

BRUNELLO DOWN UNDER

The Brunello clone of sangiovese has its home in a small area surrounding the town of Montalcino, just south of the Chianti region in Tuscany, central Italy. From humble beginnings, Brunello di Montalcino wines have risen dramatically in both quality and reputation over the past 30 years – so much so that many now consider them, and the reds of Barolo in Piemonte, Italy’s finest wines.

I recently attended a dinner in Canberra showcasing the wines of two small but premium-quality producers in Montalcino - Le Chiuse and Querce Bettina. The dinner was hosted by Sydney-based *Italian Wine Importers*, who are the sole Australian agents for both labels.



Montalcino

Le Chiuse is a tiny (eight hectare) vineyard and winery just north of Montalcino. It sits approximately 350 metres above sea level on well-drained soils the Italians call *galestro*, which is a type of marl (ie. a combination of clay and limestone). The estate is operated by Nicolò and Simonetta Magnelli. Simonetta is descended from the famous Clemente Santi, who in the 19th century devised the first prescription for Brunello di Montalcino. Further, it was Simonetta’s great-grandfather, Ferruccio Biondi-Santi, who selected and propagated the first Brunello clones. The Le Chiuse property has now been in the Biondi-Santi family continuously for five generations. Simonetta inherited the estate in the 1980s and initially operated it on her own. Today, Nicolò and Simonetta work side-by-side as viticulturists and winemakers of this prestigious little plot, following strictly traditional, organic methods in all aspects of their work, including wild yeast ferments wherever possible.

Querce Bettina is a 29 hectare estate south-west of Montalcino, approximately 450 metres above sea level. The soils are mainly heavier clay than the *galestro* to the north, and in general contribute to bigger, bolder expressions of Brunello.

Querce Bettina is operated by Roberto Moretti and his wife, Sandra Barenghi, who purchased the property in 1990 and planted around 2.5 hectares of sangiovese in 1999. Their first wines were released in 2009. Roberto and Sandra have a holistic approach to life, and work closely with an Italian organisation which conducts research into the health benefits of food and wine. Incidentally, the name of the estate comes from a local legend about an old woman named Bettina who used to sit under a large oak tree (*querce*) spinning wool and telling tales of wizards, witches and dragons to passing shepherds.

Now to the wines which, as is often the case with these dinners, were not served blind. Nevertheless, as I was unfamiliar with either of the above labels, my assessments are free of preconception.

First, a couple of whites – one sparkling, one still:

NV Mirabella Franciacorta Brut Franciacorta is an area in Northern Italy, east of Milan, with a growing renown for its sparkling wines which are made by the Champagne method. This Mirabella is a blend of chardonnay and pinot blanc. It is a refreshing, light sparkling wine with a fine mousse and a delicate nose of citrus and white peach. The palate is dry and crisp, if a little simple. A pleasant apéritif. (\$45.00) ★★★

2013 Villa Patrizia Sciamareti This Toscana bianco is a blend of malvasia, bianca lunga and trebbiano. It has a rather neutral nose, with hints of white flowers and lime. The palate finishes with a refreshing citrus cut and decent persistence. It's a good match for lighter seafood dishes, particularly shellfish. (\$31.00) ★★★☆

And now the Montalcinos:

2010 Querce Bettina Rosso di Montalcino Rosso di Montalcino is a relatively recent classification which allows wines to be released after a minimum of just one year (compared to four for wines labelled Brunello), and highlights a fresher, lighter expression of sangiovese. Fermented in stainless steel before spending 12 months in 500 litre French barrels, this delightful rosso retains its innate fruitiness. The nose is fragrant, with sour cherry and plum to the fore, along with some dark spices. These elements carry on to the palate, where super-fine but persistent tannins hold the flavours together right through to a long, dry, satisfying finish. It is by no means a frivolous red, having the structure to cellar for another four or five years. (\$46.00) ★★★

2012 Le Chiuse Rosso di Montalcino Like the Querce Bettina, the Le Chiuse Rossos are made from the younger Brunello vines, and are given as much attention to detail as the Brunellos themselves. After a cool ferment, this wine spent six months in 2,000 litre Slavonian oak, and it has a more fruit-driven, “sweeter” palate than the Querce Bettina, but it finishes with a kick of sour cherry. A vibrant, satisfying drink. (\$46.00) ★★★☆

