

A New Italian Renaissance

Ferrari, Gucci, River Café, even Football Italia - so much of what we aspire to is Italian, and Italian cuisine is second only to Indian as our national favourite. Somehow Italian wine has never quite caught our imagination in the same way - perhaps because we have been faced with a sea of cheap (and often distinctly nasty) Lambrusco, Soave and Chianti in straw flasks. The last few years have seen a real renaissance in Italian winemaking with exciting flavours emerging from the deep south and a new wave of superstars from the traditional classic regions.

The fruit of the vine has been made into Italy's vinous lifeblood for millennia, with the oldest wine cellar dating back 3000 years. With over a thousand grape varieties and a huge range of climates, ranging from the fog-bound hills of Piemonte to the sun-baked south, Italian wine is an endlessly fascinating and addictive subject. Italy's diversity is both her weakness and her trump card - confusing even for wine buffs, yet a goldmine of new flavours for anyone bored with a sea of international Chardonnay. Italian wines all have one thing in common - they are food wines first and foremost - something very close to the hearts (and waistlines) of the Italians.

Beautiful South

From Naples south, Italy's "Mezzogiorno" is where there is a real buzz about potential, though still regarded as a third world country by the affluent north. The wine mentality down here has tended to be quantity, not quality - Sicily alone produces enough wine to rank sixth in world production (after Argentina). Much of this has always ended up in vermouth or in the wine lake, and perhaps surprisingly, France is still a major customer for vast volumes of this plonk, taking 20% of Italy's exports. For years, EU subsidies have gone to grubbing up vineyards - sadly usually the oldest and lowest yielding vines.

Today, the few lone voices for quality such as Taurino (Notarpanaro £5.99 Majestic) have recently been joined by a rash of big names and cash from the north, like Antinori, Pasqua and GIV. International investors are still few but include Australia's BRL Hardy with its D'Istinto brand and California's Kendall Jackson. A flock of Antipodean winemakers have also flown in, led by Kym Milne who started working with Augusto Cantele back in 1993 (wines include Trulli Primitivo £4.99 Tesco, Somerfield, Trulli Chardonnay £4.49 Safeway, Unwins, Somerfield).

Their expertise in using modern techniques like temperate control and reductive fruit handling (in other words protecting the young wine from damaging contact with air) has definitely helped kick start the revolution. Without such techniques, the hot southern climate was a big disadvantage, but with the right technology, all that wonderfully ripe fruit could actually survive to the bottle. Local expertise has followed on, with emphasis on getting the fruit right in the vineyards too.

Order out of Chaos

Co-operatives (or more appropriately, in Italian "Cantine Sociale") produce over half of all Italy's wine. These organisations are often more ruled by local politics than any will to make good wine and have tended to eke out a living on government and EU handouts, rather than produce anything people actually wanted to drink.

A "Cantina" may have hundreds of members and persuading them to co -operate is an enormous task. Settesoli in Sicily with its 2,300 members has taken on this challenge and seems to be winning. It is headed by the visionary Diego Planeta, who flew thousands of miles to Australia in 1989 to persuade wine maker Carlo Corino to come back to Italy. A native Italian, Corino had spent 15 vintages "Down Under" in Mudgee. It took Diego one day to talk Carlo round, but a whole week to persuade his wife. Settesoli could then turn its attention to the vineyards, planting international varieties along with the native mix. By 1997, the company was in a position to start building a brand to challenge the New World at its own game and so Inycon was born (Tesco, Sainsburys, Waitrose, Unwins and others £4.99-£5.49). The brilliant Sicilian sun and rich volcanic soil gives ripe intense flavours to everything that grows here and grapes are no exception. Sicily been described as Europe's answer to California (or Australia or Chile for that matter) and with more brands like Inycon, and some of the emerging superstars like Planeta's estate wines (Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay Waitrose, Unwins £17.99), this may not be just talk.

The winds of change are not yet blowing everywhere and in some areas, the "Cantine" have been accused of wielding too much power. In Soave, around 95% of production goes through the co-ops who mostly have an industrial, low price mentality. Proposed changes to the regional wine law will actually allow higher yields and specify the old "tendone" method of training vines, preventing any innovation in the vineyards. This has forced fast -driving, fast -

talking Roberto Anselmi (long one of the leading lights in the region) to abandon the name of Soave completely.

