

Brunello 2004: the results

Inconsistency spoiled what was hyped as a great tasting, with judges finding many dilute, simple wines from this 'five-star' vintage. By **GUY WOODWARD**

A lauded vintage but only two Awards – mightn't we have expected more?

You might well have. The judges certainly did. 'When I got the invitation to this tasting, I thought: "Great, it's going to be wonderful",' said Walter Speller. 'But I must admit I'm a bit underwhelmed – especially given that the Consorzio claimed this a five-star vintage.' Speller wasn't the only one disappointed. 'It didn't match my expectations,' said Steven Spurrier, while Filippo Bartolotta felt that on this showing 'it's hard to say that 2004 is a stunning vintage'.

So what went wrong?

Too much inconsistency. 'Tasting 157 wines was like tasting through the Médoc,' said Spurrier. 'There were crus bourgeois, crus classés – everything. And some wines were definitely superior. Others were just OK – benefiting from the appellation rather than actually helping it.' Rosemary George MW agreed, and felt there had been too many new entrants to the region. 'I was in Montalcino recently and met people for whom 2004 was their first vintage. People owning a hectare or two of land thinking, "I could make a Brunello too", without realising what making a good Brunello entails,' Bartolotta said. 'These days we have 250 producers, so it's hard to assess quality. When you consider that producers on the southern slopes of Montalcino harvest 15 to 20 days before those on the northern slopes, and you've got lots of new producers who stick out, there are lots of differences in style and quality.' Spurrier made an interesting comparison: 'Brunello is like Napa: people with money come in, buy vineyards, make wine and expect it to sell.'

How did this manifest itself in the wines?

Isabelle Legeron described the wines' consistency as 'really patchy: a mix of over ripeness and green tannins and dilution'. Bartolotta felt there was more of the latter. 'The vintage was *too* good; it was over-productive,' he said, saying winemakers should have limited production, or downgraded wines to Rosso di Montalcino, to keep complexity in the Brunello. Instead there were too

THE SCORES:

157 WINES TASTED	
★★★★★ Decanter Award	2
Outstanding (18.5–20pts)	
★★★★ Highly recommended	21
Very good to excellent (16.5–18.49pts)	
★★★ Recommended	108
Good (14.5–16.49pts)	
★★	25
Fair (12.5–14.49pts)	
★	0
Poor (10.5–12.49pts)	
Faulty	1

many 'dilute, light, simple wines'. Speller agreed that many were 'lacking concentration and acidity' while the tannins 'seem to be bolstered and fairly dominant on the finish'.

What does this mean for longevity?

Limited. Nick Adams MW was 'surprised by the very forward style' which meant 'drinkability now rather than in 10 years'. 'They are not for long-term ageing,' agreed Speller. 'Big Brunellos are good after 10 years,' said Bartolotta. 'Most of the wines I'd be happy to drink now.'

So you would be happy to drink them?

Let's not get too downbeat, there are still some very good wines here. Bartolotta felt their 'ready-to-drink' character meant 'lots of freshness and tastiness'. Adams described the tannins as 'assertive' and didn't find so many that were unripe,

instead lauding a 'good kernel of acidity', while Spurrier enjoyed the best wines' vitality. Legeron admitted that they were 'lacking concentration', and offered only 'a short drinking window' but felt they had 'juicy elegance' and 'total drinkability – if you forget about the price'.

Ah, yes, the price. Do they represent value?

In a word, no. 'On a price ratio, a lot of these wines did not deliver what you would expect in terms of concentration,' said Legeron. Margaret Rand, who felt the standard was 'pretty good but not good enough for the price', talked of Brunello 'resting on its laurels' while Bartolotta said 'for the price, it wasn't good enough'. Adams 'could drink most of them with great delight tonight – if I wasn't paying for them. The prices are just silly.' The problem was that 'Brunello has to look at itself in the context of Sangiovese, not in the context of some intrinsically superior DOCG. It is one Sangiovese among many, and Sangiovese is much better than it used to be.'

So does Brunello merit its Tuscan crown?

Spurrier felt the wines 'have been very much rivalled by Chianti Classico, which is less expensive, slightly better and more consistent'. Adams agreed that 'when you compare top Brunellos with top Chianti Classico Riserva, you have to question whether the elevation in price is worth it'. Speller felt winemakers in Chianti 'must be laughing' since their wines are 'much more vibrant [in] a linear, fresher style that everyone wants'.

