

Viva Italia

A world leader in winemaking since the Roman times, Italy has come back to centre stage.

Michèle Shah reports



Just the other day as I was attempting to sort out my private cellar – dug some 15 metres deep into solid Tuscan rock – I realised just how difficult it is to put order into such diversity. This is the world of Italian wine.

My cellar, which stocks some 3,000 bottles from all-Italy is divided by North, Centre and South Italy, yet this is far too generic. Each section has a number of regions, each with a production of red, white, rosé, sweet and sparkling wines, many made from grape varieties unique to that region.

350 grape varieties

Italy is by far the most complex, yet at the same time, the richest and most exciting wine producing country. The sheer diversity of its wines originate from 350 registered indigenous grape varieties, spread over twenty regions of production, each with their individual styles, unique 'terroir' and microclimate.

With this vast plethora, Italy can offer the consumer something different and exciting, as well as having the potential to reverse the growing trend of the globalisation and standardisation of wine. The other side of the coin is that such a variety of wines from so many sources (there are some 810,000 registered wine-bottlers) does not assist effective marketing and can be confusing.

Italy has been producing wine since the ancient Roman times and even before that the Etruscans were known for their winemaking aptitude. Over the last 25 years Italy's wine industry has undergone the most radical transformation ever witnessed in a single nation. As Italian wine producers emerge from several decades of evolution – some might say revolution – a whole new class of premium wines is driving this great wine-producing nation back to centre-stage in the world of wine.

The most important changes have come from the greater class

found in Italy's traditional wines, led by the classic reds of Piedmont and Tuscany, and the elegant whites of Friuli, and from the expansion of quality wines on the Tuscan coast, the southern regions, Sicily, Abruzzi and most recently Sardinia.

The country's classified wines

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are designated DOC or DOCG. In some cases this refers to the wine-growing hectares of an entire region; in other instances the DOC only refers to a few selected vineyards. Many of these denominations are famous worldwide while others are hardly known, even in their place of origin. And while DOC(G) wines continue to increase, only a minority of the country's total production is classed in this (theoretically, at least) cream-of-the-crop category.



Shah: heady choice

Today, ever more producers of high-quality wine in Italy prefer to market some or all of their range under the more liberal “lesser” IGT designation.

An anatomy lesson

If we look at the ‘anatomy’ of Italy from north to south, each region has some very interesting estates and wines and it is difficult in so few words to bring these alive. The following is a mini-guide to Italy’s regions and the main grape varieties you can find there.

NORTH

Valle d’Aosta: Europe’s highest-altitude classified vineyards at Morgex draw on an interesting mix of Piedmontese and French varieties producing elegant, delicate wines. including Blanc de Valdigne, Petit Rouge, Malvoisie, and Vien de Nus,

Piemonte: Most of the region’s classified wines derive from native vines and single varietals predominate, though not all carry variety names. Nebbiolo, source of Barolo and Barbaresco, plus Roero, Gattinara, Ghemme, Carema, Lessona, Nebbiolo d’Alba, and other eminent reds is by far the noblest vine. Structured Barbera along with fruity Dolcetto, Freisa and Pelaverga also play a dominant role in local red wines. Bubbly, aromatic Moscato d’Asti along native Arneis, from the Roero hills near Alba, and Cortese, at its best in Gavi, make increasingly stylish dry whites.

Box: Benvenuti: Enjoy Italy in London!

Some London restaurants for imbibing Italian wines (which show their true character when matched to regional cuisine)

Assaggi	0871 2238058
No 1 Blossom Street	020 7247 6532
Convivio	0871 4260230
Locanda Locatelli	020 7935 9088
Osteria San Lorenzo	020 7584 1074
Sale & Pepe	020 7235 0098
Sartoria	020 7534 7000
Scalini	0871 3327941
Zafferano	020 7235 5800

Trentino-Alto Adige: Riesling, Sylvaner, Pinot Blanc, Pinot Noir, Pinot Gris, Kerner, Chardonnay and Muller Thurgau constitute the fragrant wines of the region. In the reds native Lagrein, Teroldego and Marzemino can be matched in class by Cabernet, Merlot and Pinot Nero.

Friuli-Venezia-Giulia: Whites excel here in particular Pinot Grigio, Pinot Bianco, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, and local favourite Tocai Friulano – now renamed Friulano only. Picolit and Ramandolo, made in small quantities are renowned as dessert wines. In the reds, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon blend with the local indigenous Refosco, Schioppettino, Pignolo, and Tazzelenghe

Veneto: Verona’s flagship wine Amarone della Valpolicella, is a strong, powerful red of uniquely dynamic dimensions made from Corvina and Corvinone. The same varieties are used to produce Valpolicella Superiore and the sweet Recioto wines. The white Prosecco grape, grown on the steep hills between Conegliano and Valdobbiadene makes delightful sparkling wines. White Garganega is the tenacious variety used in the production of Soave wines.

