

What We Learned in Europe

We recently went to Europe, and if we had just read that phrase, we'd now be cringing and preparing for a horrid, pedantic travelogue filled with arcane references to grapes and places and people that no one cares about, peppered with cutesy, pseudo-exotic phrases like "say *arrivederci* [ah reeve uh DAIR chee] to the same-old, same-old, and *buon giorno* [bwon JOHR no] to Brachetto!"

But please hang in there, because we actually learned something in Europe. In addition to being intellectually and spiritually fulfilling, this new knowledge also cinches the deal that our trip was fully tax-deductible. We could go on and on and on¹⁰ about things we saw, the strange non-English-speaking people we met, and stuff we poured into our pie-holes, but we won't (thank Dog). Instead, we'll just talk about Angelo Sasseti.

We were in the ridiculously perfect Italian hill town of Montalcino, home of Brunello di Montalcino, one of the justifiably famous Big 3 Italian B wines. It's the kind of place that Disney Imagineers[®] visited and totally ripped off for their films and theme parks.

One of our suppliers had scheduled us to visit Livio Sasseti Pertimali, a small producer on the outskirts of the town. Having no directions to the winery, we bumbled around Montalcino as if we expected to find a huge, blinking sign.

We eventually called the winery to get the poop. No one there spoke English, but we did find a guy who spoke French, a language that we know mostly from reading wine labels. Despite understanding roughly 4.7% of what the guy said, we found ourselves rolling down a "road" paved primarily with boulders. We rejoiced at the apparent miracle as we found a sign for the Sasseti property.



Angelo and Debra Sasseti

There we discovered a guy who looked like an Italian winemaker sent by Central Casting. He spoke no English, and our Italian was even more limited than our French. We asked for Signore Sasseti, and he replied "Angelo or Lorenzo?". Unaware that there might be a choice, we said "Either !" He held up a finger, made a quick phone call, and then pointed up the hill and said "Inglese". He then walked into the vineyard and picked for us two small bunches of Sangiovese Grosso grapes, better

known as Brunello. The late-ripeners were too late for the harvest, and thus would never be wine, but they tasted incredible!

A small car came down the hill, bearing a young woman and a small dog. Debra, the man's 20-ish daughter, spoke brilliant English. The dog just barked, but only when he wasn't eating grapes. Debra explained that the man was her father, Angelo Sassetti, and that we were probably supposed to be next door at the winery of his brother, Lorenzo. She mentioned that Angelo and Lorenzo had been feuding for years, and never spoke to each other.

Yikes! As folks who were supposed to be at Lorenzo's, we sheepishly attempted to excuse ourselves and to head back toward Lorenzo's place, or better yet, back to the comfortable safe-zone of our room. Debra would have none of it: "You're here now, so I'll give you a tour!"

And so she did, starting with the vineyard, where she explained that harvest workers carefully evaluate and select bunches, collecting them in small tubs that they carry, so as not to damage the grapes.



We then visited the adjacent cellar where Angelo Sassetti produces his excellent wines, directly underneath his hillside home. Mrs. Sassetti, a beautiful and charming woman, apologized for her utilitarian work apparel and lack of cosmetic adornment. She was dressed down because she, her husband, and the winery's one full-time employee were busy pushing large vats of grape skins around, and then pressing out the juice.

In the barrel room, Debra explained that Brunello is cellared for four years prior to bottling. She drew samples of the developing 2004 and 2005 vintages straight from the huge oak casks made in Veneto. The wine, like Robert Frost's woods, was lovely, dark and deep.

We then became some of the first people in the world to sample the 2007 Brunello, harvested just 10 days prior. Our verdict: It's Really Grapey ! However, we're betting that Angelo will coax it into form in the four years he has left before he puts his name on it.

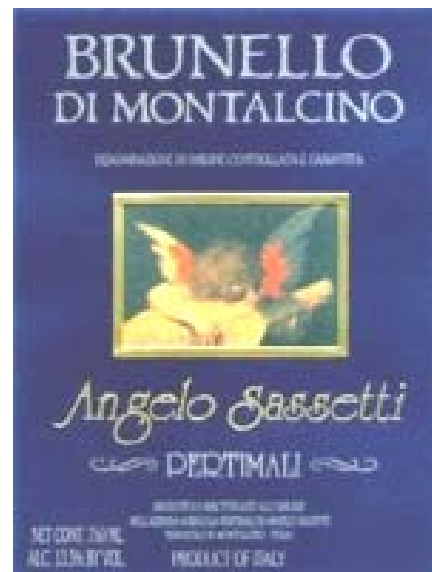
Toward the end of the tour, we were surprised to learn that at small wineries like this, people actually put the wine bottles into boxes by hand. So, when you buy wine in the store, those fingerprints are literally still on the bottles.

We found this connection very real, and comforting in some strange way.

This got us thinking about the big brand wines that come from factory farms, where grapes are harvested by machines that shake grapes off the vine, dumping and bruising the grapes, along with a load of twigs, bugs, leaves and bird doody into large collection vats. These are then trucked miles to a processing facility and dumped again into huge machines, pumped through the winery by computers, bottled on automated bottling lines, aged to minimum specs, whizzed along to packaging lines where robotic cartonizers can box and seal 1,200 cases per hour, and then palletized for shipment to Big Retail, where consumers buy them without a moment of consideration.

What we learned in Europe is that smaller is better. Grapes grown within sight of the winemaker's home are better than grapes bought from slopes unseen and unknown, and then trucked miles to some processing facility. Hand-selected grapes are better than machine-harvested grapes. Wine made by families who put their names on each bottle are better than wines that bear labels concocted by men in suits and their distillations of marketing studies and focus group sessions.

Small producer wines are works of art, while mass-produced wines are wonders of science. And while we are champions of science, it is art that we admire.



Whenever any of us choose to drop a few dollars on a bottle of wine, we've got a choice between lining the pockets of shareholders in Big Wine Corp., or in supporting the livelihoods of Angelo Sassetti and the thousands of other family farmers who make wine around the world.

And that's why Hair O' The Dog specializes in small producer wines.