



# Trend VS. Tradition

Italian wine  
styles under  
siege

By KERIN O'KEEFE



*Left: Alessandro Mori, owner and winemaker of Il Marroneto, claims that the use of French *barriques* changes the fundamental character of Brunello.*

*Far left: Some producers, such as Roberto Guerrini of Fuligni winery, are searching for compromises between the very disparate old and new styles of crafting Brunello.*

A modern-day war is being waged in Italy's most renowned and treasured wine regions. Of course, there are no real battlefields and no loss of life. Instead, this war is being fought in seemingly idyllic vineyards and winery cellars up and down the peninsula as two schools of thought clash. In jeopardy in this conflict are native grape varieties, prized wines and years of winemaking tradition. Some observers even argue that those who admire and enjoy Italy's unique wines could suffer.

On one side are the traditionalists who have invested greatly in Italy's native varieties and in replanting with select clones; they use more time-honored vinification and aging methods that require careful attention but little intervention in the cellar. According to these producers, their wines, which have strong personalities that express their *terroir*, cannot be imitated anywhere else in the world. They fear that as more and more wines are being made in the homogenous, international style, Italy's indigenous wines are at risk of losing their fundamental character.

On the other side are the modernists who often plant international varieties alongside native grapes and rely on assertive cellar techniques that allow them to produce bigger wines. To give these international-style wines, which are usually ready to drink when they exit the cantina, a more universal appeal, dominant vanilla and toasted oak characteristics are introduced via aging in smaller French *barriques*. While the conflict has often been over-simplified as one between traditionalists and modernists, or those who use large Slavonian casks (*botti*) to age their wine as opposed to those who use *barriques*, the situation is more complex. It includes the powerful influence of international wine critics who often award top scores to extremely concentrated and fruit-forward wines and tend to give short shrift to those more elegant

and sometimes austere bottlings that usually require further cellaring to fully express themselves. The increasing reliance by some producers on a select group of consulting enologists who work concurrently for numerous wineries all over Italy — and who seem to employ the same winemaking technique regardless of the region or grape variety — has also come under fire by traditionalists, vocal wine drinkers and a new wave of critics. While this style war has raged for years, its most crucial battle is now unfolding overseas as Italy competes with better-than-ever New World wines for global markets at a time when the euro is at a record high against the dollar.

Recent tasting events held in Italy by Tuscany's three most important wine consortiums — made up of producers in Chianti Classico DOCG, Vino Nobile DOCG and Brunello di Montalcino DOCG — illustrated the clear distinction between the country's two winemaking schools. At each venue, the consortiums presented their newest vintages (those scheduled for release later this year and preview samples of the 2003) to an audience of international wine critics. While sangiovese was the main protagonist at these tastings, there were marked differences in the expression of the variety that, when handled with care, produces some of Italy's finest wines.

In the opinion of this critic, sangiovese seems to be

*Opposite page: The tug of war between the traditionalist and international styles was apparent at the Benvenuto Brunello tasting, held within the walls of the ancient Montalcino Fortezza.*



The pristine casks that line the cellar at Castello di Verrazzano sum up the traditionalist viewpoint at this prestigious estate: Never use *barriques* to age Chianti Classico because they make the wines uniform.

holding its own in the 2002 Chianti Classicos. While the vintage was one of the rainiest on record, the wines were surprisingly well balanced, even if slightly lighter bodied than usual. Those producers who have taken a step back from using *barriques* presented refreshingly unoaked wines compared to recent years. Overall, the Chianti Classicos had floral notes of violets and were predominantly an intense yet transparent ruby red, the natural color of sangiovese. In the very recent past, its luminous color penalized this varietal in the sense that many critics (and consumers) associate an inky, dark hue with high quality. There were also still quite a few wines whose typical nose of violets was masked by a strong vanilla essence and whose flavor profile showed aggressive wood tannins.

According to Paolo Fassina of Castello di Verrazzano, one of the most prestigious estates in the appellation, "We never use *barriques* to age our Chianti Classico as they make the wine uniform. We want our wines to have personality and not taste like wood vanilla or become a color that is unnatural for sangiovese, all of which are effects from *barrique*." Yet some producers insist that Chianti Classico benefits from *barrique*. Giovanni Carlo Sacchet, co-founder and winemaker at Carpineto, another fine estate in Chianti, says, "Experience has taught us that correct and careful use of small oak barrels of varying ages and different origins confers a note of elegance and innovation to the wines."

According to the DOCG regulations, the strict appellation governing all aspects of Chianti Classico production, the minimum amount of sangiovese is 80 percent, while the other 20 percent can be made up of traditional and international varieties.

