Il Marroneto: Sangiovese in its place

Susan Hulme MW joins Alessandro Mori for a special vertical tasting marking the 50th anniversary of his family's Montalcino estate

Falling in love had a dramatic effect on the life of Alessandro Mori. He was 33 and had a very successful career working in a bank in Rome. There was a long family tradition of stable career paths: pharmacists on his mother's side, lawyers and solicitors on his father's. But he met a woman from Venice, fell in love, and gave up his comfortable life to live in a house with no running water to follow a romantic dream.

The dream was born out of childhood memories of glorious trips from the family home in Siena to Montalcino, to Il Marroneto, an old farmhouse surrounded by a small vineyard. The farmhouse had once been a storage-house for drying chestnuts, used to make flour for bread. This was dispensed by nuns to hungry pilgrims from the little Madonna delle Grazie chapel above the vineyard—hence the name Il Marroneto, a type of chestnut.

The property was bought by Mori's father, Giuseppe, in 1974, as a weekend retreat for his wife (Maddalena Mori Bianchini, who still owns the property) and the family. It was where brothers Alessandro, Andrea, and their sister Antonella could escape the city and enjoy a more rural childhood. There was 0.5ha (1.25 acres) vineyard above the house, as well as other vineyards, but in those days the plantings were mixed, with fruit trees and other crops dotted amid the vines.

At first, the family made wine as a passionate hobby. The first "vintage" of 20 demijohns—about 90 liters—was made in 1975, when Alessandro was just 14. By 1979, the family were making about 1,900 liters of wine, a more serious proposition, and too much wine to give away as gifts, as they had previously done. Their first "proper" wine was bottled in 1980 from vineyards planted in 1975.

As lawyers, the Mori family had many wealthy clients, some of whom also owned vineyards and made wine, so the family benefited from their advice. They engaged Giulio Gambelli, known affectionately as "il maestro di Sangiovese," and his friend and colleague Mario Cortevesio, another aficionado.

In 1993, at the age of 32, and after 18 years of learning from Cortevesio and Gambelli, Mori changed his life. Nostalgia for those glorious family weekends lingered hauntingly in his mind. He was about to start his own family so left the bank and moved to Montalcino, where his son Iacopo was born one year later.

Photography courtesy of Il Marroneto

Above: The original sloping vineyard in Montalcino between the Mori family's Il Marroneto farmhouse and the Madonna delle Grazie chapel above.

In 1994, Mori conducted his first vinification. Apart from the required analysis and tests, which he asked Tuscan enologist Paolo Vagaggini, also a Sangiovese expert, to do, it was Mori who made the wine. Recently, the Marroneto estate celebrated its 50th anniversary, and Mori reflects, "I learned 50 years ago how very important acidity was, together with polyphenols." His style of elegant, unforced wine was not always so popular, but over time this way of making wine has proved highly successful.

Il Marroneto makes four different wines: Rosso di Montalcino Ignaccio, Rosso di Montalcino Selezione Iacopo, Brunello di Montalcino, and Brunello di Montalcino Selezione Madonna delle Grazie. The latter is the top cuvée, made only from grapes from the original 0.5ha of vines below the Madonna delle Grazie chapel. They make about 45,000 bottles in total, but of these, only 8,000 bottles are Madonna delle Grazie. This is, for many, one of the very finest Brunello di Montalcino wines. It regularly achieves 100-point scores from international wine critics, and in 2024, Il Marroneto was the number-one Italian wine in a Wine-Searcher poll, which put it above Masseto.

From passion, to profession

So, how did a family from Siena come to create one of the most highly sought-after Brunello wines in a relatively short space of time? It may be precisely because they were outsiders, liberated from the constraints of the past and a long family history of winemaking. Perhaps an outsider's biggest advantage is open-mindedness and the willingness to experiment. Mori is keen to stress that he came from a different background. He was not a farmer, and wine was always a passionate hobby for him and his family. That, too, perhaps is part of the secret of their success. Making wine was an expression of joy rather than merely a way to make a living. What started as a passion became a way of life.

