

Wine Spectator

Tough Calls

Brunello vintners had hard choices to make in the challenging 2014 vintage



La Gerla estate manager Alberto Passeri (right) leads a tasting at the guest house on its Montalcino property.

By

- [Bruce Sanderson](#)

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Producers of Brunello di Montalcino faced some difficult decisions in the wake of the 2014 vintage. After struggling with a cool, wet growing season and a delayed harvest, they were forced to reckon with reduced yields and less-than-stellar fruit. The biggest issue was whether to bottle a Brunello at all, but there were other tricky questions as well.

One key consideration was how much wine producers should declassify into their Rosso production—or even sell off in bulk. On top of that, estates that did choose to bottle a 2014, already aging in oak for at least two years, confronted the problem of how to position the wine in the U.S. market, where about one-third of Brunello production is designated each year.

Biondi-Santi, one of the region's leading estates and an architect of the traditional style, decided not to produce a 2014 Brunello di Montalcino—neither an annata nor a riserva. For the third time in its storied history (2002 and 1992 were the previous vintages), Biondi-Santi bottled only a "super Rosso" under the label Fascia Rossa. Conti Costanti and Le Ragnaie also didn't bottle any 2014 Brunello, instead declassifying their productions after the requisite aging period in wood. Each estate made Rosso di Montalcino from this declassified wine.

Some producers, such as Silvio Nardi, made a 2014 Brunello but decided not to sell any in the U.S. Proprietor Emilia Nardi increased the allocation of the 2012 and 2013 vintages to compensate. Other estates, including La Gerla, stretched the allocation of 2013 to shorten the gap before the promising 2015s are available to U.S. consumers.

La Gerla's estate manager, Alberto Passeri, notes that yields in 2014 were already down 30 percent from an average year. Because of these lower yields, as well as the strict selection made by the estate, La Gerla's Brunello was ultimately down 50 percent from the usual production. The grapes for the 2014 Brunello (89 points, \$50) came entirely from La Gerla's vineyards in Castelnuovo dell'Abate, south of Montalcino, without incorporating anything from the vineyards surrounding its cellar in Canalicchio, just north of town. Passeri also filled out 15 percent of the blend (the highest legal amount) with wine from the 2013, 2015 and 2016 harvests in order to add concentration.

The other estates that chose to make a Brunello di Montalcino in 2014 also reduced yields drastically—on average by about 50 percent, and in some cases even more. Even so, most did not elect to make a riserva, instead using the best fruit for the annata and declassifying the rest into Rosso bottlings.

At Canalicchio di Sopra, for example, co-owner and winemaker Francesco Ripaccioli attributes the success of the estate's 2014 Brunello (90, \$89) to rigorous selection at harvest. The first picking of Brunello and Rosso grapes was eliminated altogether, while the second picking focused on younger vines and selected the largest clusters for the Rosso di Montalcino. The smallest clusters from older vines (10 years old and up) were left on the vine to ripen fully. It was this fruit that was eventually bottled as Brunello, at less than half the production of a typical year.

"In 2014, my usual Brunello selection has been bottled like Rosso di Montalcino and my usual Brunello riserva selection has been bottled like Brunello vintage, in a small quantity of only 15,000 bottles [1,250 cases]," Ripaccioli explains. "This was the only way to save Brunello quality and at the same time to do a good Rosso di Montalcino."

Vintners altered their approach in the cellar as well. At Il Poggione, winemaker Alessandro Bindocci shortened the aging period from 36 months in wood to 24 months, moving the wines to concrete vats for a year, before bottling and aging an additional two years. "We're happy with the outcome," he tells me. "2014 is a good opportunity to showcase the fruit."

The Il Poggione Brunello di Montalcino 2014 (92, \$85) is one of the wines of the vintage, delivering flavors of cherry, plum, loam, tobacco and cumin wrapped in a smooth texture. The other top 2014 Brunellos include the elegant, charming Caparzo (92, \$45); the savory, chewy Collosorbo (92, \$55); and the rich, muscular Talenti (92, \$50).

