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LIBERTY WINES
Italian Producers
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The answer should be: “Which Italy?”

The 2009 harvest in Italy was outstanding in places, very good in others and, in a few, challenging at best.

In general, a wet winter topped up the country’s water reserves after several dry summers, a welcome development in most of the peninsula. Spring was generally beneficent, apart from in Puglia, while the summer was hot and dry. Beyond that, generalisation, as so often in Italy, renders trite the country’s complex patchwork of regions.

Given this, we have asked each of Liberty’s producers to provide us with a report on the 2009 vintage. We have broken this report down by region. We’ve attempted to give you a flavour of the vintage as seen by our producers, supplemented by our own tastings during and immediately after the vintage. We have not tried to be exhaustive. For instance, Emilia Romagna, which at 6,660,000 hectolitres is Italy’s second largest wine producing region, is not included in this report. Not only do we not have any producers from Emilia Romagna, but a great deal of the region’s production is focused on Lambrusco and Ancellotta (the latter is used to make a blender for colour) rather than on the sort of wines made by Liberty’s producers.

In total, Italy produced 44,500,000 hectolitres of wine in 2009. This was down by 4% on 2008, and represents a decline of over 8% on the average production over the 2004-2008 vintages. This drop in production is merely a confirmation of the long term trend in Italy. It was only as recently as 1970, when annual per capita consumption was 120 litres, that Italy produced over 80 million hectolitres of wine.

There are several reasons for this decline. Firstly, many estates have greatly reduced yields over the past two decades as they look to improve quality. Secondly, consumption of table wine is dropping (per capita consumption in Italy is now about 45 litres). And thirdly, as costs have risen in Italy, many wines that were competitively priced have become too expensive for the market at which they were aimed. These latter two factors, in particular, have seen growers keen to pocket grants in return for grubbing up vineyards that had become unremunerative.

This downward trend will be accelerated by the low grape prices that prevailed in 2009. Only in Conegliano, where the new DOC and DOCG regulations brought with them lower yields and a subsequent shortfall in supply, were grape prices higher in 2009 than in 2008. In most other regions, apart from the lucky few where prices were stable, prices fell or tumbled. In many areas, market prices were insufficient to cover the cost of production.

This is, of course, a global phenomenon. The same could be said in large parts of France and Spain, in many parts of Australia and in Marlborough. But Italy has seen large swathes of vineyard disappear in the past two decades. Few tears will have been shed for many of them. And indeed, on the positive side, the higher prices for grapes in Valpolicella Classico brought on by the boom in Amarone and Ripasso have seen the once thinning vineyards of Valpolicella Classico restored to full health.

However, EU funding for growers to grub up vineyards is ongoing. In 2008/9, Italy’s 250,000 hectares were due to be reduced by 12,000 hectares as growers took advantage of grants from Brussels to grub up their vines. This grubbing up is being done with the aim of reducing the amount of poor wine produced. Unfortunately, a great deal of this money will have been taken by people with old, low-yielding vineyards who simply cannot cover the costs of production by selling their grapes to merchants or the local co-operative. A five ton a hectare vineyard won’t cover its running costs with grape prices of 30 cents a kilo; a 20 ton a hectare vineyard will.

The problem, it seems, is one of quality rather than quantity. Italy just isn’t producing enough good wine. So the last thing needed is for some – any - of the vineyards capable of producing this quality to disappear. However, these vineyards will only remain in production if we are willing to pay the price for the wines produced from low yielding vines.

The quality of many of the wines produced in 2009 will certainly help to underpin Italy’s growing reputation for quality and innovation. This will be aided by the release of the 2006 vintage in Barolo, and the 2007s in Tuscany. We are certain that similar excitement will attend the release of the top wines from 2009 in a few years time.
Piemonte as a region saw volume increase in 2009 by about 15% over 2008. It should be noted, however, that 2008 was a small vintage in Piemonte due both to peronospera and poor set at flowering.

2009, on the other hand, would appear to be a year where quality and quantity go hand in hand. Aldo Vajra feels it is as consistently good as 1990, though he feels it is most similar to 1978 in the way that ‘fantastic quality of fruit and good yields’ have combined.

“It will be a great year for those who wait,” he says.

