

Italian wine in the doldrums...

1 Oct 2005 by JR

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France's *crise viticole* may dominate the news pages but Italy's wine producers have been suffering just as much, if not more, from the current radical re-shaping of the international wine market. The big difference is that while the typical French vigneron's reaction to plummeting domestic demand and ever sharper competition from New World wines is to congregate to discuss militant protest and how to extract more help from a well-oiled system of subsidies and government distillation, the typical Italian producer is most concerned with image. It would be a humiliating admission of defeat to reduce prices, even if the cellar is stocked sky high with the last three unsold vintages.

As one of the longest-serving importers of Italian wine into the UK put it recently with a frustrated groan, "they make very good wine but they don't look beyond their own nose. They have no idea that everyone else in the world is producing fantastic wine too."

Not so long ago, Italy was on a roll. It was clearly making world-class wine, arguably for the first time in its long viticultural history, and much of it clearly distinctively different from the international styles available everywhere else from South America to South Australia. German-speaking markets were crazy about the likes of Barolo and Brunello, far preferring them to Lafite and Latour, and loden-cloth wearers were for quite a time many producers' most important customers, but the German economic malaise has seen this market shrivel alarmingly. And Italian connoisseurs themselves are becoming much more cost-conscious.

Italy was for long the prime exporter of wine to the US but the strength of the euro against the dollar, and Americans' increased enthusiasm for Spanish and New World wines, recently saw Australia overtake Italy - as it had overtaken France in the UK - as most important wine exporter to the US. Signs are that Italy has recently been fighting back in the US, although importers are concentrating on a much narrower range of favourite suppliers. The most high-profile Italian wine exporter of all Angelo Gaja of Barbaresco, a one-man publicist for Italian wine with prices that suggest he has a couple of Gulfstreams to maintain (**Gaja 2001 Barbaresco** is gorgeous, but £752 a dozen from Armit of London W11), had some particularly tough times in the US market recently but is in recovery mode now. An apparently unquenchable thirst for Pinot Grigio has helped staunch the wounds of Italy's red wine producers.

In the UK sales of white wine staples such as Pinot Grigio and Soave have also compensated for haemorrhaging demand for fine Italian reds but even so, Italy - which was once challenged only by France as Britain's favourite source of wine, is in danger of being bumped into an ignominious fifth place by South Africa, with shrinking total imports already overtaken by those of Spain and California into the UK.

Italian wine specialist writer Master of Wine Nicolas Belfrage argues that it may not matter if Italy loses the crown of selling huge volumes of wine, so long as it strengthens its position as a producer of wines that uniquely express Italian character and Italian grape varieties at the expense of yet more Cabernet and Merlot. It is certainly true that Italy has a far richer panoply of indigenous varieties and grape-growing environments than Spain for example (whose wine exports have been forging ahead recently), but Italians are not good at explaining things to outsiders. It seems to be viewed as a sign of weakness rather than a sensible sales aid to embellish a bottle with a back label that might spell out which of the eight unfamiliar proper names on the front label is the grape, which the appellation, where that appellation might be (simply naming the region would be helpful), which is the name of the producer and which is the brand name dreamt up by same.

The south of Italy and Sicily are doing relatively well, mainly by following New World models of labelling and marketing, and they enjoy much more stable vintage conditions. The real trouble spots for the Italian wine economy are the traditional centres of red wine quality Tuscany and Piemonte. For the late 1990s and early 2000s Piemonte suffered the unusual fate of too many great vintages. A wet 2002 brought to an end a string of no fewer than seven extremely successful harvests but Barolo and Barbaresco are expensive wines, and there is only so much wine that even the keenest Nebbiophile can fit in to his cellar. Producers, many of whom recently borrowed to extend their vineyards or modernise their cellars, are said to be sitting on an embarrassing amount of stock, but prices have not visibly softened, even if there are a few behind-the-scenes deals. Such crises as there are here tend to be small domestic ones, for this is the land of the family-owned wine estate rather than the shareholder.

Tuscany is rather different, particularly the scores of new vineyards recently established on the Tuscan coast which attracted so many outside investors in the late 1990s and very early 2000s. Business plans drawn up in boom times are now looking like quaint mementoes of another age. **Ornellaia**, for example, the showcase estate of the Maremma which has been bounced between several different substantial international players in recent years, reduced its price by a quarter between its heavily lauded 2001 and the **Ornellaia 2002**, still a hugely successful wine that can be drunk with enormous pleasure now (£314 for six bottles from Armit) but from a very much less successful vintage. Fortediga 2004 for example, a brand new Cabernet/Syrah blend to emerge from a 125-acre Maremma estate with heavy backing from its prominent US importer Winebow, was planned originally to sell for twice its current price of \$15 in the US and £7.99 via Liberty Wines in the UK.

There are bargains to be found among the stubbornly-priced classics. The main thing to remember is that Italy is so much to offer, and so many great white wines now, not just reds. I have included a selection of some of the most interesting Italian wine buys that I have tasted recently below.

Ah, Italy! We love you so. Nowhere is more thrilling and enjoyable to visit. But you are so annoying.

Some distinctive and fairly-priced Italians

WHITES

Casal dei Cavalieri, Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi 2004 Umani Ronchi

£8.99 Waitrose [find this wine](#)

There could hardly be a better example of just how refreshing yet complex modern Italian whites can be. This is positively opulent in its fruit character and yet has lovely notes of lemon cream.

Galea, Friuli 2001 I Clivi

£16.50 Ballantynes of Cowbridge, www.louisdressner.com in the US

[find this wine](#)

This is a great, idiosyncratic producer of dense, long-lived whites made from old Verduzzo and Tocai Friulano vines.

Vecchio Samperi Ventennale Secco Marco De Bartoli

50cl £21.50 Caves de Pyrene, Artington, Surrey [find this wine](#)

Extraordinary dry *vino liquoroso* from Marsala country that does the palate-scrubbing job of a fine old Sercial Madeira. A lesson in what long oak ageing does to wine that deserves it.

REDS

Valpolicella Classico 2004 Allegrini

About £7.50 The Wine Society, Martinez of Yorkshire, Villeneuve of Scotland [find this wine](#)

Stunning value in a wine packed with flavour - reminiscent of dried cherries. Not a jot like standard issue Valpolicella.

Tabarin, Barbera d'Asti Tabarin 2003 Icardi

£7.99 Oddbins [find this wine](#)

Dark with some old oak influence but gentle and rewarding with lots there. Neither sweet nor simple.

Montepulciano d'Abruzzo 2003 Colle Morino

£83.40 a dozen from Armit, W11 [find this wine](#)

The fruit in this vibrant young wine is so fresh it is hard to believe it all came from the heatwave vintage. This is far, far better than most Montepulciano d'Abruzzo - sweet, gentle cherry juice, yet it should drink well for at least another year.

Scurati, IGT Sicilia 2004 Ceuso

£10.99 Philglas & Swiggot, London SW [find this wine](#)

Full-bodied, richly fruity Nero d'Avola – all the fruit and nothing but the fruit.

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