Although many producers are now using 100 percent sangiovese or between 90 and 95 percent blended with colorino or canaiolo (two other autochthonous red grapes) others prefer to blend their sangiovese with cabernet or merlot. The difference is immediately evident in the glass: Rather than the expected brilliant ruby hue, a nearly opaque black color greets the taster. These non-traditional blends are much lower in the food-friendly, bright acidity that is one of Chianti Classico's hallmarks, and also lack any typical scents of flowers and earth.

Those producers who blend with French varieties are trying to make more concentrated, accessible wines that display softer tannins — characteristics they believe the market demands. Of course, the practice is a volatile subject because others fervently oppose the introduction of foreign varieties. Fioravante Cappelli, managing director of the esteemed Agricoltori del Chianti Geografico cooperative, wonders, "Why should we use varieties in our Chianti that can be grown anywhere and have nothing to do with our viticultural traditions or our land?" While many of the 2002 Chianti Classicos more readily expressed their sangiovese lineage, the majority of the Chianti Classico 2001 Riservas resonated with oak. In fact, very few showcased sangiovese's personality, and, overall, the *riservas* were rather unexciting.

While Vino Nobile di Montepulciano has been justly praised in recent years for making great progress in quality, thanks to replanting carefully selected clones and modernizing inadequate cellars, the wines at this year's tasting event in Montepulciano were characterized by shocking homogeneity. In regard to the character of the 2001

Vino Nobile bottlings, "over-extraction" and "over-concentration" were the most common phrases tossed about by the wine journalists in attendance.

The exaggerated concentration is due in part to the character of the 2001 growing season, which was very hot and dry from mid-September to mid-October, the most critical ripening stage. According to Paolo Solini, director of the Vino Nobile consortium, "The climate of 2001 conferred a very high concentration to the wines so they have higher than average sugar indices, extract and polyphenols. While we always try to make elegant wines, we have to respect what nature gives us each year. In 2001, we were lucky to have naturally rich and structured wines, just the opposite of what you will see for the 2002 vintage."

Most of the producers revealed they had lowered yields by excessive pruning to make more concentrated wines, and many had also carried out malolactic fermentation, which softens acidity, directly in *barrique* in an attempt to tame brooding tannins. Seemingly, heavy-handed extraction to further darken the color left most of the wines unbalanced with excessive fruitiness and low acidity. The resulting wines lack sangiovese's trademark finesse, instead displaying a midnight purple-blue hue with loads of vanilla and a dry, tannic finish. With the exception of a few of the smaller producers, the Nobiles showed little variation from among the different estates. This appellation also allows blending of up to 20 percent with international varieties. Sangiovese's elegance was even more repressed in those wines where merlot or cabernet had been added.

The conflict between those who produce wines that express *tipicità*, or typicity, and those who craft wines with more of a global appeal, continues in Montalcino. In February, two distinct styles of the 1999 Brunello were presented at the Benvenuto (Welcome) Brunello event held in the town's ancient fortress, the site of many historic battles and sieges in the 15th and 16th centuries. One cannot help but think that this was the perfect setting for such a tasting event because Brunello, by law 100 percent sangiovese grosso and one of Italy's most magnificent wines, is fighting to retain its true identity.

A corps of traditionalists presented brilliant ruby-nearly granite-colored wines full of charm and elegance with typical floral notes, and fresh acidity balanced with the legendary wine's natural but not excessive concentration. The differences in Montalcino's various sub-zones were easily distinguishable in these classic Brunellos that beautifully expressed those *terroirs*. Due to replanting with better clones and careful attention to cellar hygiene, particularly in regard to the large oak casks, there were very few rustic or "dirty" wines, a criticism often leveled in the past toward Brunellos matured in *botti*. While gorgeous now, these impeccably clean wines will age and evolve, making them all the more inspiring over the next 20 years. >



Il Poggione winemaker Fabrizio Bindocci and owner Leopoldo Franceschi simply believe great wine is made in the vineyard.

On the other side of the style aisle are the “innovators” (as they like to be called), whose wines largely seem more like Super Tuscan than Brunellos. Those wines presented at the Benvenuto Brunello tasting tended to be flat and lackluster. In general, most were dark and impenetrable, extremely concentrated and chewy with high alcohol and glycerine; they were also dominated by vanilla (from reliance on the controversial *barrique*) that lent a rich sweetness to the wine’s celebrated refinement, balance and freshness. Their lower acidity levels will impede lengthy cellaring (one of the many traits for which Brunello is famous) and make pairing them with most dishes more challenging. Some producers are trying to combine tradition with innovation and this is obvious in the choice of aging barrels used. Roberto Guerrini Fuligni from the acclaimed Fuligni winery, uses traditional *botti* and mid-size French barrels called *tonneaux*. “*Barriques* leave too much wood character which you don’t want in Brunello,” he says. “We use 50 percent *botti* and 50 percent *tonneaux*, which helps fix the anthocyanins that give the wine its color.” Yet, according to Emilia Nardi from Tenute Silvio Nardi, one of the leading innovators, “We have great respect for tradition, but balance this with innovation to improve what nature has provided,” she explains. “We use both *botti* and *barrique*, but feel that *barrique* adds more concentration, both in taste and color, and adds a spicy sweetness.”

