

Super Sangiovese

1999 is a classic vintage for Brunello di Montalcino

Posted: Tuesday, June 22, 2004

By [*James Suckling*](#)

Wine producers in Montalcino, Tuscany's premier wine-producing town, know that times are tough in the U.S. market due to the weak dollar, a variable economy and volatile world affairs. But they're optimistic about selling 1999 Brunello di Montalcino, and for good reason. It's a classic vintage, rating just behind 1997, the modern era's benchmark. Americans love the pure Sangioveses from Montalcino, buying about one of every three bottles of Brunello produced in recent vintages. (Annual production of Brunello is about 6 million bottles.) And we pounce on great vintages, making the 1999s especially attractive.



The 1999 growing season was just right, with lots of sun and heat but just enough rain in August to refresh the vineyards. September was perfect for harvesting, with hot days and cool nights. "The vintage is really fabulous," says Roberto Guerrini, the head of Eredi Fuligni, which made one of the best 1999 Brunellos I tasted (95 points, or classic, on the *Wine Spectator* 100-point scale). His 1999 is even better than his 1997. "I really think the 1999 is at the pinnacle of quality," he says.

I recently reviewed more than 120 Brunellos from the 1999 vintage in blind tastings at my office in Tuscany and was extremely impressed with the overall quality of the wines. For me, the 1999s did not quite reach the extraordinary zenith of quality shown by the 1997s, but they came very, very close. I rate the 1999 vintage at 97 points. The 1997 vintage rated 99 points.

The 1999s do not offer the length, depth of fruit, fine tannins or overall class that the legendary 1997s do. However, the '99s show an impressive richness of fruit and powerful tannins; some consumers might even prefer this slightly rougher style of Brunello. It's like comparing silk to velvet, the latter being the 1999 vintage, the former 1997.

Individually, some producers made even better wines in 1999 than in 1997. This can be attributed to a number of factors, the most important being that producers did better work in their vineyards and cellars in 1999. Believe it or not, two years can make a big difference in knowing how to get the most out of your vineyards. Plus, 1997 taught many winemakers a great deal about handling very hot and dry years, as did 1998 (rated 91 points), a hot year that was marred only by some rain during harvest.

"The most important thing was that we made less wine. Our yield of grapes was much smaller in 1999, and this gave us more concentrated, ripe wines," says Stefano Chioccioli, one of Tuscany's top consulting enologists. He made the best wine of my tasting, the Fanti Brunello 1999 (98, \$80). His first complete vintage at Fanti was 1998. "We also worked hard in the cellar doing things such as micro-oxidation of the must before malolactic fermentation to fix the color ... the idea was to have a wine with a deep and dark color, with strong yet polished tannins that were sweet in the mouth."

Chioccioli noted that in 1999 a number of wineries in Montalcino brought new vineyards on line, with better-selected clones, modern training and canopy styles. "This certainly added to the quality of grapes picked in 1999," he says.

After the Fanti, the highest-scoring 1999 Brunellos in my tasting were La Poderina (96, \$70), Siro Pacenti (96, \$75), Eredi Fuligni (95, \$76), Marchesi de' Frescobaldi Castelgiocondo (95, \$56), Sestadisopra (95, \$NA; not imported) and Tenuta Carlina Togata dei Togati (95, \$150). By comparison, I scored more than twice as many 1997 Brunellos at 95 points or higher.

Release prices for the 1999s should be about the same as or only slightly higher than those for the 1998s released last year. Expect to pay between \$50 and \$150 a bottle for top-rated wines, with the average priced at about \$75. The dollar has dropped significantly in value against the euro in the past year, but Brunello producers have made an effort to keep their prices at the same level in U.S. wine shops through discounting and other agreements with their American distributors.

"We are working closely with our suppliers to try to keep prices at the same level as last year, but it's not easy," says Neil Empson, who imports top Brunellos such as Lisini, Eredi Fuligni, Conti Costanti and Poggio Antico. Empson reports that the 1998 Brunellos sold surprisingly well; he expects to sell just as many 1999s.

Most of the 1999 Brunellos will be coming to the United States in very limited quantities, typically about 200 to 300 cases for the entire country. My advice: Buy them early. When the 1997s arrived in the country, many U.S. retailers increased prices significantly in expectation of a strong demand.

The Brunello most widely available in the market will be from Castello Banfi. American-owned Banfi is the largest producer of Brunello and makes about 70,000 cases each year, exporting about one-fourth to the United States. The 1999 regular bottling of it (94 points) has a suggested retail price of about \$66 a bottle. Because it is broadly available and because it offers a textbook example of the vintage, Banfi's Brunello is a good place to start in order to understand the style and quality of 1999.

Expect many of the 1999s to find their way directly into restaurant cellars, as well. A good percentage of the 1997 Brunello crop was sold to fine restaurants in major metropolitan areas in America, because restaurateurs found the reds' balance to be perfect with food, particularly meat.

"When a customer asks me for a recommendation for a top red to go with their meal, I very often choose 1997 Brunello," says Kevin Vogt, the head sommelier and wine

buyer for one of America's top steak houses, Delmonico, in Las Vegas. "Customers love them. They find them extremely balanced and delicious to drink, an enjoyable alternative from many big and rich wines from California."

In fact, it's that wonderful harmony of fruit, tannins and acidity that make a great Sangiovese so striking. Most Brunellos are very close to drinking well when they are released. They are aged a minimum of two years in cask or barrel, then another two years in bottle before they are shipped from the cellars. This long maturation helps refine the wine to a degree greater than what is achieved with, say, California Cabernet or Bordeaux, which in general spend no more than two years in barrel and another six months in bottle before they are released.

"Today's Brunellos have a lovely freshness and beautiful fruit that give you great pleasure right away," says Guerrini of Fuligni. "That's our strong point. The wines have slightly lower acidity and the tannins are much better now. The wines are really good from the beginning."

This said, however, Brunellos from top vintages usually still need another year or two of bottle age before they show their best. For instance, the best 1997s are still slightly closed at the moment and will only start to open this summer or next year. By comparison, the 1998s are delicious to drink now, as are the 1995s and 1993s -- all products of outstanding vintages. At the moment, I prefer drinking the 1998s over any other recent vintage of Brunello.

Brunello riserva must be aged an extra year at the winery before release. Thus, the 1999 riservas should reach the U.S. market next year. A few wines will surely merit the extra maturation -- as well as the much higher price -- owing to their extraordinary quality. In general, however, I find very few riservas much better than the same winery's *normale* bottling. Some riservas just seem like leftovers from the first bottling. Nonetheless, 1999 is a superior year in quality and numerous producers are bound to be making riservas.

With this in mind, it seems a wise idea to buy the top 1999 Brunellos now. For the money, they deliver the best Sangiovese Tuscany has to offer.

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