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FROM A YEAR OF CLIMATIC EXTREMES, THE 2012 BRUNELLOS DI MONTALCINO EXCEL, WITH RIPE FRUIT, DEPTH AND FRESHNESS BY BRUCE SANDERSON

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MOLCHEN PHOTO

Francesco Ripaccioli of Canalicchio di Sopra produced one of the top 2012 Brunellos in this report.

The 2012 growing season in Montalcino gave vintners the conditions to make ripe, complex and powerful reds with excellent structure and freshness. The combination of an unusually cold and frosty winter and spring, a very hot and dry summer and a perfect September resulted in wines that manage to balance concentration and power with freshness and elegance.

Imagine wines replete with ripe fruit flavors of cherry, strawberry and plum, accented by floral notes and layers of wild sage, thyme, juniper, leather, iron, tobacco and tea. Back these flavors with a rich, dense texture and weave it all together with fresh acidity and plush tannins. That describes the best 2012 Brunellos.

"From a climatic point of view, 2012 can be defined as an extreme year, which, paradoxically, turned all its extreme conditions into its strong point," states Francesco Ripaccioli of Canalicchio di Sopra. "These conditions perfectly integrated into and compensated for each other."

Located just north of the town of Montalcino, Canalicchio di Sopra offers one of the top-scoring Brunellos di Montalcino from 2012 (95 points on the *Wine Spectator* 100-point scale, $79), a 50-50 blend of Sangiovese from the Canalicchio and Montosoli estate vineyards.

A look at the top-scorers shows that great reds were made throughout the Montalcino zone. Altesino's Brunello di Montalcino Our

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40th Harvest (96, $65) and the La Serena Brunello di Montalcino (96, $50) deliver the elegance and vibrant character of the northern part of the region. From the southern sector, the San Felice Brunello di Montalcino Campogiovanni (96, $60) and Collemattoni Brunello di Montalcino (96, $65) offer more tannic structure, though the latter also has an elegant side.

"It was a fantastic summer season, very hot but very dry," notes Elisabetta Gnudi Angelini, who owns both Altesino and Caparzo. "[There was] very little production, but it was very special. The grapes were so healthy, especially in the north part of Montalcino, with incredible phenolic maturation and concentration of color and tannins."

These are just a few of the highlights among the nearly 100 wines I tasted from the 2012 harvest. Also in the classic range are Altesino's Brunello di Montalcino Montosoli (95, $125), Casanova di Neri Brunello di Montalcino (95, $65), Le Ragnaie Brunello di Montalcino Ragnaie V.V. (95, $125) and a duo from San Filippo: its regular Brunello di Montalcino (95, $70) and the single-vineyard Le Lucére (95, $80).

Overall, more than 90 percent of the 2012s I tasted rated outstanding or higher. (A free alphabetical list of scores and prices for all wines in this report is available at www.winespectator.com/063017.) The wines combine the freshness of the 2010s with the density and power of the 2006s, yet with an extra element of ripe Sangiovese fruit. I rate the vintage at 96 points.

"The wines adapted to the little amount of water so that there was less vegetation and the clusters were smaller. 2012 is a vintage where the final result is extraordinary," reports San Filippo owner Roberto Gianelli.

I also tasted about 20 riservas from the 2011 vintage. Like 2012, '11 was a warm vintage, but the heat came in a three-week period in August, when temperatures peaked at 105° F. This caused the vines to shut down, making optimum ripeness difficult to achieve.

Unlike the 2010s, the 2011 riservas have not benefited from the extra year of aging. Most seem to be developing quickly, and offer softer structures than either 2012 or 2010. Some wines are approachable now, while others should reach a good peak in the next two to three years.

La Serena, helmed by Andrea Mantengoli, delivered a classic-rated Brunello from the exceptional 2012 harvest.

