

WINE & SPIRITS / CIN CIN! ITALIAN WINE IS IN!

Sommeliers around the country are going beyond Pinot Grigio and Chianti and showing their stuff with unexpected Italian wines BY HEATHER JOHN ILLUSTRATION BY SERGE BLOCH

YOU CAN TELL A LOT ABOUT A WINE LIST THESE DAYS BY its by-the-glass offerings. Once the dumping ground for bottles restaurants needed to move in bulk, today's by-the-glass lists are more likely to represent the hottest wine trends and varietals. Last year, it was Austrian Grüner Veltliner; the year before, Spanish Rioja reds. But today, take a look at the savvy lists and you'll probably find the new darlings of the wine world: the Italians.

We're not talking about the ubiquitous Pinot Grigio or Chianti offerings—though you'll certainly find those affable varietals too—but rather, wine names that don't trip as easily off the tongue: fruity Italian whites such as Arneis, Falanghina, Soave, and Tocai Friulano; earthy Central and Southern reds like Brunello di Montalcino, Nero d'Avola, and Sagrantino.

According to David Lynch, co-author of *Vino Italiano* and former wine director at Babbo in New York, the sudden interest in Italian varietals is “not so revolutionary as evolutionary. The Italian wine evolution is running parallel to the sommelier revolution.” Simply put, it's cool to be a sommelier. “And for the serious-minded, facial-haired wine geek of today,” Lynch says, “there may be no more exciting region than Italy—a repository of ancient wine-grape migration with a diversity of grape varietals that's stunning.”

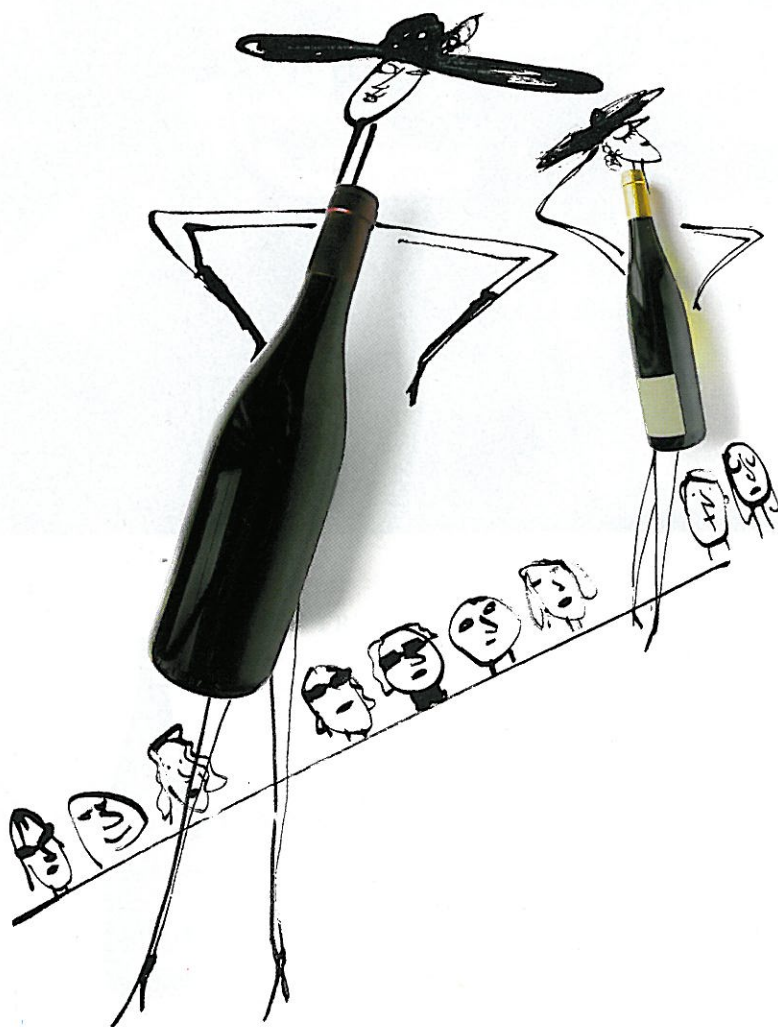
As consumers and diners, we've become obsessed with artisanal ingredients, so it follows that we expect this from our wines as well. “With ‘terroiristes’ railing against the evils of industrialized wines and support for the artisanal producer,” Lynch says, “there's a market for the customer to try something they've never heard of before.”

Italy's lesser-known wines offer not only the thrill of discovery, but also something more basic: They're perfect with food. Often these wines are higher in acidity than their counterparts from France and California.

