

# Tuscany's forgotten 1997 Brunello shines

seemed buyers were bamboozled. Bottles of the vintage that once sold for US\$100 and more can now be found for less than half that price.

## Artist's estate

I'd bought a few cases and have been drinking them year by year, only to find the vintage decent but dull. Then, a few weeks ago, I opened a 1997 Castello Romitorio, whose beautiful label of a painting called *Bread and Wine* is by Italian artist Sandro Chia, also owner of the estate. Even as I poured the wine into the glass, I could tell something was very different. The fruit in the bouquet was powerful, leaping up from the glass. As I swirled the wine, the aroma was as fresh as if it had just come from the barrel.

I sipped and was amazed. The wine had developed so remarkably in the two years since I'd last tasted it that I thought I might have chosen a different vintage. But, no, here was the 1997 I'd previously found so dreary coming into brilliance, in colour, in bouquet,

and in complexity of flavours. Its tannins were loosening, its 13% alcohol was in perfect balance, and its Sangiovese Grosso grapes exhibited all those qualities that gave Brunello di Montalcino the reputation of being one of the world's most treasured wines.

I've gone on to sample others of the vintage and found, to varying degrees, the same transformation taking place. Some, like Mastrojanni's, are just beginning to shed their adolescent gawkiness, while others, like Castello Banfi, seem close to full maturity.

## 'Dumb period'

Obviously, big red wines can, and do, improve with age, and some wines go through what the trade calls a "dumb period". But, the discrepancy between the early hype and the wine on release was unlike anything I'd ever experienced.

And then, I realised why.

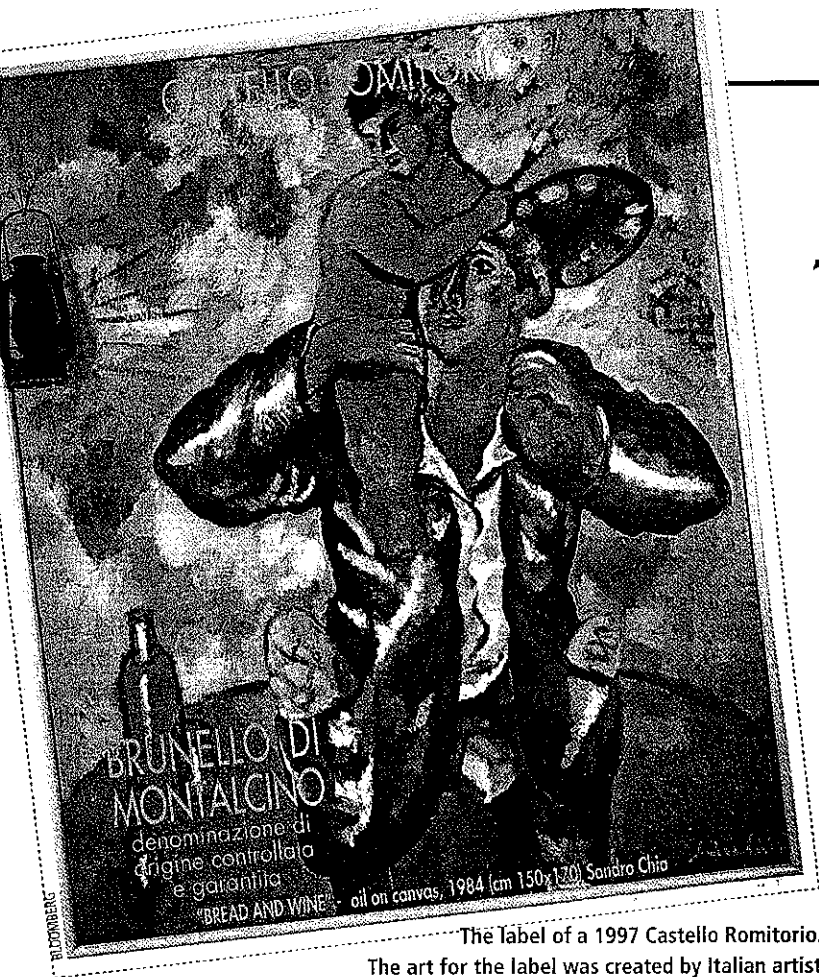
Traditionally, Brunellos were wines that were made to be saved for decades before coming into full maturity. Legendary bottlings like those of Biondi-Santi, which creat-

ed the wine's reputation in the 19th century, tasted better at 50 years of age than at 20. But, Brunello's fame has caused so many newcomers to plant estates in and around the town of Montalcino that that old style has been transformed into several styles, most lighter, some with more alcohol.

Back in 1975, only 800,000 bottles of Brunello were produced by 25 estates; in 1995 more than 3.5 million bottles were made by 120 winemakers. Today, there are more than 220, many making wines to be drunk young, and the trade and media have largely gone along with the shift.

There are now plenty of Brunellos never intended for longevity. So, while my early experiences with the 1997s were out of whack with the hype, a dozen years later, that vintage is developing into a very fine one indeed, with the prospect of getting still better in the next five years.

So, I'm holding on to what I've got and may even buy more, now that they're pretty cheap. — Bloomberg LP



The label of a 1997 Castello Romitorio. The art for the label was created by Italian artist Sandro Chia who is also owner of the estate.

| BY JOHN MARIANI |

I hope you haven't drunk all the celebrated 1997 Brunello di Montalcinos in your cellar, because if you have, you may have made a mistake.

Back in the late 1990s, the wine media and trade went wild over 1997 Tuscan wines, insisting this was the greatest vintage of the 20th century. In particular, the region's most famous wine, Brunello di Montalcino, was deemed magnificent.

Prices soared for futures, wines

were on allocation, wineries and distributors held back supply from the market, and within months of appearing on store shelves, the 1997s were hard to find. Then, everyone went silent.

When people started actually drinking the wines, it became evident they didn't even come close to deserving the ratings doled out by the media. They weren't even particularly fine examples of Brunello, much less "wines of the century".

The 1997 Brunellos just didn't justify the extravagant praise. It