Brunello’s true believer

Kerin O’Keeffe
Brunello di Montalcino: Understanding and Appreciating One of Italy’s Greatest Wines
University of California Press, $39.95 / £24.95

REVIEWED BY KEITH LEVEY, BERNBERG

I feel somewhat sheepish saying so, but one of my favorite moments in Kerin O’Keeffe’s Brunello di Montalcino is in the bibliographical endnotes. While it surely won’t elicit quite the same snicker plucked from its context, it’s too good to be overlooked.

Chapter 5: Boom Years and the Loss of Tipièda, t. Snuckling, The Greatest Brunellos Ever.

The reference is to erstwhile Wine Spectator critic James Snuckling’s review on the newly released 1997 Brunello back in 2002. He reported being “blown away by the amazing quality of the wines” and called them “the biggest, boldest and rudest reds ever to come out of the majestic vineyards surrounding the medieval Tuscan town of Montalcino.” His top-scoring selections contained the usual verbiage associated with top-scoring selections: “chocolate [...] blackberry [...] black licorice [...] black cherry [...] intense black cherry [...] black cherry, cream licorice [...] full-bodied, with high, velvety tannins [...] hung like balanced [...] blackuster, yet soft.” Snuckling also dismissed rumors that these huge, soft, intense, black-cherry-and-black-licorice blockbusters were not exactly associated with top-scoring selections.

O’Keeffe reimagines the falling-in-love with Brunello while falling in love with her future husband, whose father’s cellar contained what she calls a treasure trove of classic Brunellos back to the 1970s. It was the elegance, grace, and earthy red-fruits flavor of those Brunellos that captivated her, and O’Keeffe explicitly disavows the aesthetic relativism that afflicts much wine criticism these days, writing: “I adamantly do not believe in the dumming-down of Italian wine, so have duly avoided the big, black, and inky Brunellos on steroids, often made by one of the country’s famed flying enologists, which taste as if they could have been made from some grape variety anywhere in the world. The few producers included [in the book’s profile] whose wines fit into this internationally styled category have been added because of their undeniable impact on the denomination, as will be noted.” It’s the sort of statement that tends in conversation to be followed by a sarcastic, “So tell us what you really think,” but such an explicit commitment to an editorial stance in the context of a wine book is certainly surprising.

Oscar Wilde could have been writing about any number of modern wine critics when he admonished, “Absolut...