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California CHARDONNAY ANNUAL TASTING REPORT



**A DREAM VINTAGE FOR BRUNELLO
SUMMER SEAFOOD PAIRED WITH WINES
FRESH POURS FOR ROSÉ SEASON**

Sweet Sixteen

BRUNELLO DI MONTALCINO'S 2016 VINTAGE
IS THE BEST IN A GENERATION

By Bruce Sanderson

Photographs by Lorenzo Cotrozzi



The Montosoli hill shined bright in 2016, yielding a quintet of classic Brunellos from some of Montalcino's top estates.

Montalcino has been on a hot streak in recent years. With the exception of the difficult 2014 vintage, a string of outstanding to exceptional harvests since 2010 is capped by the best of the decade so far—the dream vintage of 2016. Simply put, the '16s are the most compelling young examples from this Tuscan region since the 1990s.

“For sure, 2016 has been a great vintage in Montalcino,” says consulting enologist Alberto Antonini. “A kind of textbook year.” Antonini’s clients include two estates—Poggio Landi and Podere Brizio, acquired by Argentinian businessman Alejandro Bulgheroni in 2012 and 2013—that both earned their highest ratings to date, scoring 97 points (\$59) and 96 points (\$70), respectively.

“The feeling during the growing season was just so-so at the beginning due to the intense rain until June,” Antonini adds. “But from then until harvest, everything was like you would hope every year: a very healthy and active canopy due to the nice moisture underground, warm but never hot summer, refreshing wind, cool nights and dry weather at harvest. Nothing more you can ask for in a growing season.”

The vintage’s young wines express pure red fruits, augmented by floral, iron, tobacco, mineral and savory elements that bring complexity and detail. They lean toward finesse and elegance courtesy of their vibrant structures, yet they show density as well, with refined tannins that are covered by the ripe fruit. Most notable is their superb balance and harmony. If they don’t shut down in a year or so, they may drink beautifully throughout what promises to be a long evolution.

Wine lovers in the United States enjoy a particular love affair with Brunello di Montalcino. Made from 100% Sangiovese, these wines reflect the unique and complex *terroirs* found in Tuscany’s Montalcino denomination. Closer to the sea than either Chianti Classico or Montepulciano, Brunellos are richer, rounder and more velvety than those regions’ pure Sangioveses and Sangiovese blends. Montalcino’s mix of marls, schist (*galestro*) and hard calcareous rock (*albarese*), along with its diverse altitudes, yield wines of varying power, density, elegance and detail.

A quartet of top bottlings showcases the strength of the 2016 vintage. Three come from vineyards surrounding Montalcino: Le Chiuse (98 points, \$80), which has the linear profile typical of Brunellos from north of the town; Le Ragnaie Casanovina Montosoli (98, \$180), the second vintage of this wine and a notch up from the debut 2015, evoking black cherry, blackberry, violet, mineral, iron and tobacco; and San Filippo Le Lucère 2016 (98, \$110) an elegant version that is also a step ahead of its predecessor.

The fourth among the top-scorers is Talenti’s Piero (98, \$150), a cherry-, strawberry-, earth- and mineral-flavored red that comes from a 5-acre parcel near Riccardo Talenti’s cellar, planted on stony soils with clones his grandfather selected in the 1970s. “[With] the 2015 harvest we wanted to acknowledge our grandfather’s work by producing a selection from this vineyard,” explains Talenti. “All the production of the vineyard is refined in new and second passage *tonneaux*, then after 24 months we taste and decide to select a maximum of five *tonneaux* to create the Piero.”

These are the highlights of nearly 100 young Brunellos I reviewed in blind tastings at our New York office this past February. More than half of the 2016s I tasted earned classic ratings of 95 to 100 points on *Wine Spectator*’s 100-point scale, while the rest scored in the outstanding range of 90 to 94 points. That’s how great this



The 5-acre parcel that vintner Riccardo Talenti sources for his highly rated Piero bottling is planted to a special clonal selection of Sangiovese that his grandfather Pierluigi developed in the 1970s.

vintage is, earning a stellar 99-point rating overall.