“Without food, the higher acidity can really freak people out,” says David Rosoff, general manager of Osteria Mozza in Los Angeles. “It's a learning

curve, and as people begin to associate wine more with food, they find Italian wine very user-friendly.”

Rosoff adds that in New York, Italian wines are at the forefront of all wine lists, not just at Italian restaurants. For obvious reasons, the wine had less distance to travel to get to New York from Italy. Initially, Rosoff says, the idea of launching Osteria Mozza's entirely Italian wine list in />



Southern California, even in an Italian restaurant, was a little daunting. But it's been a huge success.

"We have close to 800 wines on the list, and the difference between each is exciting," he says. "The list really expresses itself from region to region, and even though it's just from one country, it's the most diverse wine list I've ever worked on in terms of flavors."

Shelley Lindgren, wine director at A16 in San Francisco, echoes Rosoff's initial concerns about an Italian-heavy list in California. "When we opened A16 over four years ago, it was a risk for us to offer lesser-known Italian varietals," Lindgren says. "Now customers come in and they've likely seen some of these varietals at other restaurants around the city. I think it has a lot to do with the whole renaissance that's been going on in Italian vineyards since the mid '90s. We're seeing more wines and better wines find their way to the West Coast."

In fact, over the past two decades, there has been a seismic shift in the quality of, as well as approach to, winemaking in Italy. The most notable category affected has been the lower-priced, value wines. Take the wines of Campania and Basilicata, for example. These Southern Italian regions have always had the *terroir* and southern latitude necessary to produce great reds, but until the last decade or so, vintners lacked access to the technology necessary to produce competitively priced quality wines on a larger scale.

Lynch attributes the sea change to a generational shift. "The younger generation is trying to do more with the vineyards instead of selling as many grapes as they can. Before the '90s, their father might have sold grapes to the local cooperative, whereas now, the son has decided to create a brand instead. Once some of the technology and skills spread to the Italian south, there was no stopping them."

And the proof is in the numbers. Today, Italy exports more wine to the United States than any other country, sending out twice as much wine as France. In 2006, the Italian wine industry crossed the billion-dollar mark in terms of wine exported to the U.S. And what we're seeing in the stores and on restaurant wine lists is better quality and better value than ever before.

For those who have not yet been bitten by the Italian bug,

HOT BOTTLES

BIANCO



Teruzzi & Puthod 2006 "Rondolino" Vernaccia di San Gimignano, TUSCANY/ \$14
Clean lemon and green apple notes.



Bastianich 2006 Tocai Friulano, FRIULI-VENEZIA GIULIA/ \$16
Ripe pear flavors balanced by bright minerality.



De Falco 2005 Falanghina, CAMPANIA/ \$16
A rich floral white with apple and peach flavors.



Prà 2006 Soave Classico, VENETO/ \$16
Bright citrus and tropical fruit with mineral notes.



Pertinace 2006 Roero Arneis, PIEDMONT/ \$17
Floral aromas with peach flavors and almond notes.

ROSSO



Donnafugata 2006 "Sedara" Nero d'Avola, SICILY/ \$13
Inky dark with blueberry fruit and a spicy finish.



Montecarbello 2001 Brunello di Montalcino, TUSCANY/ \$33
Full-bodied with blackberry flavors and floral aromas.



Corte Lenguin 2003 Amarone della Valpolicella Classico, VENETO/ \$36
Rich, dried-cherry fruit and a hint of tobacco.



Scacciadiavoli 2003 Sagrantino di Montefalco, UMBRIA/ \$43
A full-bodied red with velvety tannins and vanilla notes.



Niedrist 2005 Suedtiroler Blauburgunder (Pinot Nero), TRENTINO-ALTO ADIGE/ \$45
Lovely acidity with herbal and raspberry notes.

now's a great time to look for some of these lesser-known varietals. I've included ten bottles I've seen recently on wine lists across the country (and that's just scratching the surface of wines ready for discovery). The selection you'll find locally is likely to differ, so ask your sommelier or wine merchant for advice. For instance, if you like big, meaty reds, he or she might steer you toward a rich and dark Sagrantino with black pepper spice and earthiness. Or a hearty Barbera with bracing acidity (great with fattier foods) but gobs of bright fruit. More adventurous? Perhaps you'll enjoy a glass of Pinot Nero, Italy's name for Pinot Noir, with alpine herbaceousness and notes of clove. Perhaps you're in the mood for a straw-colored glass of Soave, a mineral white with almond characteristics. Or a fruit-bomb like Arneis that is as lovely enjoyed as an aperitif as it is with a seafood dinner.

Thanks to the great diversity of Italian wines, there's a bottle out there with your name on it. *Cin cin!* ■