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Why The Most Exciting Italian Wines May Come From The Least Familiar Places

**Brian Freedman**, CONTRIBUTOR

*I cover food, wine, drinks, travel; host dinners; and consult on wine* [FULL BIO](#) ✓

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To borrow a phrase from the fashion and film industries, Italian wine is having a moment. Which may seem like a strange observation given the country’s status as one of the most perennially popular sources of wine imported into the United States, and the instant name-recognition of many of its most famous regions and appellations. But for years now, consumer appreciation for the astounding diversity of Italian wine available in the American market has expanded substantially beyond the most familiar.

“For sure we’re seeing a lot more off-roading into lesser known regions in general on our wine lists,” Steve Wildy, Director of Beverage for Vetri Family and Terrain Cafe, told me in an email. “I think there are a few things going on here: [Ten] years ago when we opened Osteria [a favorite in Philadelphia since it opened] with an all-Italian list, for example, the vocabulary of Italian wine on the guest end (heck, mine too) was much more limited. People were just getting used to seeing Prosecco as the sparkling option back then. Since then, the Italian scene and restaurants’ championing of those wines has really taken off, and the collective IQ for Italian wine in general has soared.” As a result, the ability for restaurants to sell a broader swath of the Italian spectrum, and to dig deeper into particular regions and appellations, has skyrocketed. “Now guests will ask questions about the style of Prosecco we carry for example rather than ‘what’s Prosecco...’

Wildy added, “Now that people are more often familiar with the basics, they feel more comfortable exploring the unknown.”

This shift is being felt in wine retail, too. Timothy Buzinski, Owner of Artisan Wine Shop and Beverage Director at The Roundhouse by Terrance Brennan in Beacon, New York, noted in an email that he, too, has “seen an interest in some alternate Italian regions. As sommeliers and retailers have helped consumers become comfortable with Tuscany, Piedmont, and the Veneto, it’s been easy to make connections to other regions and wines of similar style. So turning a Barbaresco drinker on to a Nebbiolo-based Valtellina from Lombardy is happening, but then also trying to introduce wines from the south using Aglianico or Nerello Mascalese.”



Italy may have a wine history going back thousands of years, but it’s only fairly recently that the full range of its wines, like the ones crafted from vines like these for

Part of the shift can also be attributed to a new generation of wine drinkers that, as countless words have been published discussing, are famously open to new wine experiences. Buzinski agrees, and believes that “the younger millennials are interested in wine well beyond the traditional region and styles. They are seeking out that obscure varietal that is supremely drinkable, perhaps naturally made,” and is different from the more typical styles of wine that have been widely popular for so long. But it also could be due to a maturing American wine market, and to the growing opportunities for oenophiles to explore the world of wine—in Italy and beyond.

I have noticed it as well. Everytime I travel to Italy or taste a broad spectrum of the country’s wines, I inevitably find my preconceived notions about a particular region or appellation challenged...and often proven thoroughly incorrect.

This past autumn, for example, in the lead-up to a media trip to Roero, in Piedmont, I assumed that I’d be spending my time tasting mainly Arneis, a delicious white grape variety whose typically high quality at a fair price and versatility at the table have made it a sommelier darling on wine lists around the United States. And while I certainly enjoyed plenty of great examples of the wine—both young and, unexpectedly, elegantly aged—I was stunned to find myself falling for the great Nebbiolo of Roero as well. Indeed, while the most famous examples of Nebbiolo come from across the Tanaro River, in Barolo and Barbaresco, Roero is home to remarkable bottlings of the variety that, unlike their more famous neighboring appellations, tend to be easier to drink when younger—perfect, in other words, for an American wine culture in which the vast majority of drinkers don’t have the ability or inclination to age their wine to full maturity. (Roero can also age beautifully, too. Look for excellent producers like Monchiero Carbone, Cascina Pace, Malabaila, Cornarea, and more.)




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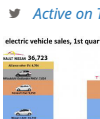
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This is indicative of so much of the Italian wine landscape right now: It’s infinitely more varied, and more exciting, than it it still too often given credit for. Indeed, there are wines in every one of the 20 regions of the country that are worth the effort to find and the money to purchase, and many of them unfamiliar. Steve Wildy, for example, has recently found himself gravitating toward the wines of Lombardia. The “sparkling wines of Franciacorta are perhaps the region's most recognized export,” he explained in an email, “but the majestic Nebbiolo wines of Valtellina, the quirky wines of Oltrepo Pavese, and the high potential whites of Lugana constitute a lot of exploratory fun on the pages of our list.” He has also been impressed with Calabria and its “pretty, storied wines of the red Gaglioppo grape” and “the rustic, edgy wines of producers like L'Acino (making red Magliocco and white Mantonico),” as well as Marche, “home to [Verdicchio,] one of Italy's great secret weapons,” he wrote. Wildy added, “The Montepulciano and Sangiovese based reds like Rosso Piceno are perfect and affordable snapshots of what drinking red wine in Central Italy is all about, and there is a fair share of quirk here as well, such as Lacrima di Morro d'Alba, the inky purple red that smells like Gewurztraminer and drinks like Beaujolais.”

Timothy Buzinski also noted a similar range of wines in Marche, and he has lately found himself drawn to Sicily as well. “Thanks to the efforts of producers like COS and Arianna Occhipinti, Cerasuolo di Vittoria has emerged as a surprisingly delicate wine given the warmth of the region and revived the Frappato grape,” he noted in an email. To those standout Sicilian producers, I’d add Firriato and Donnafugata as well.

He also noted how impressive the wines of Etna are, with character and structure to spare. Look for wines from Frank Cornelissen, Planeta, and Tasca d’Almerita, among other standouts. “Finally,” Buzinski noted, “Marsala is completely under-appreciated by too many. When done well, it’s balanced and fresh, making it perfect to have after dinner with a few Italian cheeses or by itself.”

Even regions that have a bit more familiarity are capable of surprising. Negroamaro, Primitivo, and Malvasia Bianca from Puglia (look for Li Veli, Tenute Rubino, and Due Palme) are being made in an increasingly expressive range of styles. Masciarelli, in Abruzzo, is changing perceptions of both reds and whites there, particularly Montepulciano d'Abruzzo. Several producers of Prosecco are forcing consumers to re-consider the wine’s reputation as mainly a straightforward, inexpensive source of bubbly: I adore the wines of Masottina, Bisol, and Adami. Zonin is also doing some very interesting things with blends. Then there is Alto Adige, from which little-known Müller-Thurgau, Kerner, and Schiava are worth looking for, and excellent Pinot Grigio from producers like Nals Margreid, Abbazia di Novacella, and Elena Walch are changing perceptions of the much-maligned variety. (So, too, is Silvio Jermann in Friuli.) Sagrantino di Montefalco, in Umbria, is custom-made for a rich, grilled steak.

With unfamiliar parts of Italy benefitting from more retail and restaurant attention right now, the time is perfect to take full advantage of everything that this ancient wine-producing country has to offer. Wine has been crafted there for thousands of years, but now, consumers in the United States have the unique opportunity to see and taste a more complete portrait of its beautiful vinous mosaic than ever before.

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