Where does that leave Brunello?

Speller felt the 2004 vintage represented a 'turning point' and Bartolotta detected 'a new, less-intrusive trend in winemaking style' leading to lighter wines, which he felt was 'the biggest element in the tasting'. A cynical Speller suggested this was because 'international varieties will no longer be present', but Adams preferred to be more pragmatic, stressing the variety of topography in the region which would lead to inconsistency. 'There is a danger of over expectation with Brunello,' he said.

BEST VALUE

FERRERO (16.5) ★★★★★

£25.50  

'Tight, quite closed. Good power here and a lovely perfumed finish. This will be excellent but it needs a bit more time. From 2012.' (MR) **Stockist: Try**



4 STAR WINES

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED (cont'd...) ★★★★★



CAPARZO, LA CASA (16.66/20)
£47.50 🍷

'Delicious savoury wine of very good length. Very perfumed, elegant and attractive with a lot of finesse. From 2010.' (MR) **Ast**



CROCE DI MEZZO (16.66)
N/A UK 🍷

'Shy but concentrated cherry nose with a touch of nutmeg. Fresh, dense, sweet cherry palate – not ridiculously long or complex, but appealing. From 2009.' (WS)
www.crocedimezzo.com



GAJA, PIEVE SANTA RESTITUTA, RENNINA (16.66)
£68.89 🍷

'Good, chunky red fruits, warm and ripe and very Tuscan. Ripe, even quite rich and smooth, oak smoothes it out, good potential complexity. From 2010.' (SS) **Arm**



LA COLOMBINA (16.66)
N/A UK 🍷

'Toffee and baked cherry notes with cinnamon and brooding dark cherries. The tannic structure is elegant and silky. Lovely minerality, intense, long finish. From 2010.' (IL) www.lacolombinavini.it



LA FIORITA (16.66)
£37 🍷

'Tight, long, elegant. A big, elegant finish. Will be even better in a year or two. Well constructed and well balanced. Very long indeed. From 2010.' (MR) **CeD, Wtd**



POGGIO NARDONE (16.66)
N/A UK 🍷

'Orange peel and Maraschino cherry nose with notes of leather. Succulent, multi-layered fruit and persistent, coating tannins. Great length. From 2009.' (WS)
+39 0577 84 94 85



TENUTE SILVIO NARDI (16.66)
£34.95 🍷

'Great execution with a very fresh, fruit-driven character and an impressive tannic structure. The wine will need some time to become more expressive. From 2010.' (FB) **C&C**



COL D'ORCIA (16.5)
£32 🍷

'Perfumed, savoury, tea leaf notes. Lovely balance, depth and length, all in balance. Beautifully judged – superb. From 2012.' (MR) **Evy, Ica, Lui, SpD, V&C, Val, Wmb**



FERRERO (16.5)
£25.50 🍷 £

'Tight, quite closed. Good power here and a lovely perfumed finish. This will be excellent but it needs a bit more time. From 2012.' (MR) **Try**



IL FORTETO (16.5)
N/A UK 🍷

'Attractive, spicy nose. Modern style. Very well crafted, fine, youthful, intense and concentrated red fruits. Integrated oak, tannins and acidity. A fine Brunello that is still youthful with time ahead of it. From 2010.' (AR) www.ilforteto.it



RENDOLA (16.5)
N/A UK 🍷

'Firm, cedary nose – tight-knit. Some rounded cedary notes. Nicely balanced palate with some supple tannins. Needs lots of time to develop. From 2015.' (RG)
www.rendola.com



TENUTA SAN GIORGIO UGOLFORTE (16.5)
N/A UK 🍷

'Very aromatic: lavender, herbs, new oak. Vibrantly fruity, grainy tannins, savoury tea and briary fruit compote. Lovely minerality and bold, long finish. From 2012.' (NA) www.tenutasangiorgio.it

RECOMMENDED ★★★★★

Wine name	Price	Tasting note	Drinkability	Stockist	Mean score
Altesino, Montosoli	£42.09	'Dry herbs and cherry nose, with an impressive tannic structure and balanced alcohol and acidity. Good ageing potential. From 2010.' (FB)	🍷	Bdl	16.33/20
Canalicchio di Sopra	£37.25	'Fresh cherries and crushed red berries. Tight tannic structure with a good spiciness and length. From 2010.' (FB)	🍷	F&R	16.33