



BARONE
RICASOLI

MY FAVORITE VIN SANTO

Italy, Tuscany: A Retrospective of Barone Ricasoli's Vin Santo del Chianti Classico

MONICA LARNER

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It was known as the “welcome wine” in Tuscany because families always kept a bottle on hand to serve to houseguests who might come calling. A little glass of sweet Vin Santo was offered on these occasions the same way the British might offer a glass of Sherry to visiting neighbors and friends. Indeed, Vin Santo was an important social enabler in the rural culture of traditional Tuscany..

Today, production of Vin Santo del Chianti Classico is very limited—and precious. The wine is extremely difficult to make and it incurs great expense....

The Ricasoli family of Castello di Brolio in Gaiole in Chianti is, in my eyes, the most important contemporary guardian of Tuscany's Vin Santo tradition, thanks to the many years they have kept at it and the exceptional quality they have obtained. This family is also credited with inventing the modern blending formula for Chianti Classico red wines. The Ricasoli pedigree is undisputed.

I joined Francesco Ricasoli, his head winemaker Carlo Ferrini and other Italian colleagues for this intimate tasting in February. Our retrospective started with the most recent vintage on the market now, 2009, and went all the way back to 1923. The depth and scope of this vertical tasting will never be repeated because some of these wines no longer exist at the estate's historic cellars. For example, we opened the very last bottle of the 1923 Vin Santo di Brolio.

Some of my personal favorites include 1960, 1955, 1949, 1943 and the unforgettable 1929 vintage. Vin Santo's distinctive taste profile is closely linked to oxidation and the heavier aromas of caramel, dried apricot and maple syrup that come from oxidative winemaking techniques....

Barone Ricasoli's Vin Santo is largely based on Malvasia Bianca, but smaller percentages of Sangiovese and, more recently, Trebbiano Toscana are added to the blend. This is not a late harvest dessert wine. The clusters are harvested according to their normal ripening and growing cycle and are then hung by their stems and left to dry for two months. In the vinsantaia (a dedicated Vin Santo winery), winemaking is executed in smaller oak casks called caratelli. The wine undergoes primary fermentation and malolactic fermentation (which it completes or sometimes does not complete, depending on the vintage) inside these characteristic oak barrels. Barone Ricasoli uses several barrel sizes in their vinsantaia, ranging from 225- to 110-liter capacities.

Francesco sees his wines next to foie gras or crostini toscani with liver pâté. “Or better yet, serve Vin Santo on its own. This is a wine you sip, you never drink it”.

(extract from www.robertparker.com)



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THE TOP 10

2009 Vin Santo del Chianti Classico Castello di Brolio (0,375l)

Rating: 95

The 2009 Vin Santo del Chianti Classico Castello di Brolio is Malvasia with tiny parts Sangiovese and Trebbiano Toscana in supporting roles. This is a gorgeous dessert wine in the prime of its youth. It boasts stunning fruit intensity and precision. In appearance, it shows a luminous golden color with amber highlights. It captures and reflects the ambient light with extra sparkle. On the nose, the wine peels back to layers of dried apricot, tropical fruit, honey and candied orange peel. Delicate mineral notes add to the wine's overall elegance and persistence. The mouthfeel is creamy, rich and almost succulent, thanks to this Vin Santo's expertly measured sweetness.

2004 Vin Santo del Chianti Classico Castello di Brolio (0,375l)

Rating: 97

The 2004 Vin Santo del Chianti Classico Castello di Brolio is a tremendous wine and one of the true standouts in this retrospective spanning back to the 1923 vintage. It's so rewarding when you catch Vin Santo just as it embraces those first signs of aging. It crosses that magic threshold between primary fruit flavors and evolved complexity. This wine hits that sweet spot with bull's-eye precision. The bouquet offers many unexpected aromas, such as dried fruit, maple syrup, porcini mushroom and dried tobacco leaf. This Vin Santo opens to a deeper amber color (compared to the younger vintages) and it shows slow, glycerin-rich movements as you swirl the glass. This is a beautiful expression with earthy layers to add to the smoke, mineral and other delicate aromas that emerge from the bouquet. Silky sweetness wraps smoothly over the long finish.

1995 Vin Santo del Chianti Classico Castello di Brolio (0,500l)

Rating: 94

Lusty and intense, the 1995 Vin Santo del Chianti Classico Castello di Brolio is another standout vintage in this historic retrospective. This Tuscan dessert wine shows impressive fullness and voluptuousness. The bouquet offers beautifully aged aromas of dark caramel, brown sugar, dried figs and wild mushrooms. The mouthfeel is driven by evident alcohol and a quick burst of acidity that delivers a sudden blast of power. This wine is distinguished by the strength and determination of its outgoing personality.