Brunello di Montalcino is made from 100 percent Sangiovese, specifically the Sangiovese Grosso subspecies. The area is a mix of vineyards, forests and grain production zones, ranging in elevation from 500 to almost 2,000 feet for the cultivation of Sangiovese for Brunello di Montalcino. Montalcino's complex mix of clay and limestone soils and a Mediterranean climate tempered by the influence of the Tyrrhenian Sea and the peak of Monte Amiata combine to create the region's unique *terroir*.

The southern portion of the zone is more susceptible to winds from the sea and is lower in elevation and warmer. Thus it is often harvested two to three weeks earlier than the northern vineyards. Giacomo Neri, proprietor of Casanova di Neri, has vineyards in both areas. He began picking at his more southerly Tenuta Nuova on Sept. 18 but didn't harvest his Cerretalto vineyard in the northeastern part of the appellation until Oct. 9.

The extreme weather began in the winter. January 2012 ushered in warm temperatures, but the mercury plunged at the beginning of February, accompanied by plenty of snow. Colder-than-average weather extended into March, where a risk of frost at the end of the month was narrowly avoided.

Spring advanced in a regular fashion. Then the heat turned up over the summer months, exacerbated by the lack of rain from May until the end of August. A few days of rain at the beginning of

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The vineyards around Montalcino's Castelnuovo dell'Abate deliver consistent quality.

September, particularly on the 5th and 6th in the south, recharged the vines. The arrival of more seasonal temperatures in September and a good diurnal range advanced ripening of the grapes slowly.

"The grapes were under-weight at the end of August, but on September 5th and 6th rainfall gave the boost to the vintage," says Giacomo Bartolommei, the winemaker for his family estate, Caprili (2012: 94, $55). "In fact, the rain was not too much, and it wasn't in [the entire] Montalcino area but just in the south zone. This rain was really a masterpiece for the full ripening of the grapes that were under-weight but rich in color and had good acidity as well."

To protect the grapes from the heat, Bartolommei did not remove any leaves during August in Caprili's vineyards. In the end, however, the yield was 25 percent lower than average. Gnudi Angelini said her crop was 20 percent lower in the northern part of the appellation and as much as 30 percent lower in the south. Overall, the Consorzio del Vino Brunello di Montalcino reported a 14 percent decrease in the size of the crop compared with the long-term average.

Some producers, such as Gnudi Angelini, started picking at the end of August in the south, but most waited until mid-September and finished in the first or second week of October.

Ultimately, it was the lack of development of the vines before the September rains and the cooler weather that protected the grapes from the heat, allowing them to ripen and retain freshness. What would have been an early harvest turned out to be within the average range of picking dates for many.

"I think that this protective mechanism that the plant adopted toward the fruit was the key of this vintage. [It is a] warm vintage in spirit, and fresh in the mouth, sapid and enveloping at the same time," says Ripaccioli.

"Not all great vintages follow the same path to grandeur," he continues. "There are years in which the path is perfect and linear, such as in 2010. And then there are vintages like 2012, where the seasonal and agronomic path is more tortuous, sometimes even extreme, and where the winemaker is called upon to interpret, understand and dare."

Those who dared made brilliant Brunellos di Montalcino that will delight fans of the region's wines for years to come.

Senior editor Bruce Sanderson is Wine Spectator*'s lead taster on the wines of Tuscany.*

Roberto Gianelli's San Filippo released two top wines from 2012, including the single-vineyard Le Lucére.

Rating Brunello di Montalcino

2012	96	A year of extreme weather, producing rich, concentrated wines with ripe fruit and freshness; the best have the structure to age	*Hold*
2011	91	A warm year with a heat spike in August, producing forward wines with ample fruit. The best are lively and balanced; ripe and dense in the south	*Drink or hold*
2010	98	Perfect late-summer weather resulted in ideal ripening for Sangiovese; wines are fresh, elegant, balanced and structured, with ample ripe fruit flavors. The best should age beautifully	*Hold*
2009	89	Warm summer gave elegant, fruity and balanced wines in the north; denser and more muscular in the south. Bright fruit, for early enjoyment	*Drink or hold*
2008	91	A cool growing season with rain at harvest; those who waited produced aromatic, balanced and elegant wines	*Drink or hold*
2007	93	Hotter and riper than 2006; fruit-forward, rich and elegant, offering immediate charm and softer textures	*Drink or hold*
2006	95	Complex and powerful wines that impress with ripe yet fresh fruit, firm, dense structures and fine balance	*Hold*

