

For wine lovers around the world who enjoy
wine and the good life

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WINE OF TUSCANY

CASTELLO BANFI

Putting Brunello di Montalcino on the global map

Michèle Shah visits the Castello Banfi and discovers how a poor hilltop town in Tuscany has become a mecca for wine lovers

Situated in the southern part of Tuscany and set between the Orcia and Ombrone rivers, Montalcino is one of the most famous towns of the Val d'Orcia - thanks to its top growth wine, Brunello di Montalcino, one of Italy's most prestigious wines. Montalcino is a typical Tuscan hilltop town dominated by its imposing fortress built in 1361 which overlooks the gentle rolling hills clad by olive groves, vineyards and farmhouses, many of which have now been converted to wineries.

Amidst this timeless scenery, the Castello Banfi estate is an important landmark with its castle and stone hamlet of Borgo Poggio alle Mura - originally developed between the 9th and 13th centuries to defend the southern frontier of the Republic of Siena against enemies such as its fierce rival, Florence. A massive restorative work took place after the Italian-American brothers, John and Harry Mariani acquired it in 1978 and it took the better part of a decade to bring this magnificent structure to its former splendour.

Castello Banfi is one of the historic benchmark wineries responsible for placing Brunello di Montalcino on the global map. Considered a state-of-the-art winery, where innovation meets tradition, its philosophy can be summed up as "a dynamic process of continuous improvement which looks to the future and profits from past experience".

Castello Banfi estate with its hilltop castle is an important landmark in Montalcino



Photo: A. Brookshaw

The impressive cellar at Castello Banfi with barrels of the finest French oak. The barrels have bar codes for tracking the wine

Today, Montalcino is one of the wealthiest hilltop towns in all of Italy, boasting well over 200 Brunello producers making fantastic wine that is revered throughout the world

“When my father and uncle came to Montalcino in the 1970s, it was one of the poorest hilltop towns in Tuscany, a desolate area with only a handful of wineries making a wine that was mostly unknown outside of Italy,” says Cristina Mariani-May, proprietor and co-CEO of Castello Banfi. Today, Montalcino is one of the wealthiest hilltop towns in all of Italy, boasting well over 200 Brunello producers making fantastic wine that is revered throughout the world.

“Each time I arrive at Castello Banfi and see the Poggio alle Mura castle at the top of the hill, it brings a smile to my face and fills me with energy to get started on something, anything, to keep building dreams into reality,” says Mariani-May. “We began with literally nothing but a swath of wilderness and turned it into a world-class wine estate that not only makes beautiful Brunello but also shares, educates, and provides opportunities to others.”

The strategy of sustainability is a very broad concept at Banfi and involves all stages of the production chain and a well-defined strategic plan. The deep conviction that success must go hand in hand with respect for the environment and the welfare of the people, means that since its foundation Banfi has sought to be in harmony with its surroundings, through the rational use of natural resources, organic farming and care for the environment – from the vineyard to a healthy finished product.

According to Banfi MD, Enrico Viglierchio, the most important factor is the desire to know and experience the evolution of this grape, a special clone of Sangiovese, planted to a range of territories, areas and micro zones that represent Montalcino, and to follow its path into the cellar through all phases of vinification. “Technique, research,



Photo: GianniRizzotti

experimentation and innovation are all instruments to support us in our path to understand and ultimately lead us to the utmost exaltation of a unique terroir expression of Montalcino,” says Viglierchio.

Viglierchio describes Banfi’s “Horizon” microvinification area, as a winery-within-a-winery where the top premium wines evolve over the passage of time and refine their most distinctive characteristics of strength, elegance and longevity. This is the heart of Banfi, where the process of vinification takes place in 177-hectolitre temperature-controlled vats that are made partly of wood and partly of steel. The 24 vats are an impressive sight, akin to giants, with 12 vats lined up on each side. The project was developed in 2008 by Banfi’s winemaking team led by head winemaker, Rudy Buratti. The aim of these highly technical and individual vats is to extract softer tannins, more colour and better structure. After the vinification period they are used for stocking and also for ageing some of the wines. Banfi makes a total of 600,000 bottles of Brunello di Montalcino, including the single-vineyard ones.

“The character of the terrior is inseparable from the grape variety, Sangiovese. The essence of these two inseparable elements, complemented by man’s knowledge and creativity, both in the vineyard and in the cellar, results in creating a unique wine,” says Viglierchio.

Brunello di Montalcino is a visibly limpid, brilliant wine, with a bright garnet colour. It has an intense perfume, persistent, ample and ethereal, with scents of berries, while on the palate it reflects an elegant, harmonious body, vigorous with aromatic persistence. Depending on the vintage, it can age from 10 to 30 years, improving as the years go by. The elegance and the harmonious body of this wine allows for pairings with well-structured dishes such as red meats, game, mushrooms and truffles. It also goes perfectly with international cuisines, particularly dishes with



Photo: L. Gelsi

Left: Enrico Viglierchio, managing director of Castello Banfi who joined the privately held family-run estate in 1998. Right: Cristina Mariani-May co-CEO of Banfi, the largest Brunello producer in Montalcino

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Photo: Lucio Gelsi



Horizon, Banfi's micro vinification area, where fermentation takes place in unique, hybrid tanks, constructed with stainless steel and wood in order to produce an optimal and authentic expression of Sangiovese and the terroir

a base of meats and sauces.

Banfi exports 60% of its production. Its main markets include USA, Germany, Canada, Russia, Scandinavia and Korea. The growing interest in wines in India makes this a visibly growing market. Brindco has been importing Banfi to India since 2006.

"Banfi has great brand recall value in the Indian market and now also has direct reach to consumers via our luxury retail stores," says Madhulika Dhall, Director, La Cave Enterprises. "A range of Banfi wines is listed at all the top luxury hotels and restaurants and is available at La Cave."

The biggest challenge in the Indian wine industry is the high amount of duties and taxes that foreign wines attract, notes Madhulika Dhall. This makes the premium wine segment tough to grow, she says. "However, today's Indian consumer is well travelled and has started appreciating Italian wine, its terroir and grapes much more than before. Italian cuisine is extremely popular in India, which makes the interest in Italian wine even more prevalent."

Mariani-May has a clear vision for the future of Banfi. "I'd like to see Castello Banfi maintain its status as a pioneer in Tuscany and a champion for Montalcino. Our plan is to remain focused on making the very best Sangiovese, through relentless research, experimentation and effort, and to share what we learn with our neighbours, so that Brunello continues to find new fans and be seen as one of the world's great wines," she says. ♦

BANFI WINES IN INDIA

- Castello Banfi Brunello di Montalcino DOCG
- Castello Banfi 'Poggio Alle Mura' Brunello di Montalcino DOCG
- Castello Banfi Chianti Classico DOCG
- Castello Banfi 'Col di Sasso' Sangiovese & Cabernet Sauvignon IGT
- Castello Banfi 'Summus' Sangiovese, Cabernet Sauvignon
- Castello Banfi Rosso di Montalcino DOC
- Castello Banfi 'Col di Sasso' Sangiovese & Cabernet Sauvignon IGT 375ml
- Castello Banfi 'Le Rime' Pinot Grigio & Chardonnay IGT
- Castello Banfi 'Le Rime' Pinot Grigio & Chardonnay IGT 375ml



Photo: I. Franchini

Castello Banfi – Hospitality

Castello Banfi's historic castle, Il Borgo, that crowns the estate is an elegant setting for vacations, celebrations or a day visit. It receives some 6,000 guests per year and 2,700 overnight stays. Surrounded by vineyards and olive groves, Il Borgo offers five luxurious rooms and nine suites each exquisitely and individually designed and adorned by magnificent fabrics. Its surrounding manicured gardens are ideal for enjoying the comfortable tranquillity of the Tuscan countryside and its poetic vistas.

The Borgo boasts two fine restaurants. The first is Taverna Banfi, open for lunch and housed in the old wine cellar which was used in the past to age the large wooden barrels of Brunello di Montalcino. The cuisine here is characterised by traditional Tuscan and local dishes prepared with seasonal ingredients. Guests can choose from the à la carte menu or from a tasting menu. The second, Restaurant Sala dei Grappoli offers an elegant setting for dinner and, during the summer months, one can dine *al fresco* on the outdoor terrace. Chef Domenico Francone bases his menus on seasonal ingredients with a selection of traditional Italian and Mediterranean dishes, presented with a modern touch and accompanied by Banfi wines. If it is for a short visit, tastings are conducted at the Enoteca where you can purchase Banfi wines. It is also well worth visiting

their Balsameria and the Bottle & Glass Museum that houses an interesting collection of ancient glassware going as far back as the 5th century BC and discover the secrets of their unique Etruscan balsamic condiment.

Getting There

Castello di Banfi is just 20 km outside Montalcino, 70 km from Siena and 130 km from Florence. It is reachable only by car, so it is advisable to rent a car or arrange for a taxi transfer. The nearest airports are Rome and Florence. ♦

Top: La Taverna Banfi is housed in the old wine cellar.
Below: Il Borgo's rooms and suites are all individually designed

