

Cellar the Brunello, Drink the Rosso, Montalcino Winemakers Say

By Elin McCoy

March 27 (Bloomberg) —In Italy, the smartest eating and drinking strategy is to copy the locals, which is how I first learned to love southern Tuscany's bright, fruity Rosso di Montalcino.

Yes, the region's powerful, complex and often wildly overpriced Brunello di Montalcino is the big-deal red that grabs the attention of the world's wine collectors, especially Americans. Italians certainly tip their hats to it and export much of it. Yet its baby brother—the Rosso—is the region's everyday drink and still (relatively) a bargain.

So at New York's annual Benvenuto Brunello tasting, where dozens of producers are pushing Brunellos from 2003, the hottest vintage ever recorded, I'm seeking out the 2005 and 2006 Rossos that many estates are quietly pouring alongside them.

The hillside vineyards of Tuscany's warm, sunny Montalcino zone surround the small, fortified medieval town of Montalcino, about 60 miles south of Florence. Like Brunello, Rosso is made from 100 percent sangiovese grapes grown in these vineyards.

The difference is that Brunello must be aged at least four years, first in oak casks, then in the bottle, before being released. Brunello Riserva, made only in top vintages, is aged at least five. Both are vino serio: rich, substantial and commanding, with powerful, chewy tannins that traditionally need at least 10 to 30 years to smooth out so they can really strut their stuff.

Drink-Me-Now Style

Rossos echo Brunello's black cherry and violet aromas and berry-cherry and licorice flavors, though in a fresher, fruitier, drink-me-now style. At the tasting I stop first to scribble enthusiastic notes on Tenuta Col d'Orcia's ripe, plush 2005 Rosso (\$18). It's more pleasant to sample than their 2003 Brunello (\$55).

Owner Count Francesco Marone Cinzano, who is also president of the Consorzio del Vino Brunello di Montalcino, concedes as much.

"At home, Rosso is drunk often, Brunello seldom," he says. "It's our lunchtime, non-celebration wine. It can be chilled. It's good with fish."

Granted, Rossos are not exactly a giveaway at \$18 to \$35 a bottle, yet they're about one-third the price of a typical estate's Brunello. These days that's not bad for a first-rate, oh-so-delicious red. Especially one that has authentic Italian flavors.

"You get the true sense of sangiovese in Rosso di Montalcino," says Sergio Esposito, owner of the New York shop Italian Wine Merchants. (In typical Italian fashion, he's calling from his cell phone while driving in traffic.) "Most people don't bother to pump up Rossos to win higher ratings from critics."

Ripe Brunello

He's referring to the super-ripe, modern-style Brunellos aged in French oak that some producers think export markets want.

"The personality of an estate comes through in their Rosso," says Cristina Mariani-May, co-chief executive officer of Banfi

Vintners, as I compare Castello Banfi's plump, juicy 2006 Rosso (\$20) and big, tannic 2003 Brunello (\$60). "But you really can't go wrong, even if there are many different styles."

In poor years like 2002, producers may not make a Brunello, so the best grapes go into the Rosso. In highly rated Brunello vintages like 2005 and 2006, 30 percent to 50 percent of the grapes are still put into lip-smacking Rosso.

In addition to Castello Banfi's Rosso, my short list of 2006s includes savory, traditional Il Marroneto (\$25); fresh, appealing Valdicava (\$36); succulent, sappy Lisini (\$25); earthy Uccelliera (\$25); and minerally SassodiSole (\$25). Among 2005s, I'd single out powerful, ageworthy Il Poggione (\$28), structured Capanna (\$30) and silky-textured La Togata (\$27).

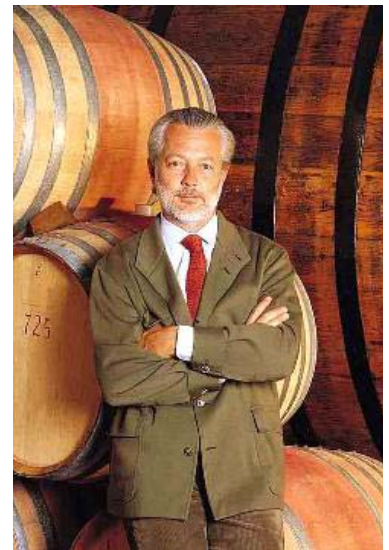
Advantages of Overplanting

Amazingly, Rosso didn't even exist as an official wine category until 1984, though Brunello has been around for 150 years. Three decades ago, there were only two dozen wineries in Montalcino. After Brunello became an international sensation in the early 1990s, outsiders flooded in, and now there are more than 200 estates.

Overplanting has some worried that many future wines won't live up to Brunello's prestigious reputation. One way to ensure quality will be to make more Rosso, which is OK by me.

The first great Italian wine I ever tasted was the legendary 1955 Biondi-Santi Brunello Riserva, long a cult classic, which now sells for \$1,000 and up a bottle. I ordered it at Florence's Enoteca Pinchiorri more than 20 years ago, when a handful of dollars could buy much greater wines than they can now.

"Oh, you should have called yesterday so I could decant it," the sommelier said in distress, clapping hand to forehead. He rushed off to start swirling the wine in a carafe, returning with a few bottles of Rosso di Montalcino to taste, keeping me happy until he deemed the great wine was ready. I've been a Rosso fan ever since.



Count Francesco Marone Cinzano, owner of Tenuta Col d'Orcia, who is also president of the Consorzio del Vino Brunello di Montalcino, poses in this undated handout photo. "At home, Rosso is drunk often, Brunello seldom. It's our lunchtime, non-celebration wine. It can be chilled; it's good with fish," says Cinzano. Tenuta's 2005 Rosso is priced at \$18 compared to \$55 for the estate's Brunello. Source: Palm Bay International via Bloomberg News