The year started with winter snows that were the deepest for 80 years. In parts of the Langhe, two metres of snow fell, which helped top up the water table and ensured that the vines weren’t stressed by the dry, hot summer that followed.

Spring was relatively wet, which caused some problems with soil erosion and small mudslides in the Barolo zone. May and June were hot and dry. These conditions, along with the water reserves built up in the winter, ensured a quick and perfect fruit set, which accounts for the good yields.

The canopies were completed by the end of July, and ripening proceeded apace. By the beginning of August, sugar levels were about two weeks ahead of the average, but phenolic ripeness was slower and more regular, helped by the warm days and cool nights of September and October.

At the beginning of August, Vajra was expecting a vintage that would be 20% lower than the maximum permitted. However, some rain at the beginning of September gave the vines the drink they needed, and they brought the crop to maturity with renewed vigour.

“In past years, we have been 15-20% down on the quantity of grapes we harvested in 2009,” explains Aldo Vajra. “However, in 2009 we didn’t have problems with hail, oidium, peronospera or drought, so the grapes were uniformly healthy.” Such were their health and quality that Vajra macerated his Nebbiolo for Barolo for 40 days!


The harvest for Moscato began on 25 August for Vajra. Arneis from the Roero began on 10 September, while Massolino started picking Dolcetto on 8 September and Barbera on 22 September. The wines from Barbera and Dolcetto have deep, rich colours, and are highly perfumed.

In Gavi, yields were down due to rain at flowering. Enrico Tomalino of La Giustiniana reports that their crop was 25% down on the average. The harvest started on 9 September and lasted for 25 days. “It was an early year, like 2007, but despite this the wines are very perfumed with better acidity and lower alcohol than 2007,” says Tomalino.

In Lessona in northern Piemonte, Luca De Marchi of Proprieta’ Sperino reports a small but excellent vintage. A combination of hail on 16 April followed by cool weather at flowering led to a crop that was about half the normal size. Wet weather until the end of June ensured there was sufficient water for the vine to thrive during the hot summer that followed. Warm days and cool nights from the end of August slowed down the ripening and enabled Luca to wait until early October to start picking. “It is a great vintage,” says Luca. “The wines have superb tannins and a generosity of fruit that is sometimes lacking in this area.”

In the Monferrato hills, where Liberty Wines makes the Ca’ del Matt Barbera, winemaker Matt Thomson reports that “there was a fair amount of rain during July and this resulted in larger than average berry sizes. As a consequence some of the reds are a little more elegant than they would otherwise have been. The vintage weather was very good, so there was little disease pressure. Cortese was harvested in excellent conditions and should be as good as we’ve done so far.”
VENETO

Even though crops were lower this year, generally by about 5%, the Veneto remains the largest wine producing region in Italy with a total quantity of about 7.7 million hectolitres.

Soave

At Cantina di Monteforte, a wet winter helped to restore water reserves after several dry winters on the trot. This resulted in a good start to the growing season, with what Pieropan described as ‘luxuriant canopies and leaves that were green and rich in chlorophyll’.

The growing season in general was uneventful, with hot spells interspersed by cool periods. There was a smattering of rain in May and June, sufficient to ensure vigour in the vineyard but not enough to create problems with rot or mildew.

August was particularly hot, with little relief in the second half of the month. On 13 August there was a bad hail storm in the eastern part of Soave, in the Alpone valley, and in Gambellara. The hail hit the vineyards in the valley rather than those on the hills. Fortunately, the dry weather in the days following the storm helped to ensure that rot did not set in and spread.

The Pinot Grigio harvest at Monteforte started very early, on the 20th August, and produced consistently good wines with high natural sugars. Chardonnay followed soon afterwards, and the wines are excellent and full bodied.

Fortunately, a little rain after the Pinot Grigio harvest brought welcome relief to the late ripening Garganega, and allowed the vines in the Classico zone to recover from the hot, dry August. After this rain in the middle of September, the rest of the growing season was warm and dry. The harvest for Trebbiano di Soave started in the middle of September, and was followed by Garganega in early October, finishing for Pieropan at La Rocca on 20 October.

The wines are ripe, full and forward, and will be ideal for early drinking.

