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# Brunello 2013 – the leopard's spots

INSIDE INFORMATION BRUNELLO BRUNELLO 2013

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'Come le macchie del gattopardo' – like spots on a leopard's skin – is how one producer described the quality of the 2013 Brunellos to me last January when I was in Montalcino to taste this just-released vintage. It is a pretty apt summary of a vintage that produced both very good as well as mediocre wines. The Consorzio of Brunello di Montalcino, the official producer association, awarded four out of five stars, classifying 2013 as 'good' rather than 'excellent' (you can read Alessandro Torcoli's [eye-witness account](#) of this curious process that was made accessible to journalists for the first time this year), but my personal expectations were higher than that.

The reason for my optimism was based on several embryonic wines I tasted from cask four years ago which were so good they immediately branded 2013 as 'great' in my mind. This was also due to the fact that, after the hot 2011 and 2012 vintages, I was yearning for a much cooler one, especially now that global warming and climate changes are almost unanimously acknowledged as facts. Nowadays, cooler vintages are dubbed 'classic' in Italy, and for me 'classic' has rapidly come to stand for 'potentially great'. Contrarily, 'warm' or 'hot' vintages, once considered a sign of greatness, at least before 2003, I now approach with trepidation.

If high temperatures are still to be considered signs of a great vintage (debatable), then from the onset 2013 was not promising. A very wet and cold early winter was followed at the beginning of 2013 with plenty of rain and rather low temperatures, which kept fungal diseases at bay but also delayed budbreak. While the season remained rather cool with regular rains, the fact that Montalcino is the driest and warmest part of Tuscany was a great advantage. Nerves as well as luck were needed to bring 2013 to a good conclusion, not least because it rained at the beginning of September, which forced quite a few producers in several parts of the zone to harvest, and not always at optimum ripeness.

The Consorzio of Brunello di Montalcino is reluctant to publish detailed harvest reports, which goes hand in hand with its resistance to produce a detailed map of the denomination's vineyards and subzones, because it is terrified that pesky journalists like me will use that information to point out prime subzones while condemning others. I have no intention of doing so, mainly because of the climate change that most years tends to mess up any generalisations, but more importantly, there are overachievers as well as more favourable sites than others in every part of the denomination. This is something that is particularly apparent in 2013. These are the spots on the leopard skin and the wines you should seek out.

There are roughly three styles of wines in 2013, the result of a producer's specific approach, the location of the subzone, or a combination of the two. But the single biggest impact on the wines in 2013 was the picking date. The ones that got it right, either by luck, diligence, perseverance or by excellence of terroir, ended up with nervy, compact, perfumed wines with plenty of fresh acidity as well as structure, both allowing for and demanding prolonged bottle age.

I am making this confession in order to explain why, after having tasted some 130 Brunello 2013s, which was not an unalloyed pleasure, I am still convinced of the quality of this vintage because of the cool-climate style of the best wines. This is not synonymous with instant drinkability, as I will explain later, but elegance is certainly one of its clearest characteristics. That, by the way, is becoming the characteristic trait of many of Montalcino's wines recently. It may be that some Brunello lovers reject these particular wines as atypical, preferring the powerful renditions of Sangiovese of the recent past. But this style, usually easy to reproduce in this warmest part of Tuscany, is more a cliché than anything else, formulated in the 1980s when a handful of large producers shot to success with this potent style, notably in the US.

Nowadays, perhaps under the market pressure created by the huge and ongoing success of burgundy and anything burgundian, a style of wine can be found in Montalcino that runs counter to this cliché. The result is more than welcome: an increased transparency in the wines achieved by a much more hands-off approach in the cellar and much greater attention in the vineyard. What emerges are styles based on provenance providing a much more nuanced picture of the diversity of the Montalcino terroir. The resulting increased diversity in the wines should be embraced by every wine lover. But to understand these 'new' styles, more information is needed on subzones as well as the exact location of vineyards and their soil types. As I have argued many times before, even as early as 2011, we lack this from a Consorzio that is still apparently bedazzled by the turbo-charged Brunello style of yore.

This digression is needed to get a better understanding of the 2013 vintage and its successful execution by the very best producers. It strikes me that the picture in 2013 is too varied for a single rating, four-star or not.

Then there are wines that clearly have been picked before optimal ripeness. These wines are very fresh, often downright tart and with hard tannins. Few of them reach more than 13.5% alcohol and might disappoint Brunello lovers looking for power and concentration. At the other extreme are wines that have been pushed for ripeness, showing rich notes of dried fruit and completely mature. So mature, in fact, that they are ready for drinking now, something you'd expect of the more humble Rosso di Montalcino rather than of the supposedly ageworthy Brunello. In these cases you get the distinct impression that producers desperately tried to cling on to the cliché style of rich, ripe and powerful Brunello, but one that speaks little of origin. Only in the rarest of cases did this work in this cool vintage.

#### **How the producers see 2013**

Although it is said that the warmer southern parts of Montalcino had a clear advantage in this cool vintage, I could not find immediate evidence of this when I visited producers in every corner of the denomination. The one common quality factor was extreme vigilance during the entire year.

Cecilia Leoneschi (pictured above right), who makes the wines at fashion mogul Massimo Ferragamo's Castiglion del Bosco estate, confirms the Consorzio's assessment that 2013 is good rather than great. She told me that the vintage didn't convince her during the growing cycle, but when she tasted the result she was surprised: 'The vintage lacks a little in structure, but it is very fresh.' Leoneschi compared 2013 with 2014, a vintage that according to her is a little dilute and much less complex, and was awarded only three stars, and even that may be rather generous.

Castiglion del Bosco takes its name from the hamlet of Castiglione del Bosco, an isolated area in the north east of the denomination where 40 ha of the estate's total area of 60 ha (148 acres) are situated at elevations between 250 and 450 m (820–1,475 ft) and surrounded by woods. Leoneschi explained that owing to a very rainy spring there was an explosive start to the vegetative cycle. What didn't help either was the lack of a real dry period in 2013. 'The fact that the vegetation kept growing and growing and there wasn't a real hot period, meant that in quite a few cases the tannins didn't ripen. The vines wouldn't invest in grape ripening because the rain triggered a continuous green growth', Leoneschi elaborated. 'There is little you can do about this. You can try to prune, but that is only an emergency measure. Much better to accept the situation and create balance by blending various parcels during vinification'.

Notwithstanding the cool and rainy season, the vintage at Castiglion del Bosco wasn't so protracted according to Leoneschi and the harvest started on 12 September. The 2013 Brunello still got a respectable 25 days maceration and the single-vineyard Campi del Drago a formidable 35 days on the skins. Both wines are elegant and succulent and under Leoneschi's guidance are much more transparent than before, due to much less new oak. After Ferragamo acquired the estate in 2003 he hired a raft of external oenological consultants who tried to mould the wines in an international, accessible style with lots of oak. 'Everyone went through this cellar: Ferrini, Cottarella and d'Afflitto', Leoneschi told me. Now Piemontese Beppe Caviola is Castiglion del Bosco's external consultant, but one senses it is Leoneschi who patiently pursued this recent, much more genuine style.