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Sangiovese Is Winning New Attention for More Balanced, Age-Worthy Wines

Wine Spectator credits decades of research, site selection and winemaking changes for a stronger generation of Italian reds.

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Sangiovese, Italy’s most widely planted grape, is drawing renewed attention as producers in Tuscany and other regions turn out more balanced and age-worthy wines after decades of changes in farming, clonal research and winemaking, according to a

new Wine Spectator report.

The magazine said the grape now stands out not only for its role in some of Italy's best-known red wines, but also for its range of styles and relative affordability at a time when many consumers are looking for bottles that pair well with food and still offer value. Sangiovese-based wines are central to Chianti Classico, Brunello di Montalcino and Vino Nobile di Montepulciano, and the grape also has a strong presence in Morellino di Scansano, Carmignano and parts of Emilia-Romagna.

The report describes a clear shift from the way Sangiovese was long grown in Italy. For centuries, much of the grape was planted for quantity rather than quality, often producing thin and tart wines with firm tannins. Even though Sangiovese became known around the world as a symbol of Italian wine, its best results remained tied to a limited group of places, especially in Tuscany, where soils, elevation and late-season weather made it possible to ripen the variety more fully.

That narrow geographic success is linked to the grape's difficult profile in the vineyard. Wine Spectator said Sangiovese is high-yielding, thin-skinned and late-ripening, with a tendency toward high acidity and sharp tannins. Those traits can make the difference between an austere wine and a refined one depend heavily on site selection and farm management. The report said the grape performs best in nutrient-poor, stony soils and at elevations between 825 and 1,650 feet, although growers are pushing vines higher as vintages become warmer.

In Tuscany's leading Sangiovese areas, especially Chianti Classico, Montalcino and Montepulciano, producers have spent decades refining how and where they grow the grape. Research by estates in Montalcino, including Biondi-Santi and Banfi, work tied to the Chianti Classico 2000 project, and studies at Tuscan universities helped improve clonal selection. Other changes followed in rootstocks, planting density and vine training. In the cellar, many producers also adopted more precise fermentation and aging practices, including barrel programs influenced in part by Bordeaux.

The result, the report said, is a more consistent generation of wines with freshness, firmer balance and clearer fruit expression. It said recent examples show more red and black fruit, floral notes and savory herbal character than many older styles. Warmer

growing seasons have also played a role, especially in helping the grape reach better ripeness without losing structure.

DNA research cited in the report said Sangiovese is a cross between Ciliegiolo and Calabrese Montenuovo, linking the variety to both central and southern Italy. Broadly, the report said, the grape is often divided into two forms: Sangiovese Grosso, associated with Montalcino, Montepulciano and the Lamole area in Tuscany, and Sangiovese Piccolo, found more widely across Chianti Classico and the larger Chianti zone.

The magazine said Sangiovese covers 8% of Italy's vineyard area, making it the country's most planted grape variety, and noted that more than 100 clones are registered. It also said the grape has had a strong showing in its annual rankings over the years, with 236 Sangioveses appearing in Wine Spectator's Top 100 Wines over four decades and 35 reaching the Top 10.

Part of the grape's commercial strength comes from how easily it fits at the table. The report said Sangiovese's natural acidity makes it well suited to foods built around tomato sauces, pickled and fermented flavors, cured meats, cheeses and grilled meats. That versatility has helped keep demand steady across entry-level and premium categories. Wine Spectator said Chianti Classico and Vino Nobile di Montepulciano remain especially attractive to price-conscious buyers, while Morellino di Scansano and Carmignano also offer lower-cost options.

The report also highlighted the longevity of top examples. It said the best wines from leading vineyards and strong harvests can age for 50 years or longer. As evidence, the magazine pointed to tastings of a 1956 Chianti Classico, a 1949 Barone Ricasoli and several Brunellos from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s that were still performing well.

Another major part of the grape's evolution came through blending. Traditionally, Sangiovese was often paired with local grapes such as Canaiolo, Ciliegiolo, Colorino, Mammolo and Malvasia Nera, and, in some cases, white varieties including Malvasia and Trebbiano. In the 1960s and 1970s, some estates began using international grapes in an effort to raise quality and move beyond the limits of Italian wine laws at the time. That experimentation helped create the super Tuscan category, which became one of

the most important shifts in modern Italian wine.

Wine Spectator’s review of recent harvests said several vintages over the past three decades stand out for Sangiovese. It identified 2021, 2019 and 2016 as especially strong years, with 2015, 2013, 2012, 2006, 1999 and 1997 also performing well. According to the report, nearly 25% of the 2021 Sangioveses it reviewed from Italy earned classic ratings of 95 points or higher. For 2016, it said nearly 120 wines reached 95 points or more, making that year one of the deepest modern vintages for the grape.

The description of those harvests also points to a broader climate story. Cooler years such as 2021 and 2013 were praised for structure, tension and acidity, while warmer seasons such as 2015 and 2012 produced more concentrated wines. The report said 1999 was an early hot vintage that in some ways foreshadowed the climate conditions seen more often in recent years. Producers are responding by moving vineyards upward in elevation and by relying more on site-specific farming choices that preserve freshness.

The grape still shows strong local identity across regions and markets. In Montalcino it is often known as Brunello, in Montepulciano as Prugnolo Gentile, in the Scansano area of coastal Maremma as Morellino, and on Corsica as Nielluccio. Historical Tuscan references also include Sangioveto. Those local names reflect how long the variety has been part of the farming and wine culture of central Italy, even as producers continue to redefine its style for modern drinkers.

Wine Spectator said much of the current momentum is being carried by a younger generation now running family estates in Tuscany. Many of those wineries are working with vines from newer clones and rootstocks planted after years of research, while older vineyards are reaching greater maturity in sites chosen for cooler exposure, stony soils and higher altitude.