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SANGIOVESE

TUSCANY'S GREATEST GRAPE
CHIANTI CLASSICO,
BRUNELLO & MORE

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ON HIS TUSCAN
WINE VENTURE

Sangiovese

The Grape at the Heart of Italy

"No grape brings more joy or more pain," says one winemaker of the variety that is the essence of some of Italy's most iconic wines. Here is the past, present and future of this exciting variety.

BY MONICA LARNER

In bad years, vintners vehemently dismiss it as *una brutta bestia* ("an ugly beast"). In good years, it is elevated to the enological equivalent of sainthood. One thing is clear: Sangiovese is the defining grape of Italy. Thickly skinned on the outside but delicate inside, slow to mature but hard to tame, tightly rooted in tradition but willing to travel, this ubiquitous grape variety is the leading protagonist of the ongoing drama known as *vino Italiano*.

From the Latin for *sanguis Jovis*, or "the blood of Jove," mercurial Sangiovese has awarded Italy its best wine moments and dragged it down to its darkest hour. Thirty years ago, it became a major component of the super Tuscan revolution that brought Italy to the forefront of global wine. Three years ago, its perceived shortcomings spurred the embarrassing Brunellogate scandal that momentarily forced Italian wine to its knees. This finicky, territory- and vintage-driven variety treads an imaginary line between angel and demon.

"No grape brings more joy or more pain," says self-proclaimed "Sangiovesista" winemaker Carlo Ferrini, who works with numerous estates throughout Italy and is recog-

PHOTO JON VAN GORDER



nized for his signature Sangiovese style. "It demands the best man and nature can give and that's what makes it so exceptional."

The good, the bad and the versatile Sangiovese represents 10% of all vineyard plantings in Italy, concentrated mostly in Tuscany but also found in the extreme north and south. When the grape excels, it produces the country's most distinguished, complex and age-worthy wines (think Brunello di Montalcino). But it also offers cheerful, easy-drinking wines like Morellino di Scansano that pair perfectly with a heaping plate of spaghetti and sauce. In fact, Sangiovese is a versatile grape that spans the entire length of the quality spectrum, from low-end Chianti to top-shelf Chianti Classico.

But this impressive versatility is also its Achilles' heel. There is a tendency to want to "improve" (a loaded word) Sangiovese by adding small components of other grapes. Cabernet Sauvignon, for example, adds rich saturation and structure to Sangiovese's thinner appearance in uneven years. Merlot can add lushness and softness to its sometimes acidic, thorny and "nervous" personality.

The problem is, winemakers are not always legally allowed to blend other grapes, depending on the rules set down by the local authorities. For example, in Chianti Classico it is legal to do so; its wines are defined as being minimum 80% Sangiovese. It is not allowed in Montalcino, however, where disciplinary rules for Brunello di Montalcino require 100% Sangiovese Grosso.

In 2008, an undisclosed number of Brunello di Montalcino producers were put under investigation for allegedly blending nonauthorized grapes. The so-called Brunello-gate scandal led to declassified wines, guilty verdicts, fines, sentences and tarnished the reputation of Italy's most celebrated wine zone—a region that relies on the U.S. for 25% of its sales.

Losing confidence or gaining momentum

"Sangiovese can be too aggressive if planted in the wrong place and that's

The World According to Sangiovese

Brunello di Montalcino

The highest expression of Sangiovese, made exclusively from the dark Sangiovese Grosso clone, it shows beautiful richness, intensity and complexity, with aromas of forest fruit, cola and spice. Brunello is released five years after the harvest and the Riserva requires an extra year of cellar aging. Rosso di Montalcino is a less austere wine. The territory is characterized by an exceptional microclimate shielded by Monte Amiata.

Vino Nobile di Montepulciano

Once the noblest of all Tuscan wines, Vino Nobile is made with the Prugnolo Gentile clone. The wine is minimum 70% Sangiovese, with components of Canaiolo Nero and Mammolo. This region also offers a lesser wine called Rosso di Montepulciano and a top-shelf Riserva. The wines show dark, earthy characteristics, often with subtle overtones of dried herbs or blue flowers.

Coastal Tuscany

With Sangiovese expressions in the Montecucco and the Maremma subzones, Coastal Tuscany offers rich, sun-drenched expressions of the grape. Jammy notes of blackberry and strawberry and spice, and the wines show loads of bright cherry flavors.

Morellino di Scansano

Quickly growing in popularity, this up-and-coming region is located around the picturesque village of Scansano in Maremma. Morellino is the local name for Sangiovese and rules governing wine production require that the variety comprise at least 85% of its wines. The wine does not need wood aging and this helps preserve its fresh fruit characteristics. It is an excellent food wine that also comes as a Riserva.