1983 Brolio Vin Santo (0,750l)

Rating: 94+

This was the year the final episode of M.A.S.H. aired to more than 125 million television viewers. The 1983 Vin Santo di Brolio takes us back to a glorious vintage and a nostalgic time when the whole concept of Tuscan wine was in its infancy. This is a beautiful expression with smooth aromas of caramel, brown sugar, candied fruit and butterscotch. You also get a distinctive balsam layer of cola, licorice and rosemary oil that adds to the elegant intensity of the bouquet. This Vin Santo shows a dark amber appearance with darkened copper highlights. However, the wine's best side is the mouthfeel, thanks to its luscious, creamy consistency. Only 408 bottles are left resting at the Castello di Brolio cellars.

1982 Brolio Vin Santo (0,750l)

Rating: 98

This wine is singing in a loud, harmonious and glorious voice at the moment. The 1982 Vin Santo di Brolio is my absolute favorite expression in this unique retrospective that spans nearly a century of winemaking at Castello di Brolio. This stunning Vin Santo (in a 750 ml bottle) opens to a dark amber color with shiny chestnut highlights. This is a beautifully expressive wine that boasts gorgeous intensity and a level of inner freshness and brightness that absolutely defies its age. The bouquet presents a steady succession of aromas, including crème caramel and marron glacé. The effect is convincingly sophisticated and intriguing. The mouthfeel is equally beautiful and pure. Only 390 bottles exist at the winery.



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THE TOP 10

1960 Brolio Vin Santo (0,720l)

Rating: 96

This decade of counterculture, music and creativity opens to gorgeous opulence and intensity when interpreted through this lovely Tuscan sweet wine. The 1960 Vin Santo di Brolio is a beautiful creation and is one of the standout bottles of this retrospective. This gorgeous wine is redolent of fine spice, preserved fruit, pomegranate marmalade, cured tobacco and roasted espresso. This wine has the amazing capacity to highlight the smaller aromatic details with the greatest precision and sharpness. This was the year Italian film director Federico Fellini made *La Dolce Vita*.

1955 Brolio Vin Santo (0,720l)

Rating: 94

Only 90 bottles of this vintage exist back at the Castello di Brolio cellar. The 1955 Vin Santo di Brolio is a balanced and forthcoming wine that boasts an enticing layer of rich muskiness on the bouquet. One of my tasting companions described that unique aroma as foie gras, and although it took me a moment, I had to agree. That association immediately made me think of pairing this wine with pâté or foie gras—undoubtedly excellent food partners for a wine of this opulence and smooth sweetness. This elegantly aged dessert wine moves seductively over the palate with lavish intensity and silkiness.

1949 Brolio Vin Santo (0,720l)

Rating: 95+

This is an exceptional wine that has aged in a very graceful and quiet manner since the years of Italy's post-WWII reconstruction. The 1949 Vin Santo di Brolio boasts a calming and soothing personality that almost seems symbolic of its peacetime birth year. The bouquet is deeply aged and finessed with medicinal herb, rosemary oil, caramel cola and balsam intensity. The wine has moved gracefully far beyond any primary fruit or barrel-driven secondary aromas. The finish is tightly polished and firm. You still get a touch of acidity, and the wine is almost miraculously free of evident oxidation despite its old age.

1943 Brolio Vin Santo (0,720l)

Rating: 94

Here's another amazing journey back in time. The 1943 Vin Santo di Brolio transports us to an era when I can't imagine many people had the wherewithal to follow the 12-month winemaking cycle with much attention or focus. Despite those understandable distractions during wartime, this wine delivers a fascinating taste profile. Aged Vin Santo shows enormous grace and sharpness with aromas of caramelized sugar, toasted coffee bean and bright balsamic herb that unite with seamless transitions. The mouthfeel is smooth, creamy and lively. Thanks to the naturally high residual sugar, these wines have a unique ability to withstand the test of time. Vin Santo from this part of Tuscany is one of Italy's truly ageless wines.

1926 Brolio Vin Santo (0,720l)

Rating: 96

Here's another "wow wine" in what has proven to be a historic retrospective across nine decades. The 1929 Vin Santo di Brolio is a wine that all of us drank with enthusiasm. Indeed, I think we consumed most of the bottle once this tasting was completed. I am absolutely amazed by the precision and purity offered by the bouquet. The wine's appearance is beaming with light and luminosity followed by a polished copper appearance that is brilliant and translucent. The bouquet shows drying mineral notes with aged tertiary layers of licorice and campfire ash. Instead of obvious fruit, you get ethereal—almost surreal—intensity. Only six bottles remain in existence at the winery.