As good as these wines are, they are surpassed in this report by a number of riservas from the excellent 2013 vintage. Leading the pack is Casanova di Neri's pure and racy Brunello di Montalcino Cerretalto 2013 (98, \$330), which delivers floral, black cherry, blackberry, graphite, tobacco and spice flavors. Close behind is San Filippo's Brunello di Montalcino Le Lucére Riserva 2013 (97, \$175), with a lush, velvety texture for its cherry, strawberry and violet notes, and Altesino's elegant Brunello di Montalcino Riserva 2013 (97, \$130), whose characteristic aromas of juniper, rosemary, thyme and Szechuan peppercorn segue into strawberry, cherry and rose hip flavors.

These are some of the highlights from my reviews of the new releases from Montalcino. Since my previous report ("[Old-School Brunello](#)," June 30, 2018), I have blind-tasted 125 wines in total, 56 of them from the 2014 vintage. The rest are mostly 2013 riservas, along with a dozen 2012s and a handful of older vintages. **Exactly half of the Brunellos from '14 are outstanding, the majority of those at 90 points.** In terms of the overall quality of the vintage, I rate 2014 at 89 points.

The main problem in 2014 was the cool, wet growing season, particularly the lack of sunshine. Though the year started off with warmer-than-average temperatures in January, February and March, the first two months of the year saw 4.5 inches of rainfall.

A cool April delayed budbreak by about 10 days, followed by another 4.25 inches of rain. Below-average temperatures continued into May, the first half of which alone received the average monthly precipitation.

The beginning of June was dry, and temperatures rose, promoting good flowering. The rain returned on June 15, and the summer was cool and cloudy, despite little rain in August. But the weather finally improved during the last week of August, and though Sangiovese is a later-ripening variety, the harvest was still delayed by 10 days to two weeks around the Brunello zone.

Most of the grapes were picked by the middle of October, when another storm dumped a little more than 3 inches of rain. The challenge was picking when the tannins were ripe.

So why buy the 2014s? Despite the challenges of the vintage, there are a number of outstanding wines to choose from. These are Brunellos that can be enjoyed now and over the next decade, delivering charming and juicy Sangiovese characteristics of cherry, strawberry, plum, floral, iron and tobacco, often shaded by savory elements of juniper, wild thyme and macchia.

The immediate gratification of the wines should also prevent Brunello fans from dipping into their stash of 2013s, 2012s and 2010s-vintages that will benefit from more aging and provide longer-term enjoyment. The only downside to seeking out the '14s is limited availability, as such a small volume of wine was made. Despite that, prices have mostly remained stable, and in some cases come down a bit.

After the struggles of 2014, vintners in Montalcino were happy to move on to the 2015 and 2016 vintages, back-to-back harvests that offer the promise of future pleasures. Until then, enjoy the best that 2014 has to offer. It's out there if you know where to look.

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

BRUCE SANDERSON'S RECOMMENDED BRUNELLOS DI MONTALCINO

TOP 2014s

#6 CASANOVA DI NERI

Brunello di Montalcino 2014

Score: 91 | \$60

WS Review: Alluring aromas and flavors of pure cherry, raspberry and wild rose mark this round red. The firm structure is well-integrated and the finish echoes the fruit, while adding a mineral element. Offers a tactile, chalky finish. Drink now through 2032. — Bruce Sanderson

TOP 2013 & 2012 RISERVAS

#1 CASANOVA DI NERI

Brunello di Montalcino Cerretalto 2013

Score: 98 | \$330

WS Review: This intense version is concentrated, with black cherry, blackberry, graphite, tobacco and spice flavors, yet remains light-footed due to the racy profile. Structured, yet beautifully balanced and youthful. Shows purity and length on the aftertaste, which introduces a floral component. Best from 2022 through 2045.

- Bruce Sanderson