Valpolicella

As in Soave, the growing season started well. Bud set wasn’t as favourable as it could have been, which explains the lower yields. 40 mm of rain at the beginning of veraison, in early July, gave the vines relief from the hot summer. 60mm of rain in mid September preceded the beginning of the harvest for grapes that were destined for appassimento (drying) for Amarone and Recioto. Fortunately, the rain stopped in time, and the rest of the harvest was carried out in splendid conditions. The harvest in Classico finished for Allegrini on 20 October. Franco Allegrini is pleased with the wines, saying “it is a good if not great year. The wines have lovely weight but lack a bit of elegance."

Matt Thomson, who works on the Alpha Zeta wines in the Valpantena (several valleys to the east of Classico) feels that 2009 is “probably the best harvest that I’ve seen here since I started making wine in the region in 1999. The wines are dark and full with excellent aromatic qualities."

The price of grapes for Amarone and Ripasso, which had softened prior to harvest, firmed up once it became evident that crops were down by about 20%. Fewer grapes were laid down to dry in 2009. Whereas 2007 and 2008 were both big years, with 29,800 tonnes of grapes being laid down to dry, 2009 saw only 20,800 tonnes laid down. This was in part due to the harvest, and in part to the market, but the Consorzio also stepped in, stipulating that producers could only dry 50% of their production in 2009, as against the 70% that was permitted in 2008. Such a decree is an inelegant way of trying to ensure that the price for these grapes remains strong. In a year like 2009, some producers on the hills could easily have dried more than 50% of their production, such was the quality, while many whose vineyards are on the fertile plains would, by any objective qualitative standard, be unlikely to find half of their production capable of being dried.

Conegliano

In a year when grape prices plummeted across Italy, Conegliano was one of the few zones to see an increase in prices. Part of this was due to the continued demand for Prosecco, and part due to the new laws that have come into effect with the advent of DOCG for Prosecco. Prosecco IGT is no longer allowed, so the maximum legal yields have dropped from 25 tonnes per hectare to 18 tonnes for DOC Treviso. This reduction in yield, it is estimated in the zone, has resulted in a shortage of 200,000 hectolitres of wine. As a result, bulk prices have increased by 20-30%.
Production in the far north of Italy was 5% up on 2008 at just under 1.2 million hectolitres. As in the rest of Italy, the winter was characterised by heavy snows. “In April, there were still 5-6 metres of snow on the mountains,” explains Roberto Cesconi. This cool spring led to a later bud burst. Good weather in May and June ensured an excellent flowering. July and August were hot and dry, but the grapes were healthy and water stress was not a problem.

In the Alto Adige, the harvest for Franz Haas started with Pinot Nero on 21 August. But as Franz has Pinot Nero vineyards up as high as 850 metres above sea level, the harvest didn’t finish until mid October. Franz is pleased with the structure and body of the Pinot Nero, noting that the lighter colour is due to the hot summer weather.

The Pinot Grigio and Sauvignon harvest started on 25 August. Franz feels that the quality of the white wines from 2009 is “very high, thanks to the perfect weather at vintage and to the management of the vineyards during the summer.”

In Trentino, the Cesconi family started picking Pinot Grigio on 25 August and continued with their other white varieties until 10 September. Their red varieties – Merlot, Teroldego, Lagrein and Cabernet Franc – were picked from the 15 to the 25 September. The harvest finished on 10 October, when the last of the Cabernet Sauvignon arrived at the winery.

Cesconi feel that their white wines from 2009 are ripe and fragrant and a bit softer than usual. The reds are rich and approachable. “We think 2009 was the best vintage for our red wines in the last decade,” says Roberto Cesconi.

While yields were generally higher in Trentino in 2009, thanks to the lovely weather at flowering, Cesconi’s yields were lower than normal, averaging 8 tonnes per hectare for whites and 5 tonnes per hectare for reds.

FRUILI

2009 was the latest in a recent run of fine vintages in Friuli. “2005 was the last difficult vintage we had,” says Andrea Felluga of Livio Felluga. “Yields were a little below average in 2009, and the wines are elegant and minerally rather than full and ripe.”