For many producers, the 2016 harvest resulted in their most successful Brunellos to date. Baricci’s ’16 Montosoli (97, \$95), for example, is fresh and vivid, showing cherry, raspberry, plum, floral, black tea and mineral flavors balanced by earthy, savory elements. “Speaking for us and therefore Montosoli, the 2016 Brunello vintage recorded a balanced and almost perfect seasonal trend throughout the year,” recalls Baricci winemaker Federico Buffi.

In particular, the warm days and cool nights in September allowed producers to harvest perfectly healthy grapes, with excellent acidity and elegant tannins. “The confirmation of this sensation was obtained at the time of racking, when I could see an extremely intense color and great aromas of fresh red fruit, all characteristics of a vintage of the highest quality level,” Buffi says. “Even my grandfather Nello, who in his long life had already seen almost 90 harvests, exclaimed ‘How wonderful!’”

The ’16 Conti Costanti (97, \$119) is also this estate’s best effort yet, showing superb balance between ripe cherry, raspberry and currant fruit and savory elements of juniper and thyme. “The main



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characteristic of 2016 is that it continuously improved during its fermentation, its aging period and also after bottling, which is typical for the best classic vintages in Montalcino,” says proprietor Andrea Costanti. “So, at the beginning I thought that the 2015 vintage, especially in my area which is fresher and higher, should be superior to 2016, knowing it was a hotter vintage and of course a little bit more ready. After the evolution of the two wines, obviously both still very young, I can assume the 2016 is slightly superior than 2015.”

The trend toward vineyard-designated Brunellos also continues with the 2016 vintage. Castello Banfi debuts its Vigna Marrucheto (96, \$130), which takes its place among some of the best Brunellos made at this American-owned estate. This excellent young red reveals the density of the wines from the southern part of the Montalcino zone, while also featuring a core of ripe cherry and berry fruit, surrounded by mineral, tobacco, earth and balsamic notes.

Banfi president Cristina Mariani-May explains that new tanks purchased in 2007 allowing for micro-vinifications fostered an in-depth study of the estate’s vineyard parcels. In Vigna Marrucheto, she says, “there are three parcels over roughly 24 acres that are south-facing and have an elevation of 665 feet. There are expansive views from the site—including the Orcia river and Monte Amiata—but the soils are what make it unique, marked by deposits of marine origin with coarse pebbles. The composition can go from sandy clay to very stony even within the same row.”

One thing all of Montalcino’s vintners agree on is that the growing season in 2016 was ideal. Nearly two weeks of temperatures below freezing in January eliminated any lingering fungal disease issues from the previous season, and regular rainfall through mid-March recharged the groundwater supply. The month of May was wet, with a total of about 4 inches of rain, accompanied by cooler-than-average temperatures that slowed the growth of the vines without compromising their health. The rain later proved key during the driest months of July and August.

Those summer months were warm, but not excessively hot, with cool nights. This pattern was followed in September by a beneficial range between daytime and nighttime temperatures (approximately 86° F and 59° F), ideal conditions for ripening the region’s Sangiovese, especially the tannins, while preserving acidity and developing aromatic compounds. An inch and a half of rain in some areas roughly two weeks before harvest was followed by drying winds from the north-northeast, allowing the grapes to be picked in a healthy state.

At Talenti, just outside of Sant’Angelo in Colle, the harvest started on Sept. 20. According to Riccardo Talenti, the Sangiovese was healthy and ripe, with no need for sorting. Farther north, picking began 10 days to two weeks later.

“If we could control the climate artificially, I believe I would program it just to be like the year 2016,” says Francesco Ripaccioli,



Castello Banfi’s Cristina Mariani-May has been instrumental in the push toward site-specific bottlings of Brunello.

winemaker at his family’s estate, Canalicchio di Sopra, just north of Montalcino. “We believe that the greatness of this vintage lies right here—simply perfect from a climactic point of view, without excess and without unexpected events, regular and continual in its pursuit of maturation of the Sangiovese fruit, easy on the eyes and exquisite to taste.”