What makes their Brunello, and especially the Madonna delle Grazie, so captivating? The wines have an exquisite and persistent perfume—of cherries, violets, and other flowers—that is rarely coaxed from stubborn Sangiovese with such vivid expression. They are beautifully executed wines, with both exuberance and precision. The wines move with ease and grace on the palate, with a certain aristocratic, silky-smooth weave and with tannins like fine sand. Madonna delle Grazie is a very Burgundian style of Brunello di Montalcino, yet it remains distinctively Tuscan. The wines still have a firm assertiveness underlying all their beguiling charm. Mori was once asked in an interview which wine or wine producer he admired the most, and Domaine de la Romanée-Conti was the one that came to mind: "I would like to be the Romanée-Conti of Italy."

I asked Alessandro about the secrets of his success. He explained he makes a traditional style of wine and uses nothing but pure Sangiovese, matured in large, traditional oak *botti*, a mixture of Slavonian oak and large French oak. Not all traditional wines are good, however, or anywhere near this level of quality. What Mori has done is absorb the best of those traditions and refine them, taking them to another level. It is clear when talking to him that he is not influenced by fashion or trends. He has always been true to the idea of making authentic Sangiovese from a particular place with minimal intervention. "Over the past 50 years I've seen continual changes come and go in winemaking fashions in Montalcino," he says. In the 1990s and early 2000s, there was a fashion for powerful, oaky "statement" wines, and some Brunello producers moved away from traditional *botti* to barriques. But Mori stayed true to his beliefs: "I never changed my kind of wine, I just brought more professionalism to some things."

In recent years, Iacopo Mori has been more involved in the winemaking. I asked him what impact he feels he has had and when he started. Having tasted Il Marroneto Brunello regularly since 2014, I have noticed increasing purity and transparency of expression on these wines, and a subtle refinement in recent vintages. Iacopo told me that he had been involved in small ways since the 2016 and 2017 vintages but started to work fully with the wines in 2019. He was allowed to make his own Rosso di Montalcino—the Selezione Iacopo—from rows of vines he chose. When this 2019 was released, it met with great critical acclaim. It is an example of a more intense, modern-style Rosso di Montalcino. The wines are super-clean, energetic, and vivid. One of Iacopo's important contributions was a very rigorous focus on cleanliness and on fine detail. They now clean the large

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2022 Il Marroneto Rosso di Montalcino Ignaccio (14% ABV)

Youthful, blue-toned ruby in color. On the nose, there are crushed rose and red fruits. There are no heavy oak aromas or flavors, but instead intriguing notes of smoke, red cherries, and redcurrant interweave on the nose and palate. It is a lively and juicy wine, with ripe red fruits that last right through to the end. The tannins are very gentle and integrated. The vibrant black-cherry flavors and bright acidity make this wine very enjoyable and so easy to drink. 2025–28. **| 93**

2022 Il Marroneto Rosso di Montalcino Selezione Iacopo (15% ABV)

Made from a selection of the best barrels as chosen by Iacopo; the first vintage was 2019 and received a lot of critical acclaim. This wine is a much more intense Rosso than the Ignaccio, with layers of spice, black cherry, and bitter vermouth-type herbs. It was a little closed and a touch reductive at the end of 2024, which is a positive sign for aging, but with plenty of depth and intensity waiting to unfold and notes of orange peel, lifted citrus, and dark, herb liqueur. There is a lovely texture and weight on the palate, and the black-cherry flavors feel just ripe. The tannins are very integrated, and there's a sense of completeness about the wine, with notes of iron and quinine contrasting with dark, ripe fruit. This is a firmer, more serious style of Rosso—almost like a baby Brunello. A lovely example. 2025–35. **| 95**