Felluga’s 135 hectares of vineyard are situated in Rosazzo in the heart of the Colli Orientali DOC zone. The wet winter helped top up the water table, and enabled the vines to flourish during the dry spring. The vegetative cycle started earlier than normal. As a result, the harvest, which started on 20 August, was about 10 days ahead of 2008.

The dry spring ensured no problems with rot or mildew. The summer was fairly normal, with a constant temperature and only one heat spike in July. “As a result,” says Andrea Felluga, “we were able to pick the grapes when they were perfectly ripe.”

The harvest for whites ran from 20 August until the end of September, while for reds it started in the third week of September and finished in the third week of October. Picolit was picked in four periods during November.

A similar story prevails in Grave del Friuli, where the Ponte del Diavolo wines are made. The harvest started early but the grapes were ripe and healthy. The 2009 Pinot Grigio is perfumed and rich, while the Refosco looks very promising.

In Isonzo, at I Feudi di Romans, Matt Thomson reports that the region was very dry right through late summer and autumn, resulting in low yields for Pinot Grigio. The wines are ripe with moderate acidity, while the reds are full and fleshy.
Production remains unchanged this year at 2.8 million hectolitres, making Tuscany Italy’s sixth largest producer, just short of Piemonte, which moved up to fifth place this year.

Carmignano

A very hot, dry, breezy summer followed a particularly wet winter and spring. Although 45mm of rain fell in July, the other months were extremely dry (2mm-7mm) so about 30 hectares required emergency irrigation at Capezzana. Fortunately, September had 59 mm of rain, which helped the grapes mature without increasing yields, which were 30% down on 2008.

Harvest was 10 days earlier than the average, with Merlot the first grape to be harvested from 24-28 August, followed by Syrah in the first week of September and then Canaiolo and Cabernet Franc between 9-11 September. Sangiovese was picked early, from 10-25 September. The late ripening Cabernet Sauvignon was harvested last between 30 September and 2 October.

Rufina

Rain and snow built up water reserves over the winter. Temperatures were average with only two or three nights falling below zero. Spring was cool with some late frosts and heavy rain falling at the end of April and throughout May. Bud break took place as usual, with rapid vegetative growth requiring good canopy management to avoid fungal disease.

It was a classic Rufina summer with scattered rain showers and higher temperatures than usual at the end of August. Warm winds triggered drying of leaves of younger vines, but widespread drying was avoided due to the large diurnal temperature range typical of the region.

A scattering of showers in the last fortnight of September and a return to normal temperatures allowed Federico Giuntini to wait until the perfect moment to harvest the Sangiovese grapes at Selvapiana. Measures were taken to thin bunches in the third week of September before harvest began on 28 September. The harvest period was long, lasting until 10 October. Lower temperatures in October meant the grapes were healthy, ripe and balanced when picked. Federico says, “a few months after harvest and the wines are showing freshness, richness of tannins and complex aromatics, we are hoping for the best now”.

Chianti

In western Chianti, near Empoli, heavy rain in spring spurred vegetative growth. Many growers responded by thinning the canopy too much, given the hot summer that followed. The second half of August was unusually hot, like in 2003, but it wasn’t as hot in June and July as it was in 2003. Normally, there is rain around ‘Ferragosto’ (15 August) and a drop in temperature, but this year the temperature was consistently at 34-35°C.

At Poggiotondo, Alberto Antonini’s estate near Vinci, Merlot suffered the most from this heat, with a loss of 30% of the crop. Syrah was better able to resist the heat. Good canopy management allowed enough shade for the Sangiovese, without overexposing the grapes, giving very good results, especially in the north facing vineyards. The weather during the harvest was good, up until 10 October, by which time about 85% of the grapes in Tuscany were picked. Despite the heat, yields were higher than in 2008.

Harvest was brought forward by 10 days at Cantine Leonardo in Vinci, starting on 7 September with Merlot and Syrah, followed by Sangiovese, which ran from 17 September to the end of the first week of October.

At Fattoria Petrolo, situated on the eastern flank of the mountains of Chianti, the weather during the growing season was normal, with higher than average temperatures in August. Good water reserves built up in the winter and spring meant that the vines didn’t suffer any stress, and harvest began as usual with the Merlot grapes (for Galatrona) on 7 September, followed by the Sangiovese (for Torrione) in mid September. Due to optimum conditions throughout the harvest, the grapes matured perfectly, producing very supple, elegant wines with great finesse and length.

