

Notes From The Cellar (NFTC); Winepairings e-letter February 26,2009

Reality Check: Barolo 2005 & Brunello 2004 -Are they worth it?

It's been a busy couple of weeks. The industry tastings in which we get to sample some of the goodies coming in, as well as direct import previews (Known as DI in the business) have started earlier than usual. Everyone it seems wants to capture the limited budgets (before they evaporate). There is more emphasis on DI orders these days as Distributors and Importers are trimming inventory and carrying less "Core" product in response to economic conditions. I am seeing a lot of closeout lists, yet the good stuff gets picked off early and fast. I will keep you posted but am sticking to my guns of being very selective. I continue to see a lot of product being re-priced at various retail outlets. If you see a well known label or producer from an off vintage at a super low price, I would urge you to try a bottle before committing to a large purchase. "Off" vintages can make for pleasant near term drinking wines but most times are not the wines you want to lay down in the cellar for long term aging. This is of course a big generalization and exceptions do exist. But it is harder even for the experts to find the jewels in the not so great years.

A good rule of thumb: If you are purchasing wine for aging, pay a few more \$ for the better vintages -it will pay off handsomely over time. Which brings me to today's topic. There has been a lot of hype in the wine media over the current and upcoming releases from Italy. Over the past few weeks I was fortunate to attend 3 different tasting featuring some of the big boys of Italian wines.

First the **2005 Barolos (and Barbarescos)** : -coming on the heels of 2004, one of the most hyped vintages in Piedmont, was going to make this interesting. After all the 2004's were the best overall since the 2001 vintage, and touted as one of the finest vintages to date. The quality as well as the demand were the perfect opportunity to raise prices, this happened from producers through all levels of distribution.

With a good but not amazing vintage in 2005, a slow economy and a US \$ which started to gain some strength, I was anticipating better prices. Not so I guess, looks like Importers and distributors who tried to offset terrible exchange rates over the past few years decided to try for better margins. So prices, while not going up remained the same. Based on what I have been tasting these prices are not justified. I don't foresee that most of the 2005's will be offered at great discounts simply because those bringing the wine into the country, are being very cautious and only ordering based on pre-arrival commitments. If you like the Nebbiolo based wines of Piedmont the smart money is buying 2000, 2001 and some of the better 2003's that are still in the market place often priced below the newer releases. (Tip: save up for some future purchases as well; according to conversations I had with wine makers, 2007 currently in Barrels may prove to be another monumental vintage) Stay tuned -I will be on the lookout for good deals on previous vintages but at current prices on the 2005, I am staying on the side lines.

Note: while there prices of the Nebbiolo based wines have left me unimpressed there are some tremendous values in some of the Barberas as well as Dolcettos from 2005 as well as 2006. I will feature some of the better ones in future issues.

2004 Brunellos: Here things get even more interesting. Italy and in particularly Tuscany have been the beneficiaries of multiple glowing reviews of the 2004 vintage, and for good reason. The overall quality has indeed been great and many producers especially in the mid price levels (\$30-80) have made wines of tremendous quality and value. The Brunellos from Montalcino are released on average a year or more later than most Tuscan wines. As some of the most coveted wines of the region their prices benefit from the frenzy and hype bestowed on the other good Tuscan wines which get into the market place earlier. Over the last few weeks I have started to see an unusually large amount of offers from retailers across the US singing the praises of the upcoming 2004 Brunello vintage (a further

indication of what a tough market it is out there). Now that I got to taste many of the wines I must admit that I am a bit underwhelmed. Yes there have been some great ones like the Pertimally I highly recommended several weeks ago.. Today's wines are also not to be missed by Brunello aficionados, but you will notice that there are only 2 of them. I am sure that I will come across some other good finds from the 2004 vintage; especially from some of the lesser known small estates as those can offer tremendous values.

Why would so few wines show well from such a tremendous vintage? I believe that Montalcino is a victim of it's own success. Since the big break -though classic vintage of 1997 the area has seen an incredible boom. More than a 1/3 of production has been sold in the lucrative US market. In the rush to get in on a good thing, many new vineyards have been planted. Production in the region has almost quadrupled! All this is in a period of less than 12 years. Many newly planted vineyards are not yet producing top notch fruit and the pressure to increase production has undoubtedly resulted in compromises. As such I have been very selective & I recommend that you do the same.

Today's Wine Deal \$\$\$

These are pre-arrivals and as such prices are very low. Wines are expected late this Spring and early summer. Please give me your interest and I will contact you for payment only once they have arrived. Since these come in through a major national distributor and our orders go in before the major scores come out, your chances of obtaining these are excellent.

LISINI Brunello di Montalcino 2004 \$65-

A perennial favorite, Lisini produces a top notch Brunello in most vintages, and excels in the good ones. In previous great vintages such as 1997 and 2001 early frosts resulted in mother nature limiting yields for most producers. 2004 saw large amounts of fruit and it was tempting for many to harvest larger crops resulting in less concentration. Not so at Lisini, where selection of fruit is draconian, (on average 1.8 kilos per vine). There is excellent concentration on the rich and plush red fruit. The flavors and feel are polished and very international in style, yet what makes this wine a standout is the traditional aromatics that are classic Brunello. Featuring scents of berry fruit with elements of pine forest floor and hints of leather and porcinni. This is a gorgeous wine which while very impressive young, holds great promise for future development.

FULIGNI Brunello di Montalcino 2004 \$69-

Another of my favorites over the years did not disappoint. The Fuligni for now stands as my favorite Brunello from this vintage. Cherries and Violets with a hint of vanilla currently dominate the delicate aromatics. It is a little more traditional in style than the Lisini but I would not classify it as a Super traditional wine by any means. The wine walks a nice middle of the road style offering great balance, tons of structure yet it is elegant and never heavy with a long long finish. Make no mistake there are some serious but very fine tannins lurking in the background which bawd well for the wine's continues development.

About a week after I tasted this wine James Suckling (who reviews Brunellos for Wine Spectator) wrote this on the 2004's in his blog:"I was impressed that the wines from numerous small, family-owned wineries also came out very high, even at the top of my tastings . There are many more new names making top notch Brunello now. So you might be surprised with some of the names that I gave

very high points. Of course, my favorite producers, such as Casanova di Neri, Valdicava, and **Fuligni** did not disappoint, as usual”

Word to the wise: Wine Spectator's ratings will be out shortly, Fuligni is the least expensive wine of the ones Suckling mentioned. Expect a good score and the prices are sure to rise after. Worth securing now.

EVENTS:

Reminder: We are in the mids of Denver restaurant week where you can get a meal for 2 for \$52.80 Unlike previous years where if you didn't reserve well in advance you got shut out: Many restaurants still have room and would love you business. Give you favorite a call.

**Thanks again for all your support and referrals, tell your friends,
Cheers!**

Paul David, Chief Fermented Grape Taster.

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