2020 Il Marroneto Brunello di Montalcino (14% ABV)

Most immediate and arresting is the haunting perfume of roses and violets, together with bright cherry and a touch of graphite. Cooler blue fruits like blueberry and just-ripe black cherry feature in this 2020, and there is a vibrant transparency to both aromas and flavors, along with a more seamless quality to the texture. This Brunello is not dense or heavy but manages that rare thing of being both concentrated and light on the palate. It has a very refined, sand-like quality to the tannins and a pretty, lacy texture. Quite filigree in style, it has a lovely, long aftertaste of licorice, dark red cherries, and blood orange encased in bright acidity. Full of life, this is a multidimensional wine, vibrant and energetic. **| 97**

2020 Il Marroneto Brunello di Montalcino Madonna delle Grazie (14.5% ABV)

Initially the aromas are dark and a little reticent, with black cherry, orange zest, and intriguing bitter-herb notes. On this, their flagship Brunello, the oak is very subtly integrated and in the background, allowing the fruit to sit front and center. Cool blue fruits like blueberry, just-ripe black cherry, and floral notes brim joyfully from the glass. This 2020 has reached new heights, with an even greater transparency of aromas

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and flavors than ever before. What a wonderful texture it has, like falling into pillows of rose petals! Despite the seductively weightless quality to this wine, there is plenty of depth and intensity on the mid-palate, with a very nuanced range of flavors: vivid fruit, delicate wildflower, and violet aromas, with fresh earth and truffle notes that come and go, wrapped in a vibrant cherry fruit. It's an energetic and edgy wine—a modern classic, with a vivacious brightness that sets it apart. 2027–48. **| 99**

2019 Il Marroneto Brunello di Montalcino (14% ABV)

2019 was considered an exceptional, classic vintage and has been compared to 2016 and 2010. Overall, what made 2019 so good was the fact that the vintage was not excessively hot, and there was plenty of rainfall at the right times. This 2019 is ruby in color, with a touch of garnet at the rim, showing a slight evolution on this bottle. The nose is full of intense red fruits such as fresh strawberry, with dried-strawberry top notes, despite being a "cooler" vintage, unlike the 2020, which has much cooler black and blue fruits. There is a hint of brown sugar and spice on the nose—not what I was expecting of 2019 but very enjoyable. On the palate, the texture is round and soft. This is a very harmonious wine, perfectly integrated, with fine tannins. The acidity is less striking and vibrant but still adds a freshness to the finish. This 2019 is welcoming and gentle, like a warm embrace, but there is plenty of power there, too. 2025–38. **| 95**

2019 Il Marroneto Brunello di Montalcino Madonna delle Grazie (14.5% ABV)

The color is blue-toned and more vibrant than the 2019 classic Brunello. Hauntingly perfumed, with lifted violet and rose top notes and a freesia-like spice contributing to the very seductive bouquet of this wine, with its bitter-cherry, cool, blue-fruit quality. When I tasted them a year earlier, the 2019 Brunello and Madonna delle Grazie were much closer in style. Now they have taken different paths. This wine has a hedonistic, joyful feel and a range of flavors such as blueberry and rose, encased in a firm structure of silty tannins that are imposing but also deftly integrated. I would wait another two to three years before approaching it to get the best out of this wine. 2027–45. **| 98**

2018 Il Marroneto Brunello di Montalcino (14% ABV)

This growing season had a lot of rain in the spring and over part of the summer, then some almost-tropical conditions around vintage time. There was insufficient temperature difference between day and night at vintage time to really provide the conditions for great wine, but here again Il Marroneto has bucked the trend and made some wonderful wines. The aromas are something of a cross between red and black fruit, and there is a background of rich red fruit, almost rosehip syrup, covered in subtle spice. The nose is slow to open, but there is an intriguing note of rose petals, of Cynar and dark green herbs. The tannins are densely layered, and the flavors and fruit continue very, very long on the finish. I have always liked the energy and vivacity of both the 2018 Brunellos here. I prefer them to the 2019s right now, because they have a lift of rose in the aromas, which allows the floral side to be more noticeable. 2025–42. **| 96**