Lombardia: A leading region in the production of classic method sparkling wine, of which Franciacorta (with its own denomination) and Oltrepò Pavese are the centres. The main grape varieties are Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. Excellent structured, tannic red Nebbiolo is used for Sforzato from Valtellina. Other local reds are Bonarda and Barbera along with the international varieties. In the whites you can find some good Riesling Italico and Trebbiano di Lugana.

CENTRE

Liguria: Great zesty whites known as Cinqueterre made from Bosco, Albarola and Vermentino. Light reds made from Rossese di Dolceacqua and Cilieggiolo.

Emilia Romagna: The local bubbly Lambrusco comes in three different styles, from a lighter to a fuller bodied dry version with plenty of character. Sangiovese di Romagna (nothing to do with Tuscany’s Sangiovese) is a round fruity wine with depth and balance. The white Albana makes excellent, sweet ‘passito’ wines.

Marche: White ageworthy Verdicchio from Castelli di Jesi and Matelica still firmly dominates the Marche’s wine production, the main exception being Passerina and Pecorino from Offida. Quality led Rosso Piceno, based on Sangiovese and Rosso Conero, based on Montepulciano can show class as true bargains in aged red wines.

Toscana: The noble Sangiovese vine is the most prominent expression that dominates the region’s reds – from the premium production of Brunello di Montalcino, right through to Vino Nobile di Montepulciano, Morellino di Scansano, and to the regions main production which is Chianti. The Super Tuscans take in a wide category of modern, Bordeaux style reds produced in various styles throughout Tuscany and particularly those from Bolgheri on the Tuscan coast. Vernaccia di San Gimignano is by far the region’s most interesting whites.

Umbria: Orvieto’s whites made from Grecchetto with some Trebbiano and Malvasia make up the main local white variety. Sangiovese, Gamay and international varieties constitute most of the reds along with the Sagrantino, a tannic noble wine which shows great complexity with ageing, as well as producing a fine sweet passito wine.

Lazio: The prime wine area around Rome is the Castelli Romani, taking in Frascati, Marino, Colli Albani, Colli Lanuvini, Montecompatri Colonna, and Velletri, producing white Trebbiano wines. In the reds good Cesanese compete with international Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon.

SOUTH

Abruzzo: The two main grape varieties are Montepulciano d'Abruzzo for reds (not to be confused with Tuscany's *Vino Nobile di Montepulciano*), which combines robust power with suppleness. Even its cherry-pink version, called *Cerasuolo*, can be impressive. The *Trebbiano d'Abruzzo* for whites – these can often be powerfully structured barrel fermented wines.

Calabria: *Cirò* the best-known Calabrian red and rosé derive from *Gaglioppo*, as do most Calabrian reds. The revival of the virtually extinct indigenous *Magliocco* grape, an ageworthy elegant red with Mediterranean aromas and soft tannis, has brought new excitement to Calabria's wines.

Campania: *Aglianico*, which in this region is named *Taurasi*, is one of the best grape varieties in Italy, producing firm, tannic, long-lasting reds of power and refine-

ment. The main whites are made from *Falanghina*, *Fiano di Avellino*, and *Greco di Tufo*, showing a zesty, nutty, mineral character.

Basilicata: *Aglianico del Vulture* is the main red variety, coming from Mount Vulture – an extinct volcano. The few other varieties of note include *Malvasia* and *Moscato*, also grown around Monte Vulture, usually for sweet wine.

Molise: Red wines feature *Montepulciano*, *Sangiovese* *Aglianico* along with *Trebbiano* and fruity local *Bombino* in the whites.

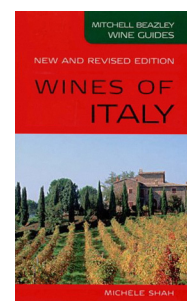
Puglia: Puglia is a prime source of the mouth-filling wines of remarkably good value. This is particularly so in the southernmost Salento peninsula, where the red varieties *Negroamaro*, *Malvasia Nera*, *Primitivo di Manduria* prevail. Rosés here from the same grape

varieties show style rarely equalled elsewhere. Whites feature *Falanghina*, *Geco* and *Fiano*.

Sicily: Perhaps the most significant development in Sicily has been the revival of *Marsala*, the once famous fortified wine. Sicily's many microclimates favour mouth-puckering reds such as a deep red *Nero d'Avola* and lighter *Frappato*, while in the whites *Inzolia (Ansonica)* dominates. The most elegant and mineral wines come from white *Catarratto*, and *Nerello Mascalese* and *Nerello Cappuccio* from the slopes of *Etna*.

Sardinia: The island's four main varieties, red *Cannonau* and *Monica*, white *Vermentino* from *Gallura*, *Nuragus* and *Monica* dominate production, yet of the most spectacular ageworthy whites from this region is *Vernaccia di Oristano*, made in the *Solera* style. ❖

Michèle Shah is the author of *Wines of Italy*



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