

# THE GAME CHANGERS

*JAMES SUCKLING names the wine, winery and winemaker that have had made the biggest impact in the past 10 years*

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his year I'm celebrating 10 years as an independent wine critic – and nearly 40 years evaluating wine professionally. In the last decade, I've tasted more than 100,000 wines with my team at JamesSuckling.com, and visited hundreds of wineries and winemakers across the world.

Given the improvements in viticulture, technology and winemaking knowledge across so many wine regions, identifying those individuals that represent the best of wine during that time is inevitably difficult. However, it's not an impossible task. In my view, since 2010 there's one wine, one winery and one winemaker that stand apart from all others and represent pinnacle achievements in the wine industry.

## WINE OF THE DECADE

### Almaviva Puente Alto 2017

Vintage after vintage over the last 10 years, Almaviva has been quietly and consistently establishing a track record as one of the greatest wine producers in Chile, if not the world.

The estate, a joint venture between Château Mouton Rothschild and Concha y Toro, has been striving for perfection since its launch in 1998. And, with the Almaviva Puente Alto 2017, it's achieved it. With such supreme quality and an astronomic growth in reputation, this Cabernet Sauvignon-based blend scored a rare 100 points – Almaviva's second perfect score, following the 2015 vintage – and I described it as “full-bodied, tight and chewy” with “wild and exotic” aromas of blackberry leaves, iodine, mussel shells and earth. “It's structured and powerful. Dense and very, very deep.”

The wine has been a labour of love by chief winemaker Michel Friou, a Chilean-industry veteran and native Frenchman who joined the single-wine estate in 2007.

The intensity and structure of Almaviva 2017 come as a particularly pleasant surprise given the hot and dry conditions during the growing season. Yet the winemakers overcame the dramatically lower yields and an early harvest that took place three weeks ahead of schedule. Even with the odds against them, Friou and his team produced yet another superb vintage that embodies the estate's first-growth expertise from Bordeaux and exceptional New World terroir – the best of both worlds.

“We have the luxury of wonderful terroir in Puente Alto [the wine region in which Maipo Valley is located]. It's very close to the Andes, which means we're always a few degrees cooler than the rest of the valley,” says Friou. “This makes a difference in terms of the ripening process – we can get ripeness and freshness as well as very elegant, fine-quality tannins.”



ABOVE: A JOINT VENTURE BETWEEN CHÂTEAU MOUTON ROTHSCHILD AND CONCHA Y TORO, ALMAVIVA PUENTE ALTO IS ONE OF CHILE'S GREATEST WINE PRODUCERS. LEFT: ALMAVIVA'S CEO FELIPE LARRAÍN AND HEAD WINEMAKER MICHEL FRIOU





BODEGA ROOM AT MASSETO.  
ABOVE: CHÂTEAU MOUTON  
ROTHSCHILD

## “Our winemaking is about reducing the process, reducing intervention”

– Axel Heinz, winemaker and estate director, Masseto

### WINERY OF THE DECADE

#### Masseto

If there's one winery in Tuscany that contends with the chateaux in Bordeaux and Burgundy, it has to be Masseto. It even sells a large proportion of its production through Bordeaux wine merchants. Set in the sunny Bolgheri region, Masseto's vineyard stretches across a gently sloping valley, where greyish-blue clay lies underfoot and the Tyrrhenian Sea to the west ricochets light across the vines.

It wasn't until last year that Masseto – owned by the Frescobaldi Group since 2005 – finally opened its own winery. Before that, the wine was produced from its vineyards in the cellars of Bolgheri's famous estate of Ornellaia, which also shares the same owners.

Opening prices for new vintages reach as much as US\$800 a bottle, which sell out within weeks. This unbelievable demand and superb quality make it one of the cult wines of a generation.

The winery produces superb, pure Merlot vintages

that consistently taste fresh, structured, soft yet powerful. I was one of the first American wine critics to recognise the winery's magical Merlot, having awarded three Masseto vintages – 2001, 2011, and 2016 – perfect 100-point scores. When I tasted a vat of pure Merlot in the 1980s with then owner Lodovico Antinori, I told him the wine could be “the Petrus of Tuscany” if he bottled it separately.

The best vintage is the monumental 2001, a perfect 100-point wine and arguably one of the greatest wines ever made in Tuscany. It's balanced with fascinating rosemary and dark-fruit character that turns to plums and light chocolate. The undertones on the nose remind me of walking through the Masseto vineyard during a cool summer's morning.

“Nothing is missing, and there's no more than necessary,” says Axel Heinz, winemaker and estate director of Masseto. “Our winemaking is about reducing the process, reducing intervention, with a ‘less is more’ philosophy.”



LEFT: ITALY'S MASSETO WINERY IS A WORTHY CONTENDER WITH THE BEST OF BORDEAUX AND BUGUNDY ABOVE: CHÂTEAU MOUTON ROTHSCHILD IS JUST ONE OF THE PLACES WHERE WINEMAKER PHILIPPE DHALLUIN HAS WORKED HIS MAGIC



## WINEMAKER OF THE DECADE

### Philippe Dhalluin

Winemaker Philippe Dhalluin has probably made more perfect wines than any other person of his generation, from the 2010 Château Mouton Rothschild in Bordeaux and 2013 Opus in Napa Valley to Almaviva 2015 and 2017 in Chile.

When asked about these incredible wines, the 62-year-old simply shrugs his shoulders and says, “I make the best wines possible as a winemaker.”

Born in 1957 in Valenciennes, in northern France, Dhalluin moved with his family to Bordeaux at the age of 16. A bottle of Châteauneuf du Pape 1970, given to his parents from a family friend, was the pivot in his career.

“At the time, I was most familiar with Bordeaux wines, along with a few Burgundies,” Dhalluin says. “When I drank Châteauneuf du Pape, I had a revelation,

an epiphany. It was an exceptional wine, so different from anything I’d tasted until then and, above all, so extraordinarily explosive that even now it seems like I can remember each mouthful!”

With this talent for precision, passion and dynamism, he was recruited in 2003 by the late Baroness Philippine de Rothschild as managing director across the Rothschilds’ various chateaux, where he introduced ever more precise vinification techniques. The result in 2006 was what many critics called the “wine of the vintage” from Château Mouton Rothschild.

From there he took his precise style to Napa Valley in California, working as wine director at Opus One, and later to Chile, where he regularly works with head winemaker Michel Friou at Almaviva (and helped create our Wine of the Decade, above).

“My work is a constant quest for balance between richness, freshness, density and charm,” Dhalluin says. **P**