Leopoldo Franceschi, owner of Il Poggione, the prominent S. Angelo estate south of the fortress town, does not agree. “Our philosophy is that great red wines are made in the vineyard, not in the cantina,” he asserts. “To make a great Brunello, it is important to use *botti* and not *barriques* as they have a homogenizing effect, making wines that are all alike.”

Franceschi is not alone. It appears that more and more producers are coming to the conclusion that

## tasting BAR

**Biondi Santi Tenuta Greppo, 1999 Brunello di Montalcino** — \$130: A stunning wine of breed and class from the house that invented Brunello. It is a pure expression of sangiovese grosso at its best. Intense aromas of rose and violet with a hint of tobacco. Perfectly balanced with crushed berries, fresh acidity, lively tannins and a long finish. Best 2005 through 2025. *Outstanding*

**Il Marroneto, 1999 Brunello di Montalcino** — \$60: Elegant and refined with captivating violet aromas and a whiff of licorice. Woodland berry qualities with great acidity and solid tannins give this traditional Brunello its long finish. Best 2005 through 2015. *Outstanding*

**Il Poggione, 1999 Brunello di Montalcino** — \$60: Attractive aromas of fresh flowers. Firm tannins and rich cherry flavors with hint of mineral from the traditional school. Best 2005 through 2010. *Superb*

**Sesti, 1999 Brunello di Montalcino** — \$65: Old-World style but concentrated as is typical from this southern estate. Very polished with lovely crushed cherry and cinnamon notes. Nice acidity balanced with pleasant tannins. Drink now through 2009. *Superb*

**Poggio di Sotto, 1999 Brunello di Montalcino** — \$80: Traditional style. Enticing and characteristic aromas of violet and licorice. Sweet, ripe fruit balanced with sharp acidity and strong

tannins. Best 2005 through 2010. *Superb*

**Tenute Silvio Nardi, 1999 Brunello di Montalcino** — \$55: Impenetrably dark from the modern school. Rich nose of chocolate and black truffles. Concentrated flavors of vanilla extract, ripe blackberry and oak with firm tannins. Lovely wine but one that does not fully convey its Brunello pedigree. Drink now. *Very good*

**Eredi Fuligni, 1999 Brunello di Montalcino** — \$76: Very dark with a sweet nose of vanilla cream and toasted oak reflecting its more modern stylistic philosophy. Bracing tannins integrated with ripe fruit and a hint of licorice. Dense but elegant. Dominant vanilla masks the earthy freshness of the varietal. Drink now. *Very Good*

**Agricoltori del Chianti Geografico, 2001 Chianti Classico Contessa di Radda** — \$23: Only the top fruit goes into this gorgeous traditional wine which is aged longer than the regular Classico. Lovely nose of rose petal and concentrated flavors of ripe fruit and spice. Drink now. *Outstanding*

**Castello di Verrazzano, 2002 Chianti Classico** — \$23: Pretty nose of violets and orange peel with cherry and licorice flavors. Hallmark Chianti Classico with bright acidity and brisk tannins. Traditional style. Drink now. *Superb*

**Castello di Verrazzano, 1999 Chianti Classico Riserva** — \$39: One of the best of the Riservas. Typical nose of violets with deep, dark fruit

sangiovese is suffocated in these small, French barrels. Alessandro Mori, owner and winemaker of one of Montalcino's most dynamic wineries, Il Marroneto, underscores Franceschi's sentiment. "Barriques, which are not part of Italy's winemaking traditions, destroy the fundamental character of Brunello," he states. "This and other factors, such as consulting enologists who use the same method and make the same exact wine for many different wineries from Piedmont to Sicily, are a menace to Brunello and Italian wine in general. Barriques and consulting enologists are turning winemaking away from a passionate expression of tradition and culture and into an industry mass producing just another beverage."