Notable older vintages: 2004, 2001, 1999, 1997

Vintage ratings: 97-100, classic; 90-96, outstanding; 85-89, very good; 80-84, good; 75-79, mediocre; 50-74, not recommended. **Drinkability:** "NYR" means the vintage has not yet been released; "drink" means most of the wines of the vintage are ready to drink; "hold" means most of the ageworthy wines have yet to fully mature; "past peak" means most of the wines are declining rather than improving.

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TASTING REPORT | BRUNELLO DI MONTALCINO

Bruce Sanderson's Recommended Brunellos di Montalcino

Nearly 100 wines were reviewed for this report. A free alphabetical list is available at www.winespectator.com/063017. WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online Wine Ratings search.

TOP 2012s

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
ALTESINO Brunello di Montalcino Our 40th Harvest 2012 Cherry, leather and iron notes mark this suave, elegant red. A bit reticent now, but the fruit is fresh and long on the finish.	96	$65
COLLEMATTONI Brunello di Montalcino 2012 This is very Burgundian in style, with effusive cherry, strawberry and floral aromas and flavors riding a supple texture.	96	$65
SAN FELICE Brunello di Montalcino Campogiovanni 2012 In a traditional style, showing beefy tannins and savory earth notes, with a core of leather and cherry. Picks up energy on the long finish.	96	$60
LA SERENA Brunello di Montalcino 2012 Enticing from the first aromas of fresh cherry, violet and spice, this supple red is balanced and expressive. Elegant frame, lively acidity.	96	$50
ALTESINO Brunello di Montalcino Montosoli 2012 Finds good equilibrium between the ripe berry, cherry, tobacco, iron and tea notes. Firm and chewy, with hints of leather and underbrush.	95	$125
CANALICCHIO DI SOPRA Brunello di Montalcino 2012 Balsamic aromas and flavors of juniper, rosemary, thyme and olive stand alongside cherry, sanguine and tobacco notes.	95	$79
CASANOVA DI NERI Brunello di Montalcino 2012 Effusive raspberry, cherry, floral, mineral and tobacco aromas and flavors are at the center of this linear, vibrant red. Well-structured.	95	$65
LE RAGNAIE Brunello di Montalcino Ragnaie V.V. 2012 This red combines cherry, strawberry, tobacco, leather, iron and wild thyme and sage flavors, backed by compact tannins.	95	$125
SAN FILIPPO Brunello di Montalcino 2012 An elegant, silky style, with wild sage, thyme, leather, cherry and iron aromas and flavors. Reveals a floral hint as this persists on the finish.	95	$70
SAN FILIPPO Brunello di Montalcino Le Lucére 2012 A dense, backward red, with plenty of cherry, plum, spice and eucalyptus flavors, a broad swath of tannins and juicy acidity.	95	$80
ANTINORI Brunello di Montalcino Pian delle Vigne 2012 The sweet cherry and raspberry flavors set the pace for this supple, charming Brunello, with leather, tobacco, earth and iron accents.	94	$75
FATTORIA DEI BARBI Brunello di Montalcino 2012 You can almost smell the countryside in this expressive red. Wild herb, underbrush, cherry and smoke notes weave throughout.	94	$52
FATTORIA DEI BARBI Brunello di Montalcino Vigna del Fiore 2012 Exhibiting a fine blend of fruity and savory characteristics, this red evokes wild strawberry, cherry, juniper, leather and iron notes.	94	$125
BARICCI Brunello di Montalcino 2012 Austere, with dusty tannins corralling the cherry, strawberry, earth and tobacco flavors. The bright acidity keeps this focused.	94	$50
CAPRILI Brunello di Montalcino 2012 Appealing aromas and flavors of cherry, almond, leather, iron and earth are the hallmarks of this muscular red. Fresh and persistent.	94	$55
CASANOVA DI NERI Brunello di Montalcino Tenuta Nuova 2012 Precise balance sets the stage for cherry, black currant, violet and tobacco flavors in this smooth, intense red. Well-integrated tannins.	94	$110
LE CHIUSE Brunello di Montalcino 2012 Charming and open, this red exudes cherry, strawberry and rose aromas and flavors. Remains elegant overall despite the firm, ripe tannins.	94	$65

