

Italian wine: the incredible journey

Known as Enotria – the land of wines – by the Greeks, Italy boasts over 2,000 grape varieties, over 2,000 growers of wine and a wealth of different regions, each with their own culture, soil type and micro-climates. Italy produces more wine than any other country and its diversity brings a vibrance to the Italian wine scene that is unmatched by any other place in the world. To know Italian wine is to embark on a lifetime of discovery; of ‘degustation’; of exploring; of enjoyment. It is to journey through the country and through history, hand-in-hand with a culinary richness that includes wild boar with juniper; rabbit with rosemary; pork chops in balsamic vinegar and fried sage leaves, not just pizza, pasta, and polenta. Indeed, there are as many wines in Italy as there are traditional Italian regional dishes, and this abundance ensures that there is a wine for every palate and for every pocket.

Given this richness and bounty, Italy has for far too long been the unsung hero of the wine world, existing under the shadow of the great French chateaux and the exuberance of New World wines. Italy’s past has been steeped in producing wines as an alternative to water: as characterful, yet unrefined companions to the country’s diverse local food dishes. They have been drunk and enjoyed for centuries, forming a thread through the country’s eating and drink culture with scant regard of further nurturing for the outside market. But, this situation is changing rapidly.

There has been a complete revolution in the wine scene in Italy over the past 30 years, with the arrival of a new generation of producers. Many of the new players are sons of the traditional growers, bursting with enthusiasm and passion for wine derived from their travels in the New World and the study of modern viticultural techniques. This explosion of knowledge and commitment has brought finesse and quality to the wines and paved the way to greater acceptance and an embracing of Italy on the international wine stage. Italy is adopting more modern practices, is improving the quality of its wines and is beginning to emulate many of the popular New World wine styles that prevail in Europe.

Such developments have brought even greater choice and variety, which can create confusion for the uninitiated, yet inevitably this complexity forms part of the fun of selecting Italian wines. It is a challenge and an adventure. Italy’s invasion over the years by the Greeks, the Romans and the Turks, coupled with its dramatic geography - a spine of wooded mountains runs through the centre of the country and is flanked by low-lands and almost 3,000 miles of coast - has shaped its wine culture and invites even novices to take their first sip.

In the area of Cortona – a hillside town said to be older than Troy - in Tuscany, there are wines that are spicy and elegant with great structure, acidity and purity, and with flavours that reflect a Rhone wine style. Sicily, blessed with its abundant sun, produces syrah-type wines with the tropical, fruity style of Australian Syrahs. Further North, Piedmont boasts wines with great scent, fruit and acidity, which match perfectly the region’s rich traditional dishes such as liver and duck. Here also, the well-known Barolo wines, made from the Nebiolo grape, offer tannin with an incredible perfume, which complement the region’s robust foods such as game and braised meat cooked with garlic and juniper that require a clear, spicy tasting wine. Such foods would overpower a traditional Bordeaux.

Crucially, it is the food that has driven traditional Italian wine production. The wines have always been boldly Italian in character: subdued and subtle, with a certain

austerity not present in wines from other parts of the world. Their taut Italian backbone frames the honest flavours of the food.

In Tuscany, where food is more balanced, not as rich as in Piedmont, the San Giovese grape reigns supreme. It fills the mouth with the perfect flavour to complement a Tuscan steak: not too rich yet succulent. It is in Tuscany that the increasingly popular Brunella and Chianti wines are produced. They draw on the traditional qualities of their region's grape to create wines with an underlying earthiness and acidity.

Italy's regions traditionally draw on their own unique grape varieties, and many have more than just one grape that is produced solely in that area. Nebiolo grapes used to produce the bold Barolo and its lesser known neighbour, Brunello Montelcino, predominate in the Piedmont region; while Sagrantino holds court in Umbria; and the unusual Negroamaro grape is a springboard for the clean and fresh new wines, which are currently emerging from Puglia.

Such companies as Antinori, one of the largest wine producers in Italy, are now taking their know-how into regions such as Puglia, Sicily and Campagna, where the wine culture is less developed than elsewhere. They are exploring the combination of the country's traditional and historical grapes with international varieties such as chardonnay and merlot to produce the fresh, fruity wines so loved by international consumers.

Other growers are experimenting with traditional grape varieties such as Aglianico, which dates back to the Greeks who colonised the country in around 735 BC and were credited with bringing the very first wines to Italy. Producing a wine that is firm in tannin, rich in structure and with great perfume and great fruit, Aglianico grapes are now being extensively planted throughout Campagna, Basilicata, Puglia and Molise in the Central South of the country. Producers are drawing on modern technology to mark the renaissance of the Aglianico grape in wines with a rich and fruity contemporary appeal.

Modern techniques have also prevailed in tracing Italy as the possible source of the well-known but not indigenous Zinfandel grape from California, USA. The Primitivo varietal from Puglia has been found to have the same genetic fingerprint as the successful Zinfandel and is now the focus of intense scrutiny and curiosity in the wine making world. Vahe Keushguerian, an Armenian-American entrepreneur, for example, has been quick to react to the new found potential of the Primitivo grape and has invested heavily in Puglia. He hired the Australian winemaker, Chris Ringland, to supervise production and in a matter of only a few years, they are producing some of the finest wines in the region from the oldest Primitivo and Negroamaro vineyards. Their Re Del Salento is ripe on the nose with concentrated and powerful flavours, and notes of dried herbs and tobacco. It has great minerals, yet is elegant, balanced and rich.

Their wines are typical of the current wave of innovation that is gripping Italian wine, particularly in the South, where much of the most extensive replanting and experimentation is taking place. Puglia, Campania and Calabria - the place first earmarked by the Greeks as Enotria - are the places to watch for the hottest New Age Italian wines. They are bubbling with new investment and ideas. Here, and throughout Italy, great wines are emerging apace as the best of the old and new coalesce and there are exciting wines available in all price brackets. There is so much to explore and so many fabulous wines to try that the only solution is to take the first step on this incredible journey of discovery and choose an Italian wine.

