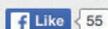


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Written by

Walter Speller

3 Nov 2016



L'Aietta - Montalcino picnic spot

TASTING ARTICLES TUSCANY ITALY BRUNELLO

Being able to show a flight of 11 consecutive vintages of Brunello in a region with so many newcomers and where estates change hands on an almost quarterly basis is no mean feat. But it is all the more remarkable if you made the first of those 11 wines at the tender age of 18. While he was still in school, Francesco Mulinari's parents, living in the town of Montalcino, bought a snip of land with olives and abandoned vines just outside Montalcino's fortified walls on a steep slope for the sole purpose of holding family picnics. With the spectacular natural beauty of the land all around Montalcino it is hard to imagine why they chose such a steep site. Perhaps the fact that L'Aietta, as the spot is locally known, was an army encampment during the siege of Montalcino in 1555, inspired them. It is now, rightfully, the tiny wine estate's name. Seeing those abandoned Sangiovese vines, Mulinari got seriously interested in them and, in some way or other, managed to coax grapes out of them. In order for him to process them legally, the land needed to be registered officially, but because Mulinari's first vintage was just before he turned 18, it had to be registered by his mother. While looking at the official land cadastre she noticed that the plot was officially registered in the Brunello di Montalcino denomination. It was thus that the experiment became Mulinari's first full-blown Brunello vintage, resulting in just 720 bottles.

That snip of land, no more than a hectare (2.5 acres) at 500 m (1,640 ft) elevation in prime Brunello territory, became his lofty playground. Unfazed by the denomination's worldwide fame (now one of Italy's most expensive per hectare, incidentally), his first fascination was the vine, so much so that in 2004 he decided to rip out the old plants to replace them with bush vines. It would have been impossible to insert poles for the wires of trained vines into the layer of hard rock underneath, Mulinari explained last June when he presented all the vintages of Brunello he had made so far at his friend's Il Vigneto Chiamato Italia enoteca in Vicenza. The tiny vineyard is so steep that the distance between the highest and the lowest of the 18 terraces is more than 115 m. But because of its minuscule size, Mulinari is perfectly able to do all of the, admittedly backbreaking, work himself.

The bush vines responded well to the barren soil, which naturally reduced Brunello's vigour, producing small bunches of thick-skinned grapes. While a clear increase in temperature due to global warming is noticeable in Montalcino, these vines thrive without any irrigation even in hot vintages. In these low-trained vines, it does not take long for water to be transported from the roots, and the bush vine's tree-like shape shades the bunches during the day. Because of the high elevation there is a significant difference between day and night temperatures, reducing the risk of both evaporation and the vines shutting down, while preserving freshness in the grapes. Fresh winds supply much-needed ventilation, further mitigating the impact of the heat.

But from passion alone one cannot live. Mulinari realised this and in 2002 he was able to buy an additional hectare of cordon-trained spur-pruned vines in Castelnuovo dell'Abate to supplement the tiny yield of the Montalcino vineyard. Between 2004 and 2006, when he ripped out the tired vines on the L'Aietta rock to replace them with more bush vines, his Rosso di Montalcino and Brunello were produced solely from the Castelnuovo dell'Abate plot, while in 2007 the bush vines started to produce tiny amounts of glorious grapes. But even with this much-needed addition he is hard-pushed to produce more than 6,000 bottles a year, divided equally between Rosso di Montalcino and Brunello di Montalcino, while every year he tries to make a very respectable rosato for his mamma by drawing off a bit of the juice. I'd say she more than deserves it. I'd have my hands full with this, but Mulinari is easily bored, judging from the fact that he has taken on another 2.5 ha in nearby Montecucco, where he makes a red based on Sangiovese, Canaiolo and Colorino, as well as a dried-grape wine from Malvasia di Candia, Vermentino and Zibibbo he planted there, too. 'One variety from the north, one from the centre and one from the south of Italy. I need to remain entertained', he explained to me, 'and Brunello gives me the bread and butter to do so.'

In the future the Montecucco vineyard will be worked not with a tractor but with a horse. A friend from the Contrada of La Giraffa in Siena, famous for its Palio, the ancient horse race still organised every year, had a foal, but because it was white, not black or deep chestnut as is required for this horse race, Mulinari was able to buy it for little money. He is even thinking of using it to breed offspring to take part in the annual Palio. Such a venture will have marketing managers - gasp for air - should it ever materialise.

In the meantime, Mulinari also studied agriculture in Cortona, but an academic approach to anything on his jewel-like estate is, unsurprisingly, off limits. He vinifies all of his wines with ambient yeast, 'as far as the vintage lets me', and while the tiny production forces him to use used barriques, he recently also bought a Stockinger cask for his garagiste-size winery on the rock in Montalcino.

