

Brunello's true believer

Kerin O'Keefe *Brunello di Montalcino: Understanding and Appreciating One of Italy's Greatest Wines*

University of California Press, \$39.95 / £29.95

REVIEWED BY
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I feel somewhat sheepish saying so, but one of my favorite moments in Kerin O'Keefe'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 Tipicità. 1. Suckling, 'The Greatest Brunellos Ever.'"

The reference is to erstwhile *Wine Spectator* critic James Suckling's report on the newly released 1997 Brunellos back in 2002. He reported being "blown away by the amazing quality of the wines" and called them "the biggest, boldest and baddest 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 big, velvety tannins [...] huge yet balanced [...] blockbuster, yet soft." Suckling also dismissed rumors that these huge, soft, intense, black-cherry-and-black-licorice blockbusters were not exactly what they purported to be. "Some debate continues," he wrote, "over whether many Brunellos have become too modern in style—too fruity, too tannic, and too dark in color. Some even say (erroneously) that certain producers add Cabernet Sauvignon,

Merlot, or Syrah to make their Brunellos dark, fruity and well structured."

Oops. As is now well known, and chronicled in Chapter 6 of Kerin O'Keefe's tome, many of those modern-styled Brunello di Montalcinos really weren't entirely Brunello di Montalcino. The story of the scandal—dubbed, Brunellogate—broke on March 21, 2008, when Italian wine journalist Franco Ziliani reported that police had confiscated huge quantities of wine from several prominent Montalcino producers based on suspected violations of the DOCG's rules. Suckling picked up the story and commented that he was "shocked." Most of the producers named in the affair strenuously denied that the Cabernet and Merlot growing in their vineyards were used in their Brunello. Then they began a campaign to amend the DOCG production code to legalize what they claimed they never did.

There are no black cherries or black licorice in Kerin O'Keefe's ideal of Brunello di Montalcino. In her preface, O'Keefe reminisces on 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-fruited flavors of those Brunellos that captivated her, and O'Keefe explicitly disavows the aesthetic relativism that afflicts much wine criticism these days, writing: "I adamantly do not believe in the 'dumbing 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 any grape variety anywhere in the world. The few producers included [in the book's profiles] 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, "Absolute catholicity of taste is not without its dangers. It is only an auctioneer who should admire all schools of art."

So, you will not see profiles of, say, Valdicava or Fanti in O'Keefe's book. Angelo Gaja's Brunello operation and the industrial-scale Castello Banfi are profiled but receive a lashing. Gaja's sin is "overwhelm[ing] ... oak and wood tannins," although O'Keefe concedes the quality of the terroir and is hopeful that the wines will improve as the estate transitions from barriques to tonneaux. Banfi's is more of an original sin, as O'Keefe relates a sordid history beginning with the "unprecedented, and today unthinkable, ecological damage that resulted from [Banfi's] razing the hills" with bulldozers to plant thousands of acres of easily farmable vineyards on flatland. What's more, they were primarily planted not to Brunello but to Moscato, in hopes of capitalizing on the popularity of sweet Asti Spumante, then the rage in America. About the wines, O'Keefe is unforgiving. Banfi's basic Brunello is dismissed as a "mass production" beverage "beefed up with evident wood [...] that will appeal more to wine drinkers than wine lovers," while its more expensive Poggio alle Mura bottling is excoriated for its inky black fruit, "evident alcohol," and "obvious oak," followed by the death blow: "I'm not sure why there is so much fuss over clonal selection if in the end wood is going to dominate both aromas and flavors."

On the other side of the ledger, O'Keefe restores Biondi-Santi to its rightful place as the *ne plus ultra* of the region. As it happens, the Biondi-Santi Brunello was one of the few 1997s



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that James Suckling couldn't manage to like, calling it "tired and acidic" while shaking his head that "there are still those producers who refuse to improve quality." Since then, other American critics have given Biondi-Santi rather more laudatory reviews, and as a result people whose opinion of certain estates follows exclusively from an osmosis-like absorption of what they understand of the critical consensus can often be heard to remark on a recent "resurgence" of quality at Biondi-Santi. But Biondi-Santi has not changed; on the contrary, it has stood resolutely unchanging as the tastes of the world around it changed. O'Keefe, previously the author of a biography of Franco Biondi Santi, includes tasting notes of Biondi-Santi vintages back to 1945 (rightfully the deepest of any producer profiled in the

book) in which that constancy of style, quality, and character is evident.

If O'Keefe's *Brunello di Montalcino* is an argument in favor of classicism in Brunello, it is to an equal extent an argument in favor of a terroir-based understanding of the zone. Perhaps there is some small bit of irony to be found in the fact that this book, which so passionately decries the internationalization of Brunello, is in a very real sense a book about Brunello in the style of so many books about bluer-chip regions like Bordeaux or Burgundy. The idea, apparent in the organization of the producer profiles, is to understand Brunello di Montalcino not merely as Brunello di Montalcino but as a progression of distinct subzones—from the vineyards just outside Montalcino itself, to Sant'Angelo and Castelnuova

dell'Abate. There are maps of each, though not at Burgundy's fractal level of detail. O'Keefe dishes all the secrets about who's on the hillsides and who's on the flats; and for those who would find it fascinating to know who makes wine from Montosoli (probably the second-most esteemed Brunello vineyard after Biondi-Santi's Il Greppo estate) without bothering to mention it on the label, this is the source. And a valuable source, too, because it gives the appellation something that it has deserved for some time: a critical voice who writes about Brunello with the affection and focus ordinarily reserved for the likes of Burgundy, and, more important still, one who appreciates Brunello for what Brunello is and not for what it can be when it's dressed as something else.