With respect to recent vintages, 2016 stacks up favorably. “Having to compare the 2016 vintage with a previous one, I would definitely say 2010,” says Buffi, who notes the similarity of the seasonal trends as well as the excellent quality of the grapes, citing both vintages’ tannic structure, sustained acidity, freshness and elegance. Antonini also thinks the current vintage is similar to 2010, as well as 2013, while Costanti harks back to 2006—all classic vintages in the Montalcino canon.

An additional bit of good news about 2016 is that quantities were generous. According to the Consorzio del Vino Brunello di Montalcino, yields were slightly higher than average for the string of harvests from 2006 through 2016.

This year’s new releases also include the *riservas* from the excellent 2015 vintage. During my recent tastings, I reviewed nearly 50 of these Brunellos that undergo an additional year of aging—for a minimum of five years overall—in a combination of at least two years in wood and six months in bottle.

The standouts are Castello Romitorio’s Riserva (98, \$290), whose bright cherry, blackberry, plum, iron and tobacco flavors knit together almost seamlessly with its vibrant acidity and refined tannins; Talenti’s Pian di Conte Riserva (98, \$90), focused and



The ongoing evolution of the 2016 Brunello at Conti Costanti allowed this ripe yet balanced wine to get better and better over time.



Filippo Chia stands amid the historic structures of Castello Romitorio, which was restored by his father, Sandro, in the 1980s and now produces top Brunellos such as its 2015 *riserva*.

complex, with macerated plum, black cherry, black currant, violet, iron and spice notes; and Uccelliera's *Riserva* (98, \$175), a vibrant version full of fresh black cherry, blackberry, iron and tobacco.

Castello Romitorio is located in a special area in the northwest of the appellation. Its *riserva* is sourced from three vineyard plots planted with historic Sangiovese clones, including BBS11 from

Biondi-Santi. Artist Sandro Chia planted the vines between 1986 and 1989, shortly after purchasing the estate in 1984.

Protected within a small valley surrounded by woods, these northwest-facing parcels excel in years like 2015. "The 2015 vintage was hot and dry and ended up being ideal for most vineyards in the north, but especially for those located at higher altitudes in

the 'bosco,' as these areas are protected by thick oak forests—the famous Leccino variety—that are evergreen," explains Sandro's son Filippo Chia. "The leaves of this tree have the capacity of trapping humidity in the day and releasing it at night."

With a few exceptions, the *riservas* are a cut above the *annata* bottlings released a year ago, making 2015 a terrific vintage for the *riserva* category. Most of them are fresher and benefited from the additional aging.

For those who are discovering Brunello di Montalcino for the first time, you could do a lot worse than these two vintages as your introduction to the region. For those who are already devotees, you'll want to have as many of your favorites from these back-to-back harvests as you can possibly afford.

Senior editor Bruce Sanderson is Wine Spectator's lead taster on Brunello di Montalcino.

Rating Brunello di Montalcino Vintages

2016	99	Textbook growing season resulted in wines of finesse and elegance, balance and harmony, with mostly red fruit flavors. Ideal weather in September preserved acidity	<i>Drink or hold</i>
2015	97	A warm but not overly hot summer, with adequate rain and healthy fruit, resulted in ripe, rich Brunellos, dense with tannins; the best have the acidity to age long term	<i>Drink or hold</i>
2014	89	A cool, wet season with lack of sun made full ripening difficult; small crop, with many producers declassifying Brunello	<i>Drink or hold</i>
2013	95	A late start to the growing season led to a late harvest of mostly elegant, balanced Brunellos with vibrant structures	<i>Drink or hold</i>
2012	96	Extreme weather produced rich, concentrated wines with ripe fruit and freshness; the best have the structure to age	<i>Drink or hold</i>
2011	91	A warm year with a heat spike in August, producing forward wines with ample fruit. The best are lively and balanced; ripe and dense in the south	<i>Drink</i>
2010	98	Perfect late summer weather resulted in ideal ripening for Sangiovese; wines are fresh, elegant, balanced and structured, with ample ripe fruit flavors. The best should age beautifully	<i>Drink or hold</i>

