



Best of 2017: Monica Larner

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It's 5:00 a.m. and I am sitting in the dark in my hotel room reflecting on the past year that is now coming to a bittersweet conclusion. I'm in this hotel as the air quality back on Larner Ranch in Santa Barbara, California, is so bad in the midst of the tragic wildfires burning near my family's home. The dim blue light of my laptop reflects off the lenses of my newly prescribed reading glasses. (Reading glasses, yes, those are one of the many smaller milestones passed in 2017.) There were many more significant changes this past year, some good and some unhappy.

I will greatly miss the lively exchanges shared with two dear teammates, Jeb Dunnuck and Neal Martin, who both left our publication this year. It has been an enormous honor and a privilege to work with these two extraordinary wine critics. Our two newest hires Joe Czerwinski (my former Tasting Director for many years at the *Wine Enthusiast*—great to see you here, Joe!) and William Kelley have big shoes to fill, but are absolutely up to the task. I look forward to hitting that comfortable and productive work stride now that our reviewing team has been successfully reconfigured. For sure, there were a lot of growing pains over the course of the past year, but if 2018 opens a new and exciting chapter for the *Wine Advocate*—I say, bring it on!

When looking back over the past 12 months, I cannot help but recall the great political and cultural uncertainty that has washed over us—not just in the United States—with regards to climate change. The effects on Italian wine started to emerge with clear and troublesome patterns to me over the past years and in 2017 in particular. We've all noticed subtle changes for years now in Italy: The parched and scorching hot summers in Puglia and Sicily where farmland cracks open like chapped lips; the fact it no longer rains softly in Rome (water instead dumps down with rainforest-like ferocity overpowering the capital's ancient drainpipes and flooding my neighborhood streets); and the worrisome infrequency of winter snow and freezes in cool climates like Piedmont (subzero temperatures are important to resetting vines against disease). Depending on the region, the 2017 vintage showed various unfortunate combinations of these dangerous weather adversities and conspired to create one of the most difficult growing seasons in recent memory across Italy.

Top Three Most Outstanding New Releases

Instead of selecting all three from Italy, I wanted to spread the love, and decided to break this category down into three sections representing Northern, Central and Southern Italy.

Central Italy

To my mind, one of the most Outstanding New Releases from Central Italy comes from the Sangiovese whisperer Alessandro Mori. His **2012 Il Marroneto Brunello di Montalcino Madonna Delle Grazie** exudes elegance and grace with a stylistic approach that is so unique to this small estate to the north of Montalcino's historic center. Finesse and pedigree put Il Marroneto in a small group of classic Brunello producers along with personal favorites Cerbaiona, Il Poggione and Salvioni (just to name a few). I took a big chance on Il Marroneto when I gave the 2010 vintage of this wine 100 points a few years back. To be honest, previous vintages tasted over the 10 years prior had not always convinced me. But the quality of 2010 was absolutely overwhelming and undisputed to my mind. I am so pleased to see Alessandro Mori maintain this excellence with his 2011 release and this exceptional wine from 2012. I look forward to reviewing the 2013 edition in just a few weeks' time.

Another wine from Central Italy that stuck out among this year's new releases is the **2013 Tenuta Guado al Tasso Matarocchio**. I would argue that Tuscany is one of the most exciting homes of Cabernet Franc. I would include this wine within an elite circle that includes Duemani's Cabernet Franc Duemani, Le Macchiole's Paleo and Tenuta di Trinoro's line of single-vineyard Cabernet Francs. The Antinori family has authored some of Italy's finest wines over these past decades. I am particularly honored to award this beauty 99 points.

The **2013 Felsina Chianti Classico Gran Selezione Colonia** rounds off my selection of Most Outstanding New Releases from Central Italy. To my mind, this wine very much represents the true heart and soul of what the Gran Selezione category of Chianti Classico was designed to taste like. This is a single-vineyard expression of 100 percent Sangiovese that leaves no doubt as to its varietal typicity and its territorial roots. The Felsina folks spent two years of dynamite blasting to clear the rock that forced previous generations to abandon the Colonia vineyard. Polished mineral nuances present on the bouquet are nostalgic reminders of that excruciating effort.