expressions have enough fruit richness to mask the alcohol's heat, others are thrown off balance by scorching alcohol sensations. Still others are already extremely evolved.

Even the best wines—those that show balance, structure and finesse, with few exceptions—are built for near and mid-term consumption when compared to Brunellos from classic vintages.

The overall quality of the vintage is still very good. Eighty wines earned a score of 90 points or higher. The highest scorers are almost exclusively made from grapes grown in Montalcino's high-altitude vineyards, where cooler temperatures and evening breezes kept the vines refreshed.

“Our vineyards are among the three highest in Montalcino, reaching 1,663 feet above sea level,” says Gigliola Giannetti, co-owner (along with Giuseppe Gorelli) of Le Potazzine, one of Montalcino's top estates. “Thanks to the high altitude, our vines didn't suffer the heat. In fact, it was an excellent harvest for us, and we're planning on releasing a 2011 Riserva, something we didn't do for the 2010 vintage.”

While 2011 had peaks of excellence, Giannetti says that it also presented challenges.

“[The vintage] wasn't uniform like 2010,” she says. “There were extremes in the weather, so vineyard management was critical. To make the right choices in 2011, you needed to know your vines as well as you know your own kids.”

Le Potazzine definitely made the right choices: its Brunello was my highest-scoring wine of the vintage.



Our Favorite Italian Wines of 2015

2010 Riserva

Although 2010 was a warm year that encouraged ideal grape ripening, the number of high-alcohol, accessible wines indicates some producers harvested when grapes were overripe or they drastically thinned out the bunches to create wines with even more body. Similar in structure to the 1997s, **many of the straight 2010s, released last year, are almost accessible now.** They don't appear destined to reach the complexity of classic vintages like 2001 and 2004.

The recently released 2010 Riservas are more compelling, with the best displaying impeccable balance, restraint and complexity. And while many have cellaring potential, they're still more immediate than Riservas from cooler vintages. This means you also won't have to wait decades before enjoying them, as is usually the case with this category. I also gave a rare 100-point score to Biondi Santi's drop-dead gorgeous Riserva, which shows real aging potential to boot.

Top 10 Scoring 2011 Brunellos:

Le Potazzine (de Grazia Imports); \$70, 97 points

Capanna (Masciarelli Wine Co); \$44, 95 points, **Cellar Selection**

Conti Costanti (Empson USA Ltd); \$74, 95 points

Gianni Brunelli (de Grazia Imports); \$56, 95 points, **Cellar Selection**

Il Marroneto Madonna delle Grazie (Montcalm Wine Importers); \$150, 95 points

Le Chiuse (Frederick Wildman & Sons, Ltd); \$59, 95 points

Lisini (Soilair Selection); \$80, 95 points, **Cellar Selection**

Poggio di Sotto (Domaine Select Wine Estates); \$290, 95 points

Donatella Cinelli Colombini Progetto Prime Donne (Banville Wine Merchants); \$105, 94 points, **Cellar Selection**

Livio Sassetti Pertimali (Massanois Imports); \$55, 94 points

Top Scoring Brunello Riserva 2010:

Biondi Santi (Vision Wine & Spirits); \$NA, 100 points, **Cellar Selection**

Baricci Nello (K&L Wine Merchants); \$75, 98 points, **Cellar Selection**

Conti Costanti (Empson USA Ltd); \$190, 98 points, **Cellar Selection**

Gianni Brunelli (de Grazia Imports); \$100, 97 points

Poggio di Sotto (Domaine Select Wine Estates); \$450, 97 points

Ciacci Piccolomini d'Aragona Vigna di Pianrosso Santa Caterina d'Oro (Indigenous); \$140, 97 points, **Cellar Selection**

Canalicchio di Sopra (Vinifera Imports); \$130, 96 points, **Cellar Selection**

Fuligni (Empson USA Ltd); \$195, 96 points

Padelletti (Superior Wines); \$115, 96 points, **Cellar Selection**

Terralsole (Terralsole USA); \$89, 96 points

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