Notable older vintages: 2006, 2004, 2001, 1999, 1997, 1990, 1988, 1985

Vintage ratings: 95-100, classic; 90-94, outstanding; 85-89, very good; 80-84, good; 75-79, mediocre; 50-74, not recommended **Drinkability:** "NYR" means most of the wines of the vintage are yet to be released; "drink" means most of the wines of the vintage are ready to drink; "hold" means most of the ageworthy wines have yet to fully mature.

Bruce Sanderson's Recommended Brunellos di Montalcino

Nearly 150 wines were reviewed for this report. A free alphabetical list is available at WineSpectator.com/BrunelloAlpha073121.
WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online Wine Ratings search.

TOP 2016s

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
LE CHIUSE Brunello di Montalcino 2016 Pretty strawberry, currant and cherry flavors take center stage in this taut and linear red, flanked by floral, mineral and tobacco notes, with fine balance and intensity on a slim frame. Ample yet refined.	98	\$80
LE RAGNAIE Brunello di Montalcino Casanovina Montosoli 2016 Charming and harmonious, evoking black cherry, blackberry, violet, mineral and woody flavors, with iron and tobacco accents emerging as this builds on the palate. Concentrated, yet never heavy.	98	\$180
SAN FILIPPO Brunello di Montalcino Le Lucère 2016 This is laden with balsamic aromas and flavors of juniper, rosemary and rose, plus black currant and raspberry fruit, with an underlying mineral element. Firm tannins enhance the overall elegance.	98	\$110
TALENTI Brunello di Montalcino Piero 2016 Cherry, strawberry, earth and mineral flavors offer immediate appeal, while the dense structure indicates this will evolve over decades. Notes of underbrush and tobacco seep in, but the beam of fruit persists.	98	\$150
ALTESINO Brunello di Montalcino Montosoli 2016 Packed with sweet, ripe cherry, plum and raspberry fruit and framed by loamy earth and woody notes, this red is intense and lively.	97	\$120
BARICCI Brunello di Montalcino Montosoli 2016 Fresh and vivid, this shows cherry, raspberry, plum, floral, black tea and mineral aromas and flavors, with terrific finesse and complexity.	97	\$95
CONTI COSTANTI Brunello di Montalcino 2016 Features a superb balance between ripe cherry, raspberry and currant fruit and savory elements of juniper and thyme. Should be long-lived.	97	\$119
SIRO PACENTI Brunello di Montalcino Pelagrilli 2016 Pure and focused, with cherry, strawberry and currant fruit shaded by mineral and tobacco accents. This vibrant red is all about the fruit.	97	\$62
POGGIO DI SOTTO Brunello di Montalcino 2016 Alluring aromas give way to a core of red fruit framed by iron, earth and tobacco in this elegant red, which is silky yet well-structured.	97	\$280
POGGIO LANDI Brunello di Montalcino 2016 Broad and mouthfilling, exuding floral, black cherry, blackberry, graphite and stony mineral flavors. Powerful yet vivid and refined.	97	\$59
LE RAGNAIE Brunello di Montalcino Petroso 2016 Intense black cherry, black currant and floral flavors are shaded by earth, iron, tobacco and soy in this incisive and harmonious red.	97	\$180
SAN FILIPPO Brunello di Montalcino 2016 Plenty of balsamic aromas lead to macerated cherry and plum fruit in this racy red, framed by juniper, thyme, Scotch broom, tar and iodine.	97	\$70
VALDICAVA Brunello di Montalcino Vigna Montosoli 2016 Focused like a laser beam, showing cherry, plum, chocolate, iron and leather flavors defined by bracing acidity, with a mouthwatering finish.	97	\$689 1.5L

