Tasting Italy's Top Ranked Wines

23 Nov 2004 by JR

One of the great mysteries of the wine world is why the British are so bad at Italian wine. American, German, Swiss and Austrian importers have been plundering Italy's cellars for their finest bottles for decades now, leaving generally slim pickings for those, still relatively few, British wine merchants who are finally cottoning on to the thrilling quality of Italy's best wines.

As usual the French are to blame of course. For centuries they have distracted us with the quality of their best wines so that the typical British wine merchant understood a bit of French and a lot of France's *appellation contrôlée* system so that there was simply no headspace left to accommodate a second foreign language and the arcane mysteries of Italian wine. Most Italian specialists in the UK dealt mainly with the restaurant trade.

The Italians steadfastly refuse to drop many clues on their wine labels, which do not even carry the name of the relevant region. Too often an Italian wine bottle comes with only the following hints as to its provenance and likely character: the name of the producer, the name of a tiny village, a fantasy brand name and a sky-high price tag. Italian wine producers clearly think that back labels are for wimps.

This is why we anglophones need guides to Italian wine. Luigi Veronelli's, written substantially by American Daniel Thomases, is highly regarded within Italy but is not available in English. Ditto *Vini d'Italia* from *L'Espresso* from which its under-acknowledged principal palate, wine writer Alessandro Masnaghetti, has just resigned. Most useful therefore is the Slow Food movement's annual *Gambero Rosso* guide which appears in English (after Italian, then German) as *Italian Wines*. *Italian Wines 2003* will be published in the UK by Grub Street at £17.99 and in the US by the Antique Collectors Club within the next few weeks.

The guide is slightly confusing for non-Italians because all wineries are listed not by the name of the producer but by the name of their (often minuscule) village, but at least they are grouped within region, and there is a reasonably efficient index at the back. Each winery is given a vertical half-page in which, well laid-out, are its contact details, a full end-of-year report with quite a bit of detail, and then a list of the top wines to which Gambero Rosso's tasters allot either no, one, two or three glasses according to perceived quality.

The identity of each year's three-glass, or *tre bicchiere*, wines is a major topic of discussion within the Italian wine world. The guide is now sufficiently well established and influential that there is a perceptible backlash against it, some voices muttering about political influence on the choices and many non-garlanded producers arguing that the guide's top wines are now 'too modern', 'too oaky' or 'not typical'.

The Slow Food organisation launches each year's guide in Italy with huge fanfare but less than perfect organisation every autumn. So when publishers Hallwag invited me to the launch of the German edition of *Vini d'Italia* in Munich recently, I leapt at the chance. German organisational skills plus the chance to taste up to 212 of this year's 250 *tre bicchiere* wines, the first time I had had a chance to taste anything like so many of them at the same time, seemed the perfect combination.

Even a German-organised wine tasting of 212 wines is well over 100 too many wines for me in a single afternoon - even when the sun is shining and the atmospheric pressure favourably high for tasting. I regretfully therefore had to make some omissions and decided, for example, to concentrate on red wines and to restrict my tasting of wines from Piedmont, Italy's classic top-quality wine region that is now facing stiff competition from Tuscany according to the guide, to those of newcomers to the *tre bicchiere* roster.

(Marco Sabellico, one of the guide's two senior editors, marked 47 of the producers showing in Munich as new to *tre bicchiere* status - representing a particularly significant proportion of those from Lombardy, Marche and further south.)

So, what did the tasting show about the current state of Italian wine and this particular guide's take on it? Firstly and most importantly that there are some truly magnificent, heart-breakingly good wines being made in Italy today that can happily rival the best that France can give us. If anything, they display more tension and sheer, driving ambition - though sometimes that does indeed translate into too much obvious winemaking rather than more natural effects on the way they

taste.

The greatest concentration of sheer quality in what I tasted was in Tuscany which is benefiting not just from a run of exceptionally good vintages but also a remarkable level of investment and the effects of much more sophisticated viticulture in recent years. In some ways the *tre bicchiere* selection is schizophrenic in that there is no shortage of ultra-modern, toasty, rich, early-maturing wines (the odd one just too oaky, as muttered) but there are also much more austere, fine-boned, more classical wines such as Riecine's Chianti Classico Riserva 1999 and an unusually delicate regular Chianti Classico 1999 from Castello di Ama which, at 12.5 per cent, is surely one of the least potent of the *tre bicchiere* reds. (And one of relatively few retailing at under £20/$30 a bottle.)

Of the 98 wines I managed to taste in Munich, the absolutely outstanding ones are described fully in purple pages. The *tre bicchiere* reds from the south rarely matched them for sophistication. The overall quality is impressively high. Alas, so in general are the prices.

UK retailers who are exceptionally good at Italian wine include Ballantynes of Cowbridge; John Armit and Lea & Sandeman of London, and Raeburn Fine Wines and Valvona & Crolla of Edinburgh. Those who wish to taste the Italian wine quality revolution for themselves could do much worse than attend *Decanter* magazine's Great Italian Wine Encounter in London on 17 May. Full details on www.decanter.com.

Some of the keenest prices for top-quality Italian wine are to be had in Italy itself where some merchants will ship wines internationally. Germany, Switzerland and the US also have some exceptional specialists in fine Italian wine. There are few sources more useful when making international price comparisons than WineSearcher.

See purple pages for my detailed tasting notes.

UK retailers who are exceptionally good at Italian wine include Ballantynes of Cowbridge; John Armit and Lea & Sandeman of London, and Raeburn Fine Wines and Valvona & Crolla of Edinburgh. Those who wish to taste the Italian wine quality revolution for themselves could do much worse than attend *Decanter* magazine's Great Italian Wine Encounter in London on 17 May. Full details on www.decanter.com.

Some of the keenest prices for top-quality Italian wine are to be had in Italy itself where some merchants will ship wines internationally. Germany, Switzerland and the US also have some exceptional specialists in fine Italian wine. There are few sources more useful when making international price comparisons than WineSearcher.

See purple pages for my detailed tasting notes.