

The 2010 Brunello di Montalcinos are Must-Buys (Mostly)

An exclusive tasting of the much-anticipated wines reveals a great year in weather can lead to some excellent offerings.

By Kerin O'Keefe

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Following the success of the 2010 vintage in Barolo and Barbaresco, as well as Bolgheri and Chianti Classico, all eyes are now focused on Brunello di Montalcino.

While these 2010 bottlings will not officially debut to the press until February (as will the 2009 Riservas), I was fortunate to preview nearly 200 of them earlier this month at the Brunello Consorzio's headquarters in Montalcino.

So, are these wines living up to the hype? Yes and no.

It's challenging to generalize any vintage in Montalcino because of its diverse growing conditions. Vineyard altitudes range from 320 to 1,969 feet above sea level, and average summer temperatures and rainfall vary significantly from north to south.

Yet, according to producers in all corners of the denomination, 2010 was a remarkable year in terms of weather.



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“It was a perfect growing season, relatively warm during the maturation phase, with pronounced day and night temperature changes that allowed us to wait for the best phenolic maturation ever attained at our estate,” says Francesco Ripaccioli of Canalicchio di Sopra and vice president of the consorzio. Ripaccioli even defines the vintage “historic.”

Thanks to these ideal growing conditions, there are some superb 2010 Brunellos that display rich fruit flavors, freshness and powerful tannins. The best have the structure to age for at least 15–20 years, yet their concentrated,

juicy flavors will also make them approachable in a few years, once the tannins start to soften.

And while perfect weather conditions don't guarantee vintage excellence across the board (although, it sure came close in Barolo), I was still surprised to find a number of wines—thankfully a minority but still more than expected—of uninspiring 2010 Brunellos.

Some of these underperformers are surprisingly evolved, already brick colored and displaying dried up fruit and astringent tannins. At the other end of the spectrum, are high-octane Brunellos displaying stewed fruit and the heat of evident alcohol, with many of the latter declaring 15% on the label. Given the half point of flexibility allowed on Italian labels, they are likely closer to 15.5%.

Top producers—those who make the best Brunellos every year—generally made fantastic 2010 Brunellos. Their expertise, especially in the vineyards—including canopy management, when to harvest and scrupulous grape selection—proved critical even in a near perfect year like 2010. Alongside these producers, most with well over twenty-five or thirty vintages under their belt, are newly established estates, many of which still lack essential hands-on experience.

Shaking up quality even more is the recent wave of outside bottling houses that buy Brunello in bulk from local producers and bottle it under their own labels. As can be expected, producers tend to keep their best quality wine and sell off the rest to the bottlers.

As for 2009 Brunello Riservas? It was a challenging year in Montalcino, and many producers didn't make a Riserva version. The majority of bottlings tasted displayed stewed fruit, low acidity and high alcohol. While some possess the opulence more typical of Amarone, most aren't destined for lengthy aging.



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Recommended 2010 Brunellos

Il Marroneto. *Montcalm Imports*; 97 points

Biondi Santi. *N/A*; 96 points

Costanti. *Empson*; 96 points

Fuligni. *Empson*; 96 points

Canalicchio di Sopra. *Vinifera*; 95 points

Sesti. *Kermit Lynch*; 95 points

Ciacci Piccolomini. *Indigenous Selections*; 94 points

Poggio Antico. *The Sorting Table*; 94 points

Caparzo. *Vineyard Brands*; 93 points

Abbadia Ardenga. *Peter Warren Selections*, 93 points

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