

Keep Rosso di Montalcino pure!

31 Aug 2011 by Walter Speller

7 Sep - *The Montalcino producers voted in the end to keep Rosso di Montalcino 100% Sangiovese. See more on the issue [here](#).*

News from Montalcino almost always seems to be bad nowadays. After the hugely damaging scandal of adulterated Brunello wines surfaced at the beginning of 2008, it seems as though the region still cannot resist seeking the spotlight again, even though in a most unfavourable way. Fortunately, Nicolas Belfrage MW (pictured) is leading a campaign to resist a damaging current proposal.

Readers may recall that just at the beginning of Vinitaly in April 2008 news broke that several Brunello producers were being investigated for adding, illegally, international grape varieties to a wine which by law must be a 100% Brunello. The scandal became known as Brunellopoli, or Brunellogate, and took a turn for the worse when high-profile producers started to debate in public whether it was possible to produce a premium wine by using the fickle Brunello (Sangiovese) grape only. This culminated in the 'take no prisoners' comments of one of Italy's most influential oenologists, Ezio Rivella (who since then has become the president of the Consorzio di Brunello di Montalcino), who was quoted as describing 100% Brunello wines as necessarily 'undrinkable'. In a referendum put forward to all producers of the Consorzio, a large majority were eager to stick to a pure Brunello wine and voted against any changes to the regulations. But with Rivella elected as the Consorzio's new head, no one expected that the matter would be put to sleep indefinitely.

And so the Consorzio's very recent proposal to change Rosso di Montalcino, 'Brunello's little brother', comes as no surprise. Rosso di Montalcino has always been 100% Brunello by law too, but is subject to a shorter mandatory period of ageing. The Consorzio has now announced a vote to be taken during its next meeting next Wednesday 7 September to change the production rules for Rosso di Montalcino to allow up to 15% of any other grape variety than Brunello. Critics defending the genuine expression of terroir, which, according to them can be transmitted only by a pure Brunello wine, are extremely concerned that this vote could also effectively provide a back door for the original idea to change the regulations for Brunello itself. Curious, to say the least, is the timing of the meeting, which coincides with what is the busiest part of the year for any Tuscan wine producer, the harvest [although newcomer to the region, Francesco Illy of coffee fame, is pleading for a postponement of this meeting, if I have translated correctly - JR].

One of the people who has tirelessly promoted and supported Italian wine on the international market for the last 40 years is Nicolas Belfrage MW, the author of several seminal books on Italian wine. In defence of a 100% Brunello Rosso di Montalcino, he appeals to all Brunello producers in the open letter below and asks them to decline the proposed changes, which would lead to the 'internationalisation' of one of Italy's most revered wines, and in doing so risks destroying its inimitable Tuscan character

You can register your view on this issue by adding a comment [here](#), as I have, below Nick's article on the [vinoalvino.org](#) website, the blog of Nicolas' colleague and collaborator Franco Ziliani - JR.

Nicolas Belfrage MW to the producers of Montalcino

I understand that, on Wednesday 7 September, 2011 a vote will be held in the Assemblée of Montalcino wine producers on whether to allow a small but significant percentage of other grapes, which everyone understands to mean Merlot and/ or Cabernet and/ or Syrah, into the blend of Rosso di Montalcino DOC, which is of course at present a 100% Sangiovese wine.

I would urge you in the strongest terms not to support this change. Rosso di Montalcino, like Brunello di Montalcino, has created for itself a strong personality on international wine markets based largely on the fact that it is a pure varietal wine. In these days when more and more countries are climbing on the wine production bandwagon it is more important than ever to have a distinctive identity, to make wine in a way which no one else on earth can emulate. It is my belief that the strongest factor in the identity of Rosso di Montalcino (and of course Brunello di Montalcino) is the fact that it is 100% Sangiovese.

I am not disputing the fact that Merlot, Cabernet and Syrah are excellent grape varieties, but it is their very excellence, their very strength of personality, which threatens to compromise the unique character of Rosso di Montalcino. Who could ever imagine the producers of Bordeaux voting to allow 15% of Sangiovese into the Bordeaux blend? The idea is absurd - or would be treated as such by the Bordeaux producers. There are many who think that a reverse situation, in Tuscany's finest vine-growing area, would be equally absurd. Yes, in many cases it may improve the wine - especially in weak vintages or where Sangiovese does not succeed every year. But it will fatally undermine the personality of the wine.

I am aware that a lot of Merlot and Cabernet are planted in the Montalcino growing zone, and that there may be a need in the short term to find a commercial use for these grapes. But there are the options of St. Antimo or IGT Toscana. Perhaps, instead of compromising the purity of one of Montalcino's unique wines, there should be more effort in the direction of promoting these other wine-types.

You will be aware that many of us fear that a compromise in regard to Rosso di Montalcino would constitute an opening of the door to a compromise, farther down the line, of the purity of the great Brunello - one of the world's great wines. Whether or not that might be the case, I am convinced that it is against the long-term interests of Montalcino to allow any other grape variety, including any Italian or Tuscan variety, into the Rosso, just as it would be fatal to great Burgundy, for example, to allow Syrah to be blended with Pinot Noir, as was once widely practised - with, one might add, some notable successes, but with the inevitable distortion of the style.

You, the Montalcino producers, hold the fate not only of your own future market in your hands. You are the representatives of all of us who will not have a vote on 7 September.

We urge you, please, to vote NO.

Nicolas Belfrage MW