Viva La Differenza

It is the fabulous flavours from Italy's treasure trove of grapes that make her wines so exciting. Die-hard Italophiles may criticise the loss of traditional wine styles in the fashion for internationalisation of winemaking. Arguably, the New World approach actually allows the true "Italian-ness" of the fruit to shine through, instead of being hidden by a blanket of oxidation, dried-out fruit and hard tannins. Use of new wood and small barrels (instead of unhygienic old wood vats or "Botti") is still relatively recent in Italy, and producers are still experimenting to get the balance just right. Undoubtedly, some wines have been over-oaked in the race to be seen to be "New Wave", but recent tastings show much finer judgement and balance.

Another major challenge is to make unfamiliar tongue-twisting names acceptable to the wine drinker. Chardonnay may trip off the tongue up more easily than Falanghina or Catarratto, but Pinot Grigio wasn't a household name a decade ago. The big international names are not exactly recent invaders either - Cabernet Sauvignon has been around since the early 19th century and it seems common sense that a dose of Cabernet in your Chianti is better news than soulless white Trebbiano. A number of producers are choosing to blend the familiar with the less so, such as Firriato's Zagara Nero D'Avola/Sangiovese (Sainsbury £3.99) or Catarratto/Chardonnay (Waitrose £3.99).

Grapes to watch from the south include Nero D'Avola (the major grape in Planeta's stunning but hard to find Santa Cecilia). Primitivo is genetically identical to Zinfandel and, in spite of Italian protests, is marketed as such under the Pendulum label (the one in the shiny gold bottle). It has also made an impression under its own name in last year's "Wine Challenge Red Wine of the Year" A Mano Primitivo (Sainsbury £5.99). Aglianico is an ancient import from Greece and potentially one of Italy's best red grapes - look out for Taurasi from Feudi di San Gregorio in Campania (Unwins £13.99), who also make a wonderfully exotic Falanghina (Oddbins £6.79).

The Classics revisited

Piemonte and Tuscany still vie for top spot in Italy. Piemonte has a star weapon in the Nebbiolo grape - late ripening and distinctly truculent but capable of truly great complex wines. The last decade has seen four or five vintages of the century, which has revived interest, along with the running debate about modernisers versus traditionalists. High prices have put Barolo and Barbaresco out of reach for most of us, but Barbera is proving to be an exciting and affordable alternative now the aggressive tannins and high acidity of the past have been toned down.

Tuscany has definitely benefited from the Chianti 2000 project, with the better clones and a greater understanding of how to manage Sangiovese (which can be thin acidic and lacking in colour when under-ripe). The official recipe for Chianti also changed in 1996, allowing producers to use up to 100% Sangiovese along with Canaiolo and up to 15% Cabernet and bringing many producers of "Super-Tuscans" back into the Chianti fold. There are even plans in discussion to drop white grapes from Chianti altogether. Lessons are gradually filtering down to the more basic Chianti, though unfortunately there is still some fairly grim stuff out there. Tuscany is not alone in this problem - Bordeaux faces a similar challenge with its most basic claret.

Cut and Dried

A tour of the classics has to include one of Italy's most distinctive wines. Recioto and Amarone (the dry version) are made in Valpolicella and Soave by drying grapes before fermentation. It is almost certainly the only wine style that depends on weather conditions both before and after the harvest for quality. The traditional drying loft contains slatted wooden racks and straw mats where grapes are laid out to dry for 3 to 4 months. A group of leading Amarone producers has got together to build a central drying shed using plastic crates and computer-controlled doors and dehumidifiers to keep rot at bay and ensure clean flavours.

Massive international demand for Amarone has generally creamed off all the best Valpolicella grapes, leaving the "Normale" to be made with poorer fruit. However, producers like Masi and Allegrini have recognised that not all Valpolicella vineyards are suitable for Recioto and Amarone. Some are better for "super-valpols" such as Masi's Toar and Osar (very limited

availability, try Masi Soave £5.49 and Valpolicella £5.99 Oddbins) and Allegrini's La Poja (though none of these claim DOC status).

Ready for the Future?

Italy certainly seems to be holding a strong hand in the battle for a place in the world's wine glasses. After all, "imitation is the sincerest form of flattery" so the New World fascination with Italian varieties must say something. Even Robi n Day, the man behind Jacobs Creek, admits to planting Italian obscurities like Sagrantino and Lagrein in his own estate, so Italy with her long years of experience in how to "do it right" should have a great future.

© Caroline Gilby
Originally published Wine World Jan/Feb 2002