

MOLTO MAGNIFICO

*After tasting nearly 2,500 Italian wines so far this year,
JAMES SUCKLING picks out the highlights*

From amazing 100-point reds like Antinori Solaia 2016, Masseto 2016, and Bruno Giacosa Falletto Barolo Vigna Le Rocche 2015, to crisp and enticing whites from Alto Adige and Friuli, and some sensationally balanced and fruit-driven wines from the Veneto such as Amarone, there are plenty of exciting Italian wines to buy this year.

In April, my son Jack and I decided to do a major Italian tasting in our office in Tuscany, reviewing wines from key producers from the top appellations of the country. We had already tasted hundreds of reds from prestigious appellations such as Brunello di Montalcino and Barolo in January. The April tasting brought the number of Italian wines tasted this year to almost 2,500, and among them were literally hundreds of outstanding to classic quality reds. Italy is crushing it with characterful and beautiful wines at the moment.

Tuscany took the biggest share of our tasting time. We found many fantastic wines from two great back-to-back vintages, 2015 and 2016. The wet 2014 vintage proved more difficult, especially in Brunello di Montalcino, where many wines are slightly diluted. Conversely, the hot and dry 2017 vintage made some extraordinary wines considering the difficult growing season (particularly in cooler areas such as Chianti

Classico) but some jammy and over extracted wines exist. So, take caution.

The region of Chianti Classico in general is on a high for quality wines this year, not just because of the September release of the legendary Solaia (we rated both the 2015 and 2016 100 points). A range of single-vineyard wines are proving real knockouts, too. For example, Barone Ricasoli's single-vineyard Chianti Classico Gran Selezione are truly exceptional young and pure Sangioveses with distinctive character and superlative quality. Chianti Classico Ceniprimo Gran Selezione 2016 (99 points), Chianti Classico Ceniprimo Gran Selezione 2015 (98 points), and Chianti Classico Roncicone Gran Selezione 2016 (98 points) are shining examples of the appellation finally emphasising the greatness of its terroir. We hope more of these wines – including village designations for reds such as the towns Gaiole or Panzano – will highlight how Chianti Classico is akin to Italy's new Burgundy.

"I don't remember two consecutive years like 2015 and 2016," says Marco Bacci, owner of Castello di Bossi in Chianti Classico, Renieri in Brunello di Montalcino and Terre di Talamo in the Maremma. "They are some of the greatest years for Sangiovese."

All the regions in Tuscany are releasing outstanding wines this year, even Brunello di Montalcino if you focus on the 2013 riservas. It's a

CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW: 2016 VINTAGES FROM RICASOLI; ALL IN A DAY'S WORK – TASTING IN BAROLO; CELLAR HOLDING OLD VINTAGES OF ALDO CONTERNO BAROLO GRAN BUSSIA



shame about the slightly diluted and light 2014 Brunellos. The growing season was just too grey and wet to produce classic quality Brunello. We suggest you wait for the release of the 2015 Brunellos in January 2020. Stay tuned for some early tasting results later in the year; the wines will be significantly better than the average 2014 Brunellos or even the excellent 2013 riservas. They could be even better than the legendary 2010.

“The 2015 is the greatest Brunello of my career,” admits Vincenzo Abbruzzese, the owner of the great estate of Valdicava.

There will be much debate whether 2015 is better than 2016 or vice versa, particularly in Tuscany. But Jack and I believe that 2015 is a little better than 2016 because it has more intensity and riper tannins. Yet 2016 is very exciting as well with slightly firmer tannins and fresher acidity.

The same debate will rage in Piedmont for the 2015 and 2016 vintages. We experienced the excellence of the 2015 Barolos after an extensive tasting in Barolo in January, and we tasted dozens more bottles in April. We like their harmony and beauty at such an early stage. Sure, they have firm and structured tannins, but the brightness and clarity of ripe fruit gives them an energy and beauty that is rarely seen today in Piedmont. I think the vintage is the best in years and better than 2010. The 2016s will be tasted later this year and in early 2020.

