

The Sun Also Rises

A dispatch from **Montalcino** by **Jeremy Parzen**

Growers were already beginning to harvest their early-ripening varieties when I arrived in Montalcino at the first week of September. Despite some hail that damaged vineyards in the southwest of the appellation in August, the 2008 harvest is expected to be a classic vintage, with rich fruit that has ripened slowly, thanks to cool evenings during the summer. The Sangiovese harvest began mid-September as predicted, and aside from some light rainfall, growers are exceedingly happy with the results.

Sangiovese grapes,” said Fabrizio Bindocci who began making wine there in the 1970s. “Just look at the bright, clear color,” he noted as we tasted his gorgeous 1997 Brunello di Montalcino over a lunch of garganelli with ragù, stewed wild boar, white beans and an aged pecorino. “If it’s dark and opaque, it’s not 100% Sangiovese.”

“Sangiovese is an extremely difficult grape to grow,” said legendary winemaker Gianfranco Soldera, one of Brunello’s undisputed masters, when we tasted together at his storied Case Basse estate. “You need to know how

A panoramic view of the Montalcino harvest in progress

PHOTO COURTESY TENUTA IL POGGIONE



It has been a tough year for Brunello. In April 2008, five major wineries were implicated in an investigation launched by the Siena prosecutor’s office. According to sporadic accounts in the press, investigators have alleged that a small group of winemakers have used grapes other than Sangiovese in their Brunello, which, according to law, must be made with 100% Sangiovese grapes. Confusion and bureaucratic inaction led to an unnecessary ban by the U.S. Alcohol and Tobacco Tax Bureau. But the U.S. and Italian governments quickly hammered out a solution. The good news: The Italian quality-control laboratory in Florence has already begun to issue certification that the wines are made from 100% Sangiovese grapes.

When I met with the winemakers at Il Poggione, one of the appellation’s most respected producers of traditional-style Brunello, they had already received their certificate letters from the Italian government and had begun shipping their current release to the American market. “It’s easy to tell whether a Brunello has been made with 100%

to grow it and you need to grow it in the right soil in order to make fine wine.” Certain growers, it seems, have planted Sangiovese in vineyards not suited for the variety. Of course, certificate letters have not been issued to every Brunello producer, and some will not be allowed to ship their 2003 Brunello to the U.S.

At a recent and heated public forum held at the University of Siena, renowned enologist Ezio Rivella, ex-director of Banfi, argued that the appellation should be changed, allowing for the use of international grapes, giving the wines more appeal in the global market. Wine writer Franco Ziliani and winemaker Teobaldo Cappelano countered that the distinct nature of Italian wine is what sets them apart from great wines made in other countries. As one small producer noted in a Q&A that followed, the large wineries should make wine however they like in Montalcino, but “they shouldn’t call it Brunello if it’s not made with 100% Sangiovese grapes.”

Although some producers have clearly strayed in the past, the sun also rises over Montalcino. ■■

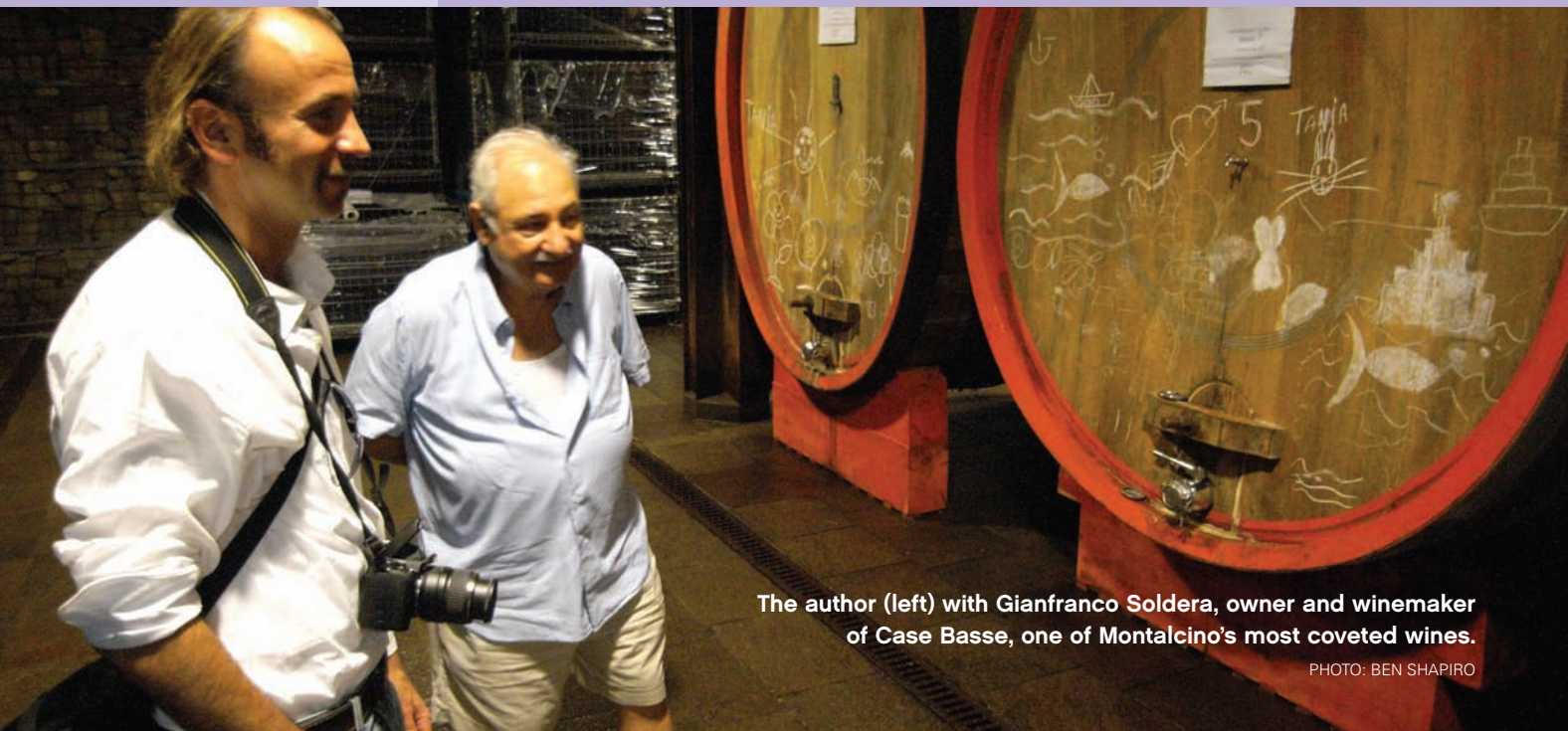


The Sangiovese grape is at the core of the controversy in Montalcino.

PHOTO: JEREMY PARZEN

It's easy to tell whether a Brunello has been made with 100% Sangiovese grapes: Just look at the bright, clear color."

—Il Poggione's Fabrizio Bindocci



The author (left) with Gianfranco Soldera, owner and winemaker of Case Basse, one of Montalcino's most coveted wines.

PHOTO: BEN SHAPIRO