Luca Sanjust is very pleased with the outcome of an undisturbed harvest which. At an early stage in their development, he sees similarities with the 1999 vintage. The Torrione is also similar to 2007, and the Galatrona to the 2006 and 2007 vintages.
Production remains unchanged this year at 2.8 million hectolitres, making Tuscany Italy’s sixth largest producer, just short of Piemonte, which moved up to fifth place this year.

Chianti Classico

Following a cold winter and wet spring, flowering was slightly problematic at Isole e Olena, but a warm summer spurred good vegetative growth. A hailstorm on 8 August caused significant damage, considerably reducing yields. Fortunately, quality wasn’t compromised. Hot and dry conditions in August and September scorched some grapes making harvest more difficult than usual as a more thorough selection process was necessary.

Harvest began earlier than usual with Chardonnay on 31 August and the reds from 22 September, Syrah then Sangiovese and finally Cabernet Sauvignon, finishing on 15 October.

Stylistically, the wines from the 2009 vintage are powerful yet not overbearing with great aromatic expression and mature tannins. Paolo De Marchi has described the vintage as ‘optimum but difficult’.

Over the hills at Fontodi, similar weather conditions during the growing season produced a good crop of healthy grapes without any complications. The Sangiovese harvest began at the end of September and ran through to mid October. Despite a long, hot, dry summer, the wines are elegant and balanced with good acidity levels. Giovanni Manetti says it is too early to compare the vintage with any others, but yields were similar to those of 2004.

Montalcino

Good availability of water after a wet winter helped the vines to survive the summer heat. The spring was warm with steady temperatures. A very long, hot, dry summer allowed grapes to ripen perfectly, though yields were lower than in 2008. Low yields were in part due to small berries, which have given wines with excellent colour and structure.

According to Andrea Costanti, “2009 is a fantastic vintage – one of the best in the last 20 years” where his vineyards are located in the northern part of Montalcino, close to the town and at a higher altitude than the other vineyards in the zone. His wines have an ideal balance of acidity, alcohol and tannin. It is a vintage that combines body and elegance, and looks like it will be suitable for long ageing, like the 2001 vintage. The weather in September couldn’t have been better, with warm, sunny days and cool nights. Harvest at Costanti took 4 days (due to the compact nature of the estate), beginning on 28 September.

At Cantina di Montalcino, a co-operative with vineyards throughout the zone, substantial rain in June and July caused outbreaks of downy and powdery mildew, which were cured with the appropriate treatments. The summer heat, especially in August, put a lot of stress on the vines, causing the leaves to turn yellow. The Sangiovese was harvested between 14 September and 20 October, depending on the location of the vineyard. The weather was fine, except for a few days of rain from the 15 to 20 September which slowed harvest but helped with the final stages of phenolic ripeness. The grapes were very healthy, of good if not excellent quality, with relatively thick skins resulting in yields of about 2-5% less than normal with high sugar content and average acidity.

In the eastern part of Montalcino, at Poggio San Polo, the harvest of the early ripening, younger vines began towards the second half of September and lasted six weeks, finishing with the Sangiovese destined for the Brunello at the end of October. According to winemaker Nicola Biasi, the 2009 vintage at Poggio San Polo will produce well defined wines of longevity similar to those from 2000.

Balanced wines rich in colour and silky soft tannins are the outcome at Fossacolle in the Tavernelle zone, where Fossacolle is located. Adriano Bambagioni feels it is difficult to compare 2009 with other vintages, though when pressed he admitted that at this early stage the wines are showing similarities to those of 1998 and 1999.
Montalcino ...

2009 saw many Brunello producers struggling to recover from the ‘Brunellopolì’ scandal of 2008, and at the same time convince both the domestic and American markets that the historically high prices fetched by wines from Montalcino were warranted. This job was made all the more difficult by higher volumes of bulk wine being mopped up by opportunistic negociants. As a result, the gap between low cost Brunelli and those from established wineries has grown considerably.

Following the scandal, the producers