



A mainstay of Brunello, Banfi was named Winery of the Year at Vinitaly in April. Cristina Mariani-May, who co-runs the firm, tells us why the company markets the family's wines as an 'affordable luxury', and the importance of tourism

BANFI AND Brunello go together like gin and tonic. The estate has grown to become one of the leading lights in Montalcino, and its owners, the Mariani family, are credited with introducing Americans to Italian wine in the late 1960s. In 1967, brothers John and Harry Mariani travelled to Emilia-Romagna to visit a co-operative called Riunite with the aim of importing a Lambrusco tailored to American palates to the US. The duo had high hopes for the sweet sparkling wine and by 1983 Riunite was the number-one imported wine in America, with Banfi bringing in 11 million cases of the sparkler into the country.

Spotting its potential as a region, in 1978 Harry and John bought 1,820 hectares of land south of Montalcino and established Castello Banfi. Today, having grown the estate to 2,830ha, one third of the land is under vine in a constellation of single vineyards, with the remainder occupied

by olive groves, wheat fields, plum trees, forest and scrub. Now run by Harry's son, James, and John's daughter, Cristina Mariani-May, Banfi is in safe hands. The estate was named Winery of the Year at Vinitaly in Verona in April, and scooped a wine excellence award from the American Chamber of Commerce.

AFFORDABLE LUXURY

For Cristina, the key to success in today's saturated wine industry is marketing the wines in the Banfi portfolio as "affordable luxuries". "We have to present ourselves as an affordable luxury in order to succeed. Wine is a very challenging and competitive market - so many new things are being put out there; if you don't have authenticity you're going to come unstuck," she says.

Celebrated as the "builders of Brunello", the Mariani family has expanded beyond Montalcino with the historic Bruzzone

winery in Piedmont, now known as Banfi Piemonte, which specialises in sparkling wines. Broadening its reach further, the Banfi portfolio takes in wines from the Maremma, Bolgheri, Chianti and Chianti Classico, which are exported to 85 countries.

Mariani-May is happy to report a recent run of good vintages, which has been great for the region. "Montalcino started getting attention again in 2010 because the wine press loved the vintage. And 2012 was outstanding, which helped Montalcino be recognised again as a leader in quality wine production," she says. Based in Tuscany and the US, Mariani-May believes the challenge in America with Brunello is education. "Once consumers move into the Italian category they don't leave it because people are won over by the elegance and finesse of the wines. American consumers are coming back to liking that style of



Cristina Mariani-May

wine. People want more accessible styles today. They are eating lighter and don't want to drink heavy wines. American palates are changing and people are seeking out softer, lighter wines, such as Pinots from Oregon rather than big California Cabs. Tastes are migrating to cooler climates for the drinkability of the wines," she says.

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ARISTOCRATIC WINE

Having gained a reputation for their reds, Banfi makes equally compelling whites, be it in the form of La Pettegola, a racy Vermentino from the Tuscan coast with notes of apricot and grapefruit, or Fontanelle – a barrel-fermented IGT Toscana Chardonnay from the southern hills of Montalcino that spends six months on its lees, resulting in notes of apple, peach, apricot and spice, which Mariani-May describes as "an aristocratic wine with ageing potential".

Tourism remains a priority for Banfi, with its boutique hotel, Il Borgo, having recently been voted one of the top small



Keep me posted: a junior suite at Banfi's boutique hotel, Il Borgo

hotels in Italy. "Banfi has always believed strongly in hospitality. For this reason, the winery was designed to welcome visitors and open its doors to wine aficionados visiting the beautiful countryside of southern Tuscany," says Mariani-May. In the 1700s the space served as a dwelling for farmers working for local landowners. With its 14 rooms, including eight suites, the hotel opened in 2007. Guests can go on guided winery tours, enjoy bespoke wine tastings, swim in a pool looking out over the vineyards, dine in Il Borgo's two restaurants – La

Taverna and La Sala dei Grappoli, run by head chef Domenico Francone, and taste local sheep's cheese and prosciutto paired with Banfi's extensive collection of wines in the hotel's enoteca.

Acclaimed Italian interior designer Federico Forquet created the rustic yet elegant look of the rooms, which feature vinotherapy products made with Sangiovese. With its vaulted arches and chandeliers, classic Tuscan restaurant La Taverna is housed in what used to be the estate's barrel cellars,

and serves traditional Tuscan dishes made from local seasonal ingredients such as wild boar ragout braised in Rosso di Montalcino; duck ravioli with shaved truffle; and lamb loin with a wild herb and pistachio crust.

The fine-dining La Sala dei Grappoli, meanwhile, offers a revolving seasonal menu in an elegant setting with al fresco dining when the weather permits. The menu boasts the likes of quail with Jerusalem artichoke and foie gras; pheasant ravioli with asparagus and spring truffle; and monkfish with cannellini beans.

This July Banfi will celebrate its 20th year as the main sponsor of the Jazz & Wine in Montalcino festival, which will run from 18-23 July.

One of Italy's most enduring music festivals, this year's event will see top jazz musicians from around the world gather in Montalcino for a week of wine-soaked performances within the historic walls of Castello Banfi and the 13th-century fortress in Montalcino.