TOP 2012s (continued)

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
LA COLOMBINA Brunello di Montalcino 2012 Combines power and elegance, with bright acidity and dense tannins. Cherry and plum fruit are accented by leather, tobacco and mineral.	94	$42
LA FORNACE Brunello di Montalcino Origini 2012 Ripe cherry, wild underbrush, tobacco and graphite aromas echo on the palate. Firmly structured, with an element of sweetness.	94	$97
TENUTA LA FUGA Brunello di Montalcino 2012 An enticing combination of ripe cherry, almond, iron, beef and leather aromas and flavors, backed by a vibrant structure.	94	$70
LISINI Brunello di Montalcino 2012 This is round, exuding black cherry and blackberry flavors allied to a pliable profile. The acidity and tannins emerge on the finish.	94	$65
IL MARRONETO Brunello di Montalcino 2012 This offers a mix of strawberry and cherry fruit that is very pure, married to an elegant frame. Beautifully balanced, with refined tannins.	94	$70
IL MARRONETO Brunello di Montalcino Madonna delle Grazie 2012 Very pure and elegant, offering pretty cherry, blackberry, violet and tobacco flavors. Firmly structured and balanced.	94	$200
MASTROJANNI Brunello di Montalcino Vigna Loreto 2012 Rich, full of cherry and raspberry fruit and augmented by tobacco, spice and mineral flavors. Harmonious and long.	94	$90
MASTROJANNI Brunello di Montalcino Vigna Schiena d'Asino 2012 This is packed with sweet cherry, currant, spice and licorice notes, well-matched to the fine-grained tannins. Balanced and taut.	94	$170
POGGIO DI SOTTO Brunello di Montalcino 2012 A lean high-wire act, boasting strawberry, currant and mineral flavors. Vivid acidity lends drive, while the refined tannins add support.	94	$290
LE RAGNAIE Brunello di Montalcino 2012 Silky and refined, featuring pure strawberry, cherry and floral flavors, with elements of leather, iron and leafy underbrush. Firm structure.	94	$75

TOP RISERVAS

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
COL D'ORCIA Brunello di Montalcino Poggio al Vento Riserva 2010 This is broad-shouldered and dense, with plum, cherry, leather, iron and tobacco flavors gaining intensity as this evolves on the palate.	94	$150
BIONDI-SANTI Brunello di Montalcino Tenuta Greppo Riserva 2011 A supple, harmonious red, showing some softening, with cherry, leather and wild herb flavors well-integrated with the lacy structure.	93	$NA
LA GERLA Brunello di Montalcino Riserva gli Angeli 2011 Black cherry, plum, spice and tobacco flavors are the hallmarks of this polished, sophisticated Brunello. Beautifully balanced.	93	$90
POGGIO DI SOTTO Brunello di Montalcino Riserva 2011 Medium-weight and juicy, this red offers floral, wild cherry, almond, iron and tobacco flavors. Firm and bright, lingering on the spicy finish.	93	$450
SAN FELICE Brunello di Montalcino Campogiovanni Il Quercione Riserva 2011 This is mellowing into a mix of sweet plum, cherry, licorice and roasted almond flavors, with accents of tobacco, leather and caramel.	93	$115

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