Montalcino vineyards update

4 Apr 2008 by Linda Murphy

Just days before the start of the massive VinItaly trade show in Verona yesterday came news of a potential scandal involving Brunello di Montalcino, arguably Italy's most sacred of wines and the certainly superstar of Tuscany.

Italian newspapers, including the daily *La Repubblica,* report that Brunello di Montalcino producers are being investigated for adding Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and other red grape varieties to what are, by law, supposed to be 100% Sangiovese wines. As a result, all shipments of 2003 Brunello di Montalcino have been halted while the probe continues. Among the names surfacing in print and online reports: Frescobaldi, Antinori, Argiano and Castello Banfi.

"There is no basis for such a claim," Tiziana Frescobaldi told *La Repubblica* writer Maurizio Bologni. "And we have no doubt that we will be able to clear this all up."

"We will not release a drop of 2003 Brunello," said Piero Antinori**,** "even though we could. Before we do, we want this affair to be cleared up and we trust it will be, fairly and promptly as far as we are concerned."

The report by *La Repubblica* credits vinowire.com editor Franco Ziliani with breaking the story in Italy.

The Consorzio del Vino Brunello di Montalcino, which oversees production of Brunello di Montalcino, published this declaration on 29 Mar, in response to what some journalists are calling "Brunellopoli."

Since 2004, the Brunello di Montalcino Consortium has been invested by the Italian Ministry Agriculture and Forestry Policies with the power to conduct controls on Brunello di Montalcino vineyards and wine products with Brunello di Montalcino denomination. And, as in other occasions, the Brunello Consortium was among the first to be invested with this role.

Therefore, in reference to rumours that have appeared recently on web sites with allegations of the violation of Brunello di Montalcino production practices, the Consortium makes the following declarations:

1. Rumours that producers in Montalcino have used wines from Southern Italy in Brunello 2003 vintages: this is a very grave accusation that we find hard to believe and which the Consortium has no evidence of whatsoever.

2. As for the purity of Brunello vineyards, in 2007, the Consortium completed an inspection of over 1,667 hectares of enrolled vineyards. With these inspections, which began in 2004, only 17 hectares of vineyards were revealed as non-conforming, equal to about 1% of all vineyards that were controlled. It can, therefore, be confirmed that over 99% of vineyards enrolled under the Brunello di Montalcino denomination, completely adhere to production disciplines.

It is the declared intention of the Board of Directors of the Brunello di Montalcino Consortium, as it has always declared as its task, to safeguard the wines of the four denominations in the Montalcino territory, with both the tools for control imposed by the government and the ever more stringent rules of the Consortium itself."

Lars Leicht, spokesman for New York-based Banfi Vintners, said from VinItaly that a magistrate in Siena, the province in which Brunello di Montalcino is produced, has questioned the controls exercised by the Consortium. Leicht said authorities are reviewing winemaker notes, harvest and bottling records, consorzio registrations and DOCG stamps, looking for signs of adulterated wines.

"If the slightest discrepancy is found, even if subject to interpretation and explanation, the existing stocks of the 2003 vintage Brunello, the year in question, are sequestered from distribution," he said.

Marc Goodrich, chief operating officer of Banfi Vintners, said Brunello di Montalcino "has been caught in a crossfire between warring factions in what amounts to a political disgrace." The majority of Brunello producers are likely to fall under what he describes as "this intense and misguided scrutiny," with sale of the 2003 vintage suspended, potentially for several months if not longer."

The Siena magistrate, Nino Calabrese, has remained largely silent on a public basis, except for a statement he gave to winenews.it (as reported by vinowire.com):

"This office is verifying whether or not grape-growers have respected appellation regulations for Brunello di Montalcino DOCG. The investigation is still pending. There is no truth, however, to what has been reported by certain members of the media regarding the use of wines from the region of Apulia in the production of Brunello."

As I'm not at VinItaly, I can only imagine how much more frenzied the already intense show is with the buzz about Brunello. Needless to say, this being Italy, there is a political element to the story. I've heard off-the-record comments about Calabrese, whose term expires in three months, wanting to make a name for himself with his investigation. Whether or not it shows any Brunellos to be something other than all Sangiovese, Calabrese certainly has stopped Brunello di Montalcino commerce in its tracks, just as orders for the 2003 are being placed.

***10 Apr* - David Gleave MW of London wine importer Liberty Wine adds:** Just back from Italy where I've had my fill of the Brunello scandal but I just thought I'd see what was being said about it in the UK and I noticed the article on your site.

There is an error where it says that 'all shipments of 2003 Brunello have been halted'. This is not true. They have been halted for Argiano, Col d'Orcia, Banfi, Antinori and Castelgiocondo (Frescobaldi), as they are the producers under investigation. Producers not under investigation are free to ship where and when they want. Hope this clears this issue up.