As we noted earlier this year, there are also a number of exciting riserva Barolos with anything from a few extra years of bottle age to 10 years just now being released on the market. We love this trend in fine Barolo.

“We’ve been very lucky with so many outstanding quality years recently,” admits Alberto Chiarlo, whose family runs the well-known estate of Michele Chiarlo. “Our know-how and dedication continues to grow in fine winemaking and this reflects in our wines from the region.”

Veneto is another region that caught our attention in the tasting in April with many wines showing balance and transparency instead of overripe, opaque character. Amarone and Ripasso are particularly strong in reds while Soave is consistently making complex and fresh whites.

A new generation is making wines in the region and they clearly understand vineyard management and winemaking to produce focused and vivid wines. We look forward to exploring the region this summer. All the vintages recently released on the market produced outstanding wines, but 2013 looks particularly excellent for the top wines.

Other parts of the north, such as Alto Adige and Friuli, made some beautiful whites and a limited number of fascinating reds. I remember Alto Adige remained green and fresh during the boiling 2017 summer when we filmed our documentary *The Miracle of Alto Adige* and in turn made fresh and fruity whites at extremely high quality levels, not to mention some fruity and delicious reds such as Lagrein and Pinot Noir.

The south of Italy also showed consistent results with many outstanding wines. We tasted a lot of Sicilian wines and Etna still makes the best of them. Recent excellent vintages include 2014, 2015 and 2016. However,

Campania may be making even more exciting wines. It’s a magical place with its volcanic soils, diverse microclimates and amazing history.

“We’re going back to many of the old viticulture and winemaking ideas of the 1960s and 1970s that made some legendary wines, but in a modern way,” says Piero Mastroberardino, the head of the famous family winery bearing his surname. “We have some of our best wines yet coming out.”

It’s comments like these that make us ready for the next set of tastings – this summer and in the future. We plan to review between 5,000 and 6,000 Italian wines this year and we know we’re going to find great and exciting wines from all of Italy. 📌

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INCANDESCENT ITALIANS

JAMES SUCKLING'S TOP BOTTLES OF 2019
(ALL AVAILABLE IN HONG KONG)

BRUNO GIACOSA FALLETTO BAROLO VIGNA LE ROCCHIE 2015
SCORE: 100

I'm lost for words with this wine. Perfumed and so elegant with the most exquisite aromas of roses, plums and earth, yet always subtle and complex. Full body and ultra-fine, firm tannins. Fantastic finish that lasts for minutes. Try in 2026.



MARCHESI ANTINORI UMBRIA CERVARO DELLA SALA 2017
SCORE: 99

This is big and powerful, without being ripe and heavy. So much apple, stone, and hints of toffee. Aromatic. Full-bodied, layered and framed with phenolic tension and a great finish. Muscular and agile at the same time. One of the best I've tasted. Drink or hold.



PIRA (CHIARA BOSCHIS) BAROLO CANNUBI 2015
SCORE: 99

Impressive roses and finely ground spices with a bright red-cherry core, as well as a fresh wild-herb thread. The sense of focus and purity here is stunning. The palate has a deeply juicy and fresh core of tightly knit tannins that carry immense power with impeccable balance. Elegantly executed wine with profound length. Try from 2025.



PODERI ALDO CONTERNO BAROLO GRAN BUSSIA RISERVA 2010
SCORE: 99

Glorious aromas of roses and other flowers with blackberries and ripe plums. Spectacular. Perfection. Full-bodied, firm and chewy with polished and tight tannins. Slightly dusty. Great length and beauty. Very, very persistent on the palate. Needs another two or three years to soften, but already a classic.



FELSINA TOSCANA FONTALORO 2016
SCORE: 98

Amazing aromas of liquorice, wet earth, orange peel and lavender. Full body, tight and super compact and polished. Goes on for minutes. Clearly great. Better in 2021, but already a star.

