

Bill Zacharkiw: Discover the white wines of Sicily



BILL ZACHARKIW, SPECIAL TO MONTREAL GAZETTE

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A lot of red wine is made in Italy, but the country produces some fantastic white wines, too, Bill Zacharkiw says. *MICHELLE LOCKE / ASSOCIATED PRESS*

When it comes to wine, most people think red when they think Italy. It's not surprising: Few Italian regions are known primarily for whites. After pinot grigio — and trebbiano if you are a little more wine savvy — many would be hard pressed to name Italian white grape varieties.

But Italy produces some fantastic white wines. And though it might seem counter-intuitive, many are from the warmer, more southern regions. Why is that strange? Most of the best known white wines come from cooler, more northerly climates. Whether you are talking chardonnay, riesling, sauvignon blanc, or any other well known white grape variety, the best expressions tend to come from cooler growing areas where the grapes can hold their acidity as they ripen.

However, in regions that have been growing grapes for centuries, wine makers have had time to test out grapes, mostly by replanting or keeping vines that worked best in a particular soil and climate. In many cases, the vines themselves have either cross pollinated, or were purposefully crossed, with other grape varieties.

One of my favourite sources for Italian whites is Sicily, which has a host of interesting indigenous white grapes. While there are plantings of international varieties like chardonnay

and sauvignon blanc, I am much more excited about grillo, catarratto, carricante, and inzolia which is also called ansonica.

Except for carricante, all of these grapes are well represented at the SAQ. Carricante, which grows almost exclusively on the slopes of Sicily's Mount Etna, is a huge omission at the SAQ. I tasted Etna whites that were absolutely extraordinary, almost Chablis-like in their minerality and precision, and with an ability to age that will rival most whites.

As for the rest, most of these southern Italian whites are under \$20, and offer a wide range of styles, so they are well worth your investigation. Here is a rundown of the grape's main qualities and some of my favourite wines among those I recently tasted.

Grillo

While used primarily for making the fortified wine Marsala, more producers are starting to make dry table wines with grillo. This ancient grape dates back thousands of years. Like Marsala, grillo has declined in popularity: it can be a tough grape to grow and vinify as a dry wine because it has a tendency to oxidize. But thanks to winemakers like Marco de Bartoli — only 9 bottles of his fabulous 2014 are left at the SAQ — it is making a comeback. Grillo wines tend to be not overly aromatic but have a chardonnay-esque texture.

Sicilia Igt 2014, Grillo, Fondo Antico, Italy white, \$17.90, [SAQ # 10675685](http://www.saq.com/page/fr/saqcom/vin-blanc/fondo-antico-grillo-parlante-2014/10675685) (<http://www.saq.com/page/fr/saqcom/vin-blanc/fondo-antico-grillo-parlante-2014/10675685>). Very interesting wine. Not the most aromatic, but a punchy attack of fruit and spice. Moderate texture, fresh enough for an apéritif, but with very good length that finishes on peppery spice. Residual sugar: 1.7 g/L. Serve at 8-12C. Drink now. Food pairing idea: Apéritif, trout with lemon and black pepper.

Terre Siciliane Igt 2014, Vigna Verde, Marco De Bartoli, Italy white, \$26.90, [SAQ # 12755152](http://www.saq.com/page/fr/saqcom/vin-blanc/marco-de-bartoli-vigna-verde-2014/12755152) (<http://www.saq.com/page/fr/saqcom/vin-blanc/marco-de-bartoli-vigna-verde-2014/12755152>). One of my favourite wines from last year; I'll let you know when the 2015 arrives. Shows a wonderful fruitiness, mostly melons. Super juicy finishing with a superb mineral note. Delicious. Residual sugar: 1.7 g/l. Serve at 8-12CC. Drink now. Food pairing idea: Apéritif, smoked salmon.

Catarratto

As the most planted grape in Sicily, it's no wonder catarratto was used to make bulk white wine, along with serving as a blending component for making Marsala albeit in smaller quantities than grillo. Today, catarratto is used mostly in blends with other grapes that bring more aromatics and depth. However, as a base for the blend, it works superbly as it can maintain its acidity in the Sicilian summer heat, which is of primary importance. Look for citrus and orchard fruits with a fresh, but well balanced acidity.

Terre Siciliane Igt 2015, Catarratto/Viognier, Montalto, Italy white, \$11.55, [SAQ # 12698670](http://www.saq.com/page/fr/saqcom/vin-blanc/montalto-catarratto-viognier/12698670?selectedIndex=1&searchContextId=1158945981413211128) (<http://www.saq.com/page/fr/saqcom/vin-blanc/montalto-catarratto-viognier/12698670?selectedIndex=1&searchContextId=1158945981413211128>). Rich and honeyed, with pear and peach, but with a spicy finish — both grape varieties are well defined. For under \$12, it's a worthy wine and unique in its style. Residual sugar: 4 g/L. Serve at 8C. Drink now. Food pairing idea: Vegetarian or seafood curries with coconut milk.

Sicilia Igt 2015, Anthilia, Donnafugata, Italy white, \$18.95, [SAQ # 10542137](http://www.saq.com/page/fr/saqcom/vin-blanc/donnafugata-anthilia-2015/10542137) (<http://www.saq.com/page/fr/saqcom/vin-blanc/donnafugata-anthilia-2015/10542137>). 75 per cent catarratto with ansonica and grillo making up the balance. Lots of fruit, with apple and citrus, with a hint of tropical. Easy drinking with a comfortable acidity that keeps it exceptionally fresh. Residual sugar: 4.2 g/L. Serve at 8C. Drink now. Food pairing idea: Apéritif, spicy fried squid, smoked salmon with cream cheese, capers and onion.

Sicilia Igt 2015, Lucido, Marco de Bartoli, \$20, [SAQ # 12640603](http://www.saq.com/page/fr/saqcom/vin-blanc/marco-de-bartoli-lucido-2015/12640603) (<http://www.saq.com/page/fr/saqcom/vin-blanc/marco-de-bartoli-lucido-2015/12640603>). A rare 100 per cent catarratto. Pear and lemon alongside a subtle herbal note. Comfortable texture, this is all about the finish, with an almost salty minerality. Really enjoyed this. Residual sugar: 1.3 g/L. Serve at 8-10C. Drink now. Food pairing idea: Apéritif, raw oysters with lemon, mussels.

Inzolia

Inzolia, or ansonica, like catarratto, is most often found blended with other grapes. The most aromatic of the Sicilian white grapes, I have found it to be floral with an almond-type nuttiness. If picked late, it can be low in acidity, so it requires a skilful grower to pick it early enough to keep the freshness without sacrificing the aromatics.

Sicilia Igt 2015, Inzolia/Chardonnay, Angimbé, Cusumano, Italy white, \$14.75, [SAQ # 11097101 \(http://www.saq.com/page/fr/saqcom/vin-blanc/cusumano-angimbe-2015/11097101?selectedIndex=2&searchContextId=11588691814114657589\)](http://www.saq.com/page/fr/saqcom/vin-blanc/cusumano-angimbe-2015/11097101?selectedIndex=2&searchContextId=11588691814114657589). 70 per cent inzolia with chardonnay making up the rest of the blend. Interesting aromatics with orange and apple, with exotic spice and a zippy finish. Well done. Residual sugar: 1.5 g/L. Serve at 8-10C. Drink now. Food pairing idea: Apéritif, seafood pasta with cheese and cream sauce.

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