2010 Querce Bettina Brunello di Montalcino After fermentation in stainless steel, the various parcels of this wine spent between 30 and 36 months in large Slavonian casks prior to another year in bottle. The nose is classic Brunello, showing an abundance of dark cherry supported by licorice and a hint of balsamic. Talc-like tannins support the long, savoury palate, which finishes with a hint of cherry-pip bitterness at the end. A well-balanced Brunello which is drinking beautifully now but will cellar for another 10-15 years. (\$98.00) ★★★★★☆

2010 Le Chiose Brunello di Montalcino The wine of the night for me. After fermentation by wild yeasts in steel tanks, the wine was aged for three years in large casks, bottled and released after five. A nose of maraschino cherry, licorice, forest floor and briar leads to a beautiful, firm, savoury palate of prodigious length. The tannins are fine and mouth-coating, and the palate is poised, but with considerable drive, and no heaviness. This is sangiovese at its very best. It should age gracefully for 20+ years. (\$98.00) ★★★★★★

2006 Querce Bettina Brunello di Montalcino Riserva DOCG regulations require Brunello Riserva to be aged for at least five years, as opposed to four for standard Brunello. This wine was aged in casks for four years and released after six. Now at eight years of age, this wine displays lighter, sweeter cherry characters than the younger Brunellos above. In this extremely elegant red the nose is redolent of rose petals and violets, and the palate has ripe, sweet cherry flavours underscored by acidity. The tannins are fine and firm. Drink over the next 3-5 years. (\$130.00) ★★★★★

2007 Le Chiose Brunello di Montalcino This wine opened up appreciably over a period of 15 minutes in the glass. Classic dark cherries and spice highlight the nose and the palate is fleshy, rounded and firm - very savoury too, with fine, powdery tannins and a long finish. It's a big wine, but the fruit is alive and the palate balanced. Still in its youth, but built for the long haul. A classic which is, unfortunately, unavailable. ★★★★★

In the past, the wines of Montalcino had a reputation for being big, dark and muscular. However, many of the region's winemakers have recently approached their work with a more sensitive hand, resulting in wines which are approachable in their youth and expressive of the unique characteristics of the Brunello clone of sangiovese – without compromising longevity. This trend is further enhanced by the implementation of the “junior DOC” classification of Rosso di Montalcino, many of which are enticing, flavoursome and immediately food-friendly wines which will only add to the reputation of Montalcino. The two red-wine estates reviewed are excellent examples of this approach.

The wines are available through Italian Wine Importers:
www.italianwineimporters.com.au

Lex Howard

JOHN DUVAL WINES

To long-standing wine fans, John Duval requires no introduction. For the information of those who have entered the world of fine wine comparatively recently, John was chief winemaker at Penfolds from 1986-2002, overseeing the creation of some of the most illustrious vintages of Grange. While his wines today owe much to the skill and experience he gained at Penfolds, stylistically they're very much his own.

2014 John Duval Wines Plexus Barossa Valley Marsanne

Roussanne Viognier The Rhône white varieties usually produce wines of richness and substance, and this one certainly fits that description. Peach and apricot characteristics show on both nose and palate, and the latter has significant grip to balance the rush of flavour. To enjoy this wine to the full, I suggest pairing it with robust chicken or pork dishes. (\$30.00) ★★★☆

2013 John Duval Wines Annexus Barossa Valley Grenache At first sniff I realised this was no ordinary grenache. There's no sweet confectionary character here. The bouquet is all brambly and complex, with eye-opening depth and intensity. Although richness of flavour comes to the fore on the palate, it's the savoury dryness that sets this wine apart. I can easily visualise enjoying slow-cooked lamb shank with this. (\$70.00) ★★★★★☆

2013 John Duval Plexus Barossa Valley Shiraz Grenache

Mourvèdre What I wrote about the first impressions of the Annexus applies here as well. A whiff of floral primary grenache aroma shows through, but there's a lot more – brooding blackberry and what the French call “garrigue”, which relates to herbs of Provence like rosemary and lavender. The palate confirms the nose. Again, it's all about the savoury tannins matching the fruit intensity. A special GSM. (\$40.00) ★★★★★☆

John Duval has also released a brace of shiraz. They will be reviewed very shortly.

<http://www.johnduvalwines.com/>

If you're fortunate enough to visit the Barossa Valley, John's wines may be tasted at Artisans of the Barossa, which also happens to be an ideal place for lunch. The food, the view, the wines and the people are all worth a detour.

<http://www.artisansofbarossa.com/>

Lester Jesberg