TOP 2015 RISERVAS

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
CASTELLO ROMITORIO Brunello di Montalcino Riserva 2015 A stunning version, this exudes bright cherry, blackberry, plum, iron and tobacco flavors, all knit together almost seamlessly, with vibrant acidity and refined tannins. Shows a mix of power and grace.	98	\$290

TALENTI Brunello di Montalcino Pian di Conte Riserva 2015 This intense red is saturated with macerated plum, black cherry, black currant, violet, iron and spice flavors, with a rich texture wrapping around the refined tannins. Distinctive and expressive.	98	\$90
UCCELLIERA Brunello di Montalcino Riserva 2015 An enticing red, whose vibrant character sets the pace for fresh black cherry, blackberry, iron and tobacco, with a frame of oak spice. Round and solid, showing lingering accents of fruit, mineral and spice.	98	\$175
ALTESINO Brunello di Montalcino Riserva 2015 Laced with ripe cherry, strawberry, floral, spice, iron and leather flavors, this is complex and charming, yet with serious tannins.	97	\$130
BARICCI Brunello di Montalcino Nello Riserva 2015 Plenty of cherry, raspberry, currant and floral flavors highlight this svelte red, with lively acidity and superb texture and harmony.	97	\$195
CAPRILI Brunello di Montalcino AdAlberto Riserva 2015 Expressive and lush, this vibrant red shows ripe cherry, plum, earth, tobacco and leather notes, backed by a rigid backbone of tannins.	97	\$135
CASANOVA DI NERI Brunello di Montalcino Cerretalto 2015 Wild rosemary, thyme and juniper flavors frame the core of black cherry in this supple version, which is firmly built and very expressive.	97	\$350
CIACCI PICCOLOMINI D'ARAGONA Brunello di Montalcino Vigna di Pianrosso Santa Caterina d'Oro Riserva 2015 There's a bright edge to this red, harnessing the cherry, strawberry, rosehip, mineral and tobacco flavors that build on the palate.	97	\$180
SAN FILIPPO Brunello di Montalcino Le Lucère Riserva 2015 Floral, black cherry, black currant, spice, earth and mineral flavors abound in this appealing red, which is smooth, lively and balanced.	97	\$210
VALDICAVA Brunello di Montalcino Madonna del Piano Riserva 2015 Cherry, berry and wild herb flavors mark this linear version, which is pure and vibrant, with refined tannins and bright acidity.	97	\$285
PODERE BRIZIO Brunello di Montalcino Riserva 2015 Ripe black cherry, blackberry and plum flavors permeate the opulent texture, with woody, wild herb, mineral and black pepper notes.	96	\$110
CARPINETO Brunello di Montalcino Riserva 2015 A rich, harmonious red, showing cherry, raspberry, iron, leather and earth flavors. Sleek and succulent, with a well-integrated structure.	96	\$130
EREDI FULIGNI Brunello di Montalcino Riserva 2015 Offers dark fruit flavors of black currant, blackberry, violet and iron, with the supple texture tying it all together. Classy and complex.	96	\$205
LA GERLA Brunello di Montalcino Riserva gli Angeli 2015 Rich and round, this is full of macerated plum and cherry flavors, with almond, leather, spice and earth accents. Firms up on the finish.	96	\$125
LE MACIOCHE Brunello di Montalcino Riserva 2015 Pure flavors of black currant and cherry are graced by sage, iron and tobacco. Tightly wound and crisp in feel, with fine harmony.	96	\$185
LA MANNELLA DI CORTONESI Brunello di Montalcino La Mannella Riserva 2015 Alluring for its opulent profile and velvety texture, with lush cherry, strawberry, floral and mineral flavors, allied to a dense structure.	96	\$200
POGGIO DI SOTTO Brunello di Montalcino Riserva 2015 There's a leafy underbrush element to this red, punctuating the cherry, strawberry and earth flavors. Compact for now, yet balanced.	96	\$500