2018 Il Marroneto Brunello di Montalcino Madonna delle Grazie (14.5% AVB)

I have always loved both the 2018 Il Marroneto Brunellos but especially the flagship wine, Madonna delle Grazie, because of its wonderful multilayered floral aromas and its bright and lively delivery on the palate. This 2018 has immediate and vibrant red-cherry aromas competing with cool, blue fruit intertwined with notes of violet and rose. On the palate, it is very harmonious, with a beautiful weight and texture and light, gravelly-textured tannins—a little drier than on 2019, but they create a salty, more savory finish. There is a delightful harmony yet also a tension and energy in this wine that makes it irresistible. 2025–45. **| 98**

2017 Il Marroneto Brunello di Montalcino (14% ABV)

2017 was a difficult vintage because it was hot and very dry. This resulted in unripe tannins that taste dry in many wines. It was a vintage often panned by critics, but here at Il Marroneto they have still managed to make another lovely wine. This 2017 has some dark, smoky aromas, with mixed red and black fruits, cherries, black plums, raspberries, sweet spice, and a touch of green herb. On the palate, there's a lovely harmony but a kind of upright firmness to the tannins—savory, salty and firm, yet wrapped in a seductive texture. The slight dry edge to the tannins works beautifully here to counterbalance the silkiness of the wine and the rich layers of the aromas and flavors. This 2017 Brunello has much firmer tannins than the 2017 Madonna delle Grazie, but these are still beautifully managed and integrated. For Alessandro Mori, the only problem with 2017 was that it followed 2016! I am inclined to agree. 2025–38. **| 96**

2017 Il Marroneto Brunello di Montalcino Madonna delle Grazie (14.5% ABV)

In this challenging year, the vines were stressed more by drought than by heat. Some 2017 Brunellos I've tasted have simple, broad aromas and drying tannins—but not here, because this is a deeply expressive and vibrant wine. Crushed roses, lavender, freesia, and perfumed spice usher in this beautifully fragrant nose. It feels both wild and hedonistic at the same time. The palate has a lovely weight and harmony and finishes with a beautifully bright acidity, giving a freshness and lightness of touch that allow Sangiovese to show at its vibrant, energetic best. 2027–40. **| 97**

1994 Il Marroneto Brunello di Montalcino (13% ABV)

It was a thrill to taste this 1994 Brunello, which was Alessandro Mori's first independent wine after leaving behind his previous life as a banker. He says of this time, "I decided to allow myself, Iacopo's mother Anne, and my son Iacopo, to enjoy what I had when I was growing up. [Making] this wine is an expression of the purest part of my childhood, of the good things about childhood in my early family life and the Mori family clan." The color is a deep garnet. At first, the wine has some earthy and tertiary aromas, showing some evolution, only to be expected with a 30-year-old wine, but it is very clean and not at all oxidized. As it opens in the glass it becomes smoky, with a touch of tar, tobacco, spice, and ash. With air, the nose develops a lovely, black-tea, Assam-like maltiness and the smoky notes of China tea. On the palate, it is smooth and completely harmonious, with a lovely texture and weight. Mature flavors combine with a light waxy note, as well as black tea and sweet tobacco, all wrapped in a meltingly seductive texture. This is a wine with a strong identity and personality, and amazingly still some freshness, lingering and alive. It is fully mature but retains focus and purity. Drinking beautifully now, it will hold but not develop. 2025–29. **| 94**

botti—a big job—four times a year. A consequence of the added attention to detail is that there are now 12 people working in the winery and the vineyards, whereas in 2019 there were only four in total, including Iacopo and his father Alessandro. Iacopo believes that even in the worst vintages, you can make good wine: "It's important to be precise, accurate, and in control of everything." Based on my recent annual tastings with them, I must agree. Even in "off" vintages like 2018, father and son have managed to produce something exceptional.

"Our history is our treasure," remarks Alessandro. "The more we are attached to history, the more we are able to express it. Il Marroneto Brunello di Montalcino is the perfect evolution of an expression of Sangiovese in its place." These charming and elegant Brunellos have a nostalgia for times past in the way they are matured, but they are also a graceful and vibrant expression of all that is best about the present. They are the results of passion and dedication and a love affair with the land that has already lasted 50 years. ■