Mori explains how Brunello and other indigenous Italian wines have become so divided in terms of style: "In the late 1980s and early 1990s, producers in Montalcino and all over Italy began producing wine to meet international consumer demands," he recounts. "These wines of enormous structure were unnaturally flat and lifeless. Elegance was replaced by an almost explosive impact of various sensations, including exaggerated fruit and high alcohol." Mori blames the birth of the genre on "a certain group of influential English-speaking wine critics who favored this type of wine which originated in California and which these journalists easily understood." Because such bold wines seemed to garner lavish praise, he says many of his peers were eager to earn similar accolades. "Soon, there was an explosion in Italy of consulting enologists who were hired to make this type of wine, even forcing some of Italy's most traditional wines to adhere to this universal style, forgoing their individual character. These wines were, and are, made to please critics and get high scores," Mori concludes.

Yet, it is not only the American and English wine press that has celebrated this style. Gambero Rosso's

*Italian Wines*, which has become the international barometer for interpreting the country's wines, seems to endorse the international approach to Italian winemaking. The guide describes the top wines assigned the "Three Glasses" award with adjectives such as "powerful," "enormous" and "concentrated." Old World-styled wines were often passed over, but in the 2004 edition, more orthodox producers are listed with descriptors such as "typical," "elegant," "traditional" and "austere." To further cement the importance of Italy's native varieties and time-tested wines, Gambero Rosso has just published its first edition of *I Vitigni Autoctoni*, a guide dedicated primarily to wines made by confirmed veterans from indigenous varieties. The most stunning about-face for the guide, however, was the concession made by Gigi Piumatti, co-chief editor of the guide, in an interview with *Il Corriere Vinicolo*, an Italian wine trade magazine. "In the past, we made the mistake of feeding the trend toward powerful and concentrated wines — fruit bombs, which were full of strong sensations, but which often sacrificed elegance," he declared. Gambero Rosso has also been under mounting pressure to recalibrate its editorial palate as a new wave of Italian wine magazines, such as *Porthos* and *Bere*, criticize the country's move toward the international style. By all

accounts, the reason for this attitude adjustment among the nation's wine press stems from a collective boredom expressed by wine drinkers on both sides of the Atlantic.

The war of the wines is by no means a Tuscan phenomenon. It is breaking out all over Italy — and the world — as producers have faced the difficult choice of remaining loyal to their heritage and their land or giving in and making easier-to-understand wines to satisfy perceived market demands.

At Nebbiolo Grapes, the first international nebbiolo conference held in Sondrio in January, Professor Attilio Scienza from the University of Milan, one of the country's most respected experts on viticulture and enology, warned against embracing New World techniques. "Enough of using new barriques, additives and other practices in the cellar. To make indigenous wines, we must use traditional methods which respect our native varieties. Let's put an end to this universal system of making wine," he entreated. Scienza's plea passionately sums up the current sentiment in Italy: Producers and consumers alike are feeling a protective urge to save and celebrate the country's distinctive enological treasures. ☞

Guest contributor Kerin O'Keefe is an American wine writer who has lived in Italy since 1989.

balanced by bright acidity and tamed tannins for this traditional wine. Drink now through 2009.

*Outstanding*

**Concadoro, 2001 Chianti Classico** — \$23:

Beautiful nose of spring flowers and talcum powder with fresh berry and licorice flavors. Traditional style. Drink now. *Superb*

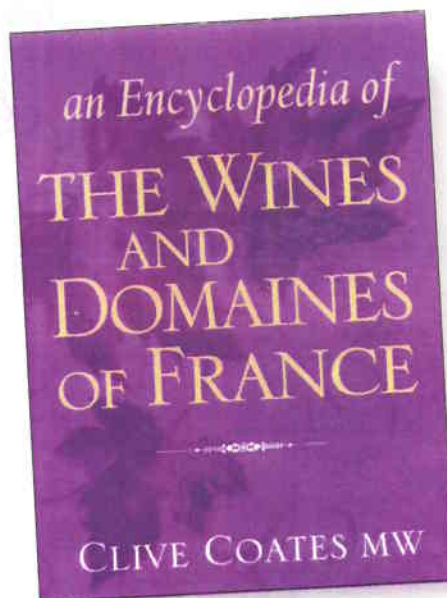
**Carpineto, Chianti Classico 2002** — \$18: Nose of ripe fruit and a hint of vanilla. Crushed berry and mineral flavors well balanced with bracing tannins and fresh acidity. Very polished, one of the best examples from the Modern School. Subtle use of *barrique* has not suppressed the varietal's crisp earthiness in the least. Drink now. *Superb*

**Le Casalte, 2001 Vino Nobile di Montepulciano** — \$25: Soft nose of violets. Extremely concentrated with ripe dark fruit and vanilla. A sweet but muscular Nobile from the Modern School. Drink now.

*Very Good* — KO

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