Chianti Classico

This landlocked wine region is the traditional home of Sangiovese and has had the biggest in-

fluence on its stylistic evolution. The wines must be at least 80% Sangiovese and vintners can add indigenous (Canaiolo and Colorino) or international (Cabernet Sauvignon or Merlot) varieties to their blends. There is a growing movement to produce Chianti Classico (and the Riserva version) as 100% Sangiovese.

Umbria

Neighboring Tuscany, Umbrian producers use Sangiovese in their Torgiano Rosso wines and as a blending element to tame the astringent tannins of Sagrantino in Rosso di Montefalco.

Sangiovese di Romagna

The most important of the Sangiovese-based zones outside Tuscany. In a move to highlight the importance of the grape, the proportion of other varieties permitted in the wine is being reduced from 15% to 5%. Expressions of the variety range from full bodied and tannic near the province of Forlì-Ces-

ena to lighter, fruitier options closer to Bologna. One excellent way to become familiar with these unique wines is to visit the Web site of the Consorzio Convito di Romagna (convitodiromagna.it). Detailed profiles of the main producers can be accessed there; producers of interest include Tre Monti, Fattoria Zerbina, Drei Donà, San Valentino and San Patrignano.

Marche

Pure expressions of Sangiovese do hail from the Marche, on the eastern flank of Italy, but the grape is most often used as a blending agent (up to 15%) with the tannic Montepulciano grape in Rosso Conero wines from near Ancona.

Other

Although central Italy is its natural home, Sangiovese is present in 259 DOCs across the country, from Valpolicella in the north to the deep south.



why some were tempted to add softening elements," says vintner Franco Biondi Santi, whose family is credited with bottling the first official Brunello di Montalcino in 1888. "The immediate outcome of Brunello-gate was fear-fear-fear."

"It really comes down to ideological differences," says Consorzio del Vino Brunello di Montalcino President Ezio Rivella. "In traditional Tuscan winemaking, Sangiovese was always blended with other varieties such as

Colorino or Mammolo. Sangiovese purity was not the standard because the grape can bring uneven results if planted in the wrong places. Only in Montalcino did 100% Sangiovese become the standard, because this territory is considered perfect for the variety."

Lingering ambivalence regarding Sangiovese begs a question that is pivotal to the future of the grape: Has Italy lost confidence in its flagship variety, or are we entering a period of Sangiovesista pride?

It's possible that the answer to both questions is yes. Early this year, it was suggested that the rules governing Rosso di Montalcino, sometimes described as Brunello's little sister, will be changed. Up to 15% of grapes other than Sangiovese will be permitted, thus changing the identity (and consequently the price point) of Rosso di Montalcino. And it is widely believed that Rivella will push to modify Brunello production rules to align with the more flexible rules already in place in Chianti Classico. "If you want to make

Highest Scoring Sangiovese Wines

97 Casanova di Neri 2006 Tenuta Nuova (Brunello di Montalcino); \$89. Imported by Dalla Terra Winery Direct. **Cellar Selection.**

96 Poggio Nardone 2006 Brunello di Montalcino; \$50. Imported by Kysela Père et Fils. **Cellar Selection.**

95 Il Poggione 2005 Vigna Paganelli Riserva (Brunello di Montalcino); \$96. Imported by Terlato Wines International.

95 Podere Brizio 2006 Brunello di Montalcino; \$65. A Marc de Grazia selection; various American importers.

94 Siro Pacenti 2006 Brunello di Montalcino; \$70. Imported by Michael Skurnik Wines.

94 Tenute Silvio Nardi 2006 Vigna Monachiara (Brunello di Montalcino); \$106. Imported by Kobrand.

93 Marchesi de' Frescobaldi 2007 Montesodi Riserva (Chianti Rufina); \$40. Imported by Folio Fine Wine Partners.

93 Podere Poggio Scalette 2007 Il Carbonaione (Toscana); \$65. Imported by Winebow.

93 Castello di Bossi 2007 Berardo Riserva (Chianti Classico); \$41. Imported by Winebow. **Cellar Selection.**

93 Camigliano 2005 Gualto Riserva (Brunello di Montalcino); \$107. Imported by Vias Imports.

92 Collemassari 2006 Lombrone Riserva (Montecucco); \$85. Imported by Bedford International.

92 Castellare di Castellina 2006 I Sodi di San Niccolò (Toscana); \$55. Imported by Winebow.

92 Poliziano 2007 Asinone (Vino Nobile di Montepulciano); \$65. Imported by Palm Bay International.

92 Fattoria Petrolò 2008 Torrone (Toscana); \$45. Imported by Virtus LLC.

92 Ca' Marcanda 2007 Magari (Toscana); \$85. Imported by Terlato Wines International.

91 Tua Rita 2009 Rosso dei Netri (Toscana); \$23. Imported by Winebow. **Editors' Choice.**

91 Carpineto 2006 Riserva (Chianti Classico); \$27. Imported by Opici Wines.

91 Mazzei 2006 Ser Lapo Riserva (Chianti Classico); \$60. Imported by Palm Bay International. **Editors' Choice.**

90 Rocca delle Macie 2007 Ser Giovetto (Toscana); \$52. Imported by Palm Bay International.

90 Morisfarm 2007 Riserva (Morellino di Scansano); \$30. Imported by Polaner Selections.

For more on Sangiovese from the experts, go to winemag.com/sangiovese



superplush and extracted wines to thinner old school renditions, have been bridged. “Brunello 2006 speaks a common language,” says Biondi Santi: “It’s the language of Sangiovese. With time, we began to see that there was indeed a positive outcome to the Brunello scandal.”

Enrico Viglierchio, managing director of Castello Banfi, says the problems related to Sangiovese have been largely resolved with modern winemaking technology, which help prevent oxidation, maintain color and preserve aromas. “Not only are we more confident with Sangiovese as winemakers,” says Viglierchio, “we’ve seen a positive evolution in style thanks to modern techniques and careful clone selection.”

“Most importantly,” Viglierchio adds, “we now understand how important the concept of territory is to Sangiovese.” This last point cannot be underestimated: Most vintners will tell you that quality Sangiovese can only be achieved in pinpoint locations scattered across Italy in defined spots such as Montalcino, Montepulciano, Chianti Classico, Scansano and Romagna. Many in Italy reject the idea that the variety can be exported to foreign countries or continents.

pure Sangiovese, make it pure; if you don’t want to, then don’t. Why complicate our lives?” Rivella asks. Yet, these changes would surely undermine the strong bond between the Montalcino territory and its premier grape.

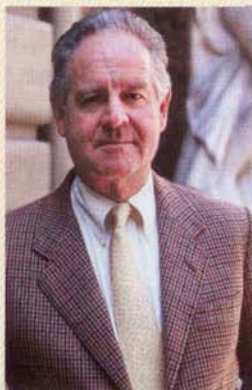
On the other side of the coin, a lucky string of excellent vintages from 2006 and 2007 to 2009 and 2010 (skipping the notorious ’08) have underscored the grape’s amazing potential. The 2006 vintage of Brunello di Montalcino (already in barrel when the Brunello scandal erupted) represents a new face of Sangiovese Grosso. As a group, the wines are uniform and excellent. The massive stylistic differences of the past, ranging from

In preparation for this article, I tasted nearly 400 wines consisting of 100% Sangiovese and wines comprised mostly of Sangiovese with smaller elements of outside grapes. Although Brunello di Montalcino nabbed the highest scores in my blind tastings, the blended wines also impressed me: The addition of Merlot or Cabernet Sauvignon (no more than 10 or 15%, otherwise the beauty of the Sangiovese bouquet is overwhelmed) was simply delicious.

But put Sangiovese in the right territory, give it an excellent vintage—and this sovereign grape of Italian viticulture reigns supreme. 🍷

Sangiovese According to the Experts

Marchese Piero Antinori



I believe that Brunello, even in terms of coherence with its name, must remain a wine that is made with Sangiovese. But this doesn’t mean that in the future, there can’t be a tiny level of elasticity (maybe 5 percent of other

varieties?) that would not change the fundamental characteristics of the wine.

Cristina Mariani-May



Today, no other Italian red commands greater worldwide recognition than Sangiovese, Tuscany’s signature red grape. In an increasingly competitive global wine market, Italy’s abundance of native grapes provides a welcome point of difference. And here in the

U.S. as wine lovers become more sophisticated and adventurous, Italy is ideally poised to meet this growing demand.

Riccardo Cotarella



There is no other variety in the world that is as linked to the habitat in which it grows. There are 70 biotypes and clones of Sangiovese, of which 57 are Tuscan and 13 are from Romagna, so it is difficult to say which is the best Sangiovese. This is the beauty of Sangiovese because it means

growers are given the opportunity to match their commercial goals according to the specific characteristics of various territories.