The firmly organic approach has led to yet another activity, that of spumantista. The grapes are culled during the green harvest - 'only from the Castelnuovo dell'Abate vineyard. Not L'Aietta. It doesn't need diradamento [bunch thinning]', he told me sternly. At the end of my visit he grabbed a bottle from a riddling rack and disgorged it for me. 'I harvest the grapes for this wine on the basis of acidity levels, not their maturation.' He presses the grapes and uses all the press wine. No manipulation here either, in any form, except for the liqueur de tirage and added yeast to trigger the secondary fermentation in the bottle. 'But this is only for the moment', he warned me. He got acquainted with Giovanni Arcari of the Franciacorta estate Arcari + Danesi, who wages a war against any addition of sugar at any stage in the production of their complex wines. Dried grape juice to make his own liqueur de tirage for his sparkling wine, is planned. 'I started off with only the free-run juice, but the wine smelled of Amaretto di Saronno [the liqueur] and with the press juice it is much more Sangiovese.'

L'Aietta, Spumante Non Dosato 2012 Italy

Pale salmon. Exciting, fresh nose reminding me a little bit of a red wine and with earthy notes. Full-bodied and fruit driven on the attack and then fresh and with plenty of strawberry fruit. No real autolysis notes but fine persistent carbon dioxide. A bit like a Franciacorta Satèn. Well made. Not bone dry although no residual sugar. Long, fruit-driven finish. (WS)

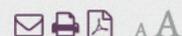
13%

Drink 2016-2020

€20 RRP

16

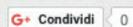
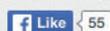


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L'Aietta 2011 Brunello di Montalcino

Mid ruby with orange tinges. Savoury nose with sweet spices and great depth. Still a little closed on the palate, savoury and yet with a hint of dried fruit. Firm, but not rough, mouth-filling tannins that go on and on. Contained and balanced for this hot vintage. (WS)

14%

Drink 2016-2026

17+

L'Aietta 2010 Brunello di Montalcino

Concentrated ruby with a narrow, orange rim. Firmer and more compact on the nose than 2011, but with the same sweet spice notes. Iron, orange and cherry on the palate. Still a little compact and tannic yet with a fine balance. Genuine. (WS)

14.5%

Drink 2018-2030

17.5

L'Aietta 2009 Brunello di Montalcino

Maturing mid ruby with narrow orange rim. A little stalky and savoury on the nose with a hint of raw meat. Clearly in need of lots of air. Very supple and juicy. Stubborn, with firm tannins on the finish betraying the 2009 heat. (WS)

14.5%

Drink 2012-2022

16

L'Aietta 2008 Brunello di Montalcino

Mid ruby with bright orange tinges. Malty and introvert on the nose with sweet cherry creeping up. Supple fruit with firm tannic spine. Almost vibrant acidity and Nebbiolo-like tannins. This needs much more age. (WS)

14%

Drink 2018-2030

17

L'Aietta 2007 Brunello di Montalcino

Maturing mid ruby with narrow orange rim. Firm nose with spice and a hint of Moroccan leather, raw meat. Minerally. Supple fruit and then quite backward. A hint of dried fruit on the finish, but no signs of heat. Firm, bitter-sweet tannins and only just beginning to open up. Very tannic, but well done. (WS)

14%

Drink 2016-2028

17

L'Aietta 2006 Brunello di Montalcino

Maturing mid ruby with bricky rim. Oatmeal hint but otherwise closed on the nose. Bit of liquorice. Almost Barolo-like nose! Firm tannins and good acidity and compact fruit. Still very youthful and vibrant. Great potential. (WS)

13.5%

Drink 2017-2030

17.5

L'Aietta 2005 Brunello di Montalcino

Maturing mid ruby with orange tinges. Cherry nose with hints of undergrowth and the first wine in this flight to show this. Notes of sweet baking spice. Supple palate with bags of drying tannins - demands food. Long and a little rustic, but certainly not washed out or over the hill. (WS)

13.5%

Drink 2012-2024

16

L'Aietta 2004 Brunello di Montalcino

Concentrated, maturing ruby with narrow bricky rim. Savoury and with oatmeal notes (new casks!) and very slow to open up. Brooding cherry with hints of iron and spice. Complex and brooding. Succulent brooding fruit and then bags of powdery tannins. Very long and unpolished and still very youthful. (WS)

13.5%

Drink 2010-2030

17.5

L'Aietta 2003 Brunello di Montalcino

Mature mid ruby with narrow orange rim. Mature nose of undergrowth and a thick layer of spice. That iron note again. Wonderful acidity and plenty of savoury fruit. The drying tannins are the only thing that betray this hot vintage, but so well judged and elaborated. (WS)

Drink 2010-2026

17+

L'Aietta 2002 Brunello di Montalcino

'I leaf-plucked intensely during summer and this has saved the vintage. But that was during summer when it was still hot and everyone asked me, "What have you done???" But I did it because I had to do other work, too, and knew I wouldn't have time for that at a later stage. It proved to be salvation.'

Deep ruby with narrow, bricky rim. Sweet, savoury and a little nutty on the nose and almost with a hint of honey. Juicy fruit that shows a little mature and with firm tannins. A little drying and slightly herbal on the finish, but far from over the hill. (WS)

13.5%

Drink 2010-2024

15.5

L'Aietta 2001 Brunello di Montalcino

Mature ruby with bricky rim. Wonderful, compact spice nose with brooding cherry, leather and real depth. Plenty of depth on the palate too and with slightly rustic but not hard tannins. Juicy yet tannic finish. A little rustic but with lots of tension on the finish and already a little progressed but succulent to the very end. (WS)

13.5%

Drink 2008-2026

17+

