

SASSETTI LIVIO PERTIMALI

#3 Top 100 Wine of 2020
Brunello Articles & Reviews by James Suckling
November 2020

Our Top 100 Wines of 2020
Brunello's Greatest Vintages Ever: 2016 and 2015
By James Suckling | November 2020

If you ever wanted a Brunello di Montalcino for your cellar to age for decades, then buy the 2016 vintage when the wines come out in the market in January 2021. The 2016 vintage marks the second great year in a row for Brunello di Montalcino following the sensational 2015, which is currently on the market.



A view across the garden at Luce and towards the sea on the southern hillsides of Montalcino last summer.

We decided to include two Brunello di Montalcinos in the Top 10 as Italy's famous appellation is just about to release two phenomenal vintages in the world: 2015 riserva and 2016 normale. The *Livio Sassetto Brunello di Montalcino 2016 (No. 3)* and Tassi Brunello di Montalcino Franci Riserva 2015 (No. 8) highlight the super depth and structure of these wines and of these two vintages, which made very different styled wines. The 2015 produced more flamboyant and richer Brunellos due to the slightly warmer growing season while the 2016 made wines more tannic and intense from a slightly longer and cooler one. Both are necessary additions to anyone's cellar who loves great Italian reds and they are the greatest vintages yet for Brunello di Montalcino.



“These are wines for your cellar,” said Lamberto Frescobaldi, the head of the Florentine wine family that owns Castelgiocondo, a solid Brunello di Montalcino estate. “The tannins and structure are really special.”

Indeed, I tasted 212 Brunello di Montalcino 2016s in my tasting room in Hong Kong and the young sangioveses certainly do have a lot of tannins. In fact, I have never seen so much tannin in a young Brunello and I have been tasting young vintages from Montalcino since the early 1980s. I honestly wonder if the wines have much more tannin than 2015 or they just don’t have as much fruit to cover up their phenolic structure. But the 2016s are very impressive.

“The 2016 is different than 2015,” said Massimo Ferragamo of Castiglion del Bosco, which made its greatest Brunello ever in 2016. “It is a strong vintage. It has been a great combination of circumstances and after 2010 we have been working better and better every year. I had them side by side (2015 and 2016) but I think 2016 is better.”



The Livio Sassetti Brunello di Montalcino (our No. 3 wine) highlights the super depth and structure of the vintage.



In my tasting of 2016s, I kept writing at the end of the tasting note, “try after 2024” or “better after 2025.” These drink recommendations are certainly longer than the 2015s. The 2015s are much easier to drink young but they have the structure and concentration to age for decades just like the 2016s. The slightly hotter growing season during the summer in 2015 gave the wines that added level of ripe fruit in addition to the ripe tannins.

As I wrote in the fall of 2018 in Tuscany after tasting a few hundred barrel samples, the 2015 grape growing season was clearly hotter with less difference between the heat of the day and the coolness of the night. So the wines tend to be very fruity, sometimes even exotic. In 2016, there was greater diurnal temperature variation, which explains why the acidities are a little higher in the wines and the characters slightly less opulent. But don’t get me wrong, there’s a subtleness to the top 2015s that make them irresistible.

“These are clearly two great vintages,” admitted Carlo Ferrini, the well-respected consulting enologists who has his own small estate in Montalcino called Giodo. I rated both his 2015 and 2016 wines 100 points. “They are terrific young Brunellos.”

I like to say that 2016 would be the greatest vintage ever for Brunello if it weren’t for the stupendous 2015. In fact, you can easily see the difference in personality and nature when you taste the two together, as I did when I also rated almost 100 2015 Brunellos last week. Most were 2015 Brunello riservas. And they showed the opulence, plush fruit and ripe tannins like the classic bottlings I tasted last fall before their release in January 2020.

If you missed buying some 2015 Brunellos, you are going to want to buy some 2015 Riservas. They are usually a smaller production (fewer bottles) and selected from particular vineyard parcels or barrels. That’s how producers justify their higher prices and longer maturation before release. I only wish they were obviously better quality than the “normale” bottlings. But I still enjoy the category of Brunello.

The 2016 Brunellos will also be a great buy but plan on aging them much longer than the 2015s before opening. And their more intense tannins suggest they may ultimately live longer than the 2015s, but who’s counting? I am currently drinking the legendary 1997s and they are still fresh and beautiful.

To better understand just how good 2016 and 2015 are, I analyzed my scores from the tasting this year and all the 2016 normale Brunellos and 2015 riservas were rated 90 points or more. This highlights how Brunello has arrived at an incredible quality level and the small names as well as the great are making some of their greatest wines ever. Fifty percent of the wines from both vintages were rated 95 points or more.

“It is a year where lots of people made great wines,” said Lorenzo Sassetto of Livio Sassetto, the highly regarded estate that may have made the wine of the 2016 vintage. “It’s important to work well in a great year and get the most out of it.”

The big difference with the 2016 Brunello tasting was how many lesser-known producers made truly outstanding wines. The vintage seems to be a pivotal moment for the region where so many estates, even the cooperatives, are making outstanding quality wines. I am excited for the future of Brunello and consumer and the trade can revel in the diversity in names and prices for outstanding quality wines from the region.

“We make wines much better now and we cultivate the vineyards better,” added Ferrini in a telephone interview. “The age of the vines is so much better. The conditions are much better for vines and we know much more as winemakers. The wine culture is so much more now than just 10 years ago.”

So which vintage do I ultimately prefer? For now, I honestly have a slight preference for 2015. Perhaps it’s the flamboyance of the wines and their multi-layered and complex nature compared to the more reserved and tannic 2016s. This also why I rated 12 2015 Brunello di Montalcino 2015s 100 points as well as four 2015 riservas. I only rated three 2016s 100 points.



But the reputation of a great vintage is not made on the perfect wines. I learned a long time ago as a wine critic that great years are years when everything is outstanding from the lesser-known properties to the most prestigious ones. The 2016 and 2015 vintages certainly achieved this, making this pair of years the greatest ever for Brunello di Montalcino.

I still remember the words of Roberto Guerrini, the wizard winemaker and part owner of the small estate of Fuligni, when speaking about 2016 and 2015 in the summer of 2018: “I am almost speechless when I try to talk about these two vintages.”

James Suckling Reviews – November 2020



2016 Livio Sassetti Brunello di Montalcino

Named #3 of Top 100 Wines of 2020

Blackberries, black walnuts and black cherries, as well as loads of chewy tannins. Some smoked wood, wood tannins and even black truffles. It's full-bodied and powerful with loads going on. It just keeps growing on the palate. So much wet earth and black olive at the finish with porcini mushrooms, too. Needs time to soften. Crazy finish. Try after 2025.

100 points

2015 Livio Sassetti Brunello di Montalcino Riserva

Really pretty, sweet berries, cherries and fresh flowers on the nose. Orange peel, too. It's medium-to full-bodied with very fine tannins that are polished and attractive and melt into the wine. Such purity and finesse. Drink or hold.

96 points

2015 Livio Sassetti Brunello di Montalcino Mulino

Dried leaves, chocolate and licorice on the nose, followed by black olives. It's full-bodied with firm, focused tannins and a long, savory finish. Dark chocolate and crushed walnuts. Tar and hints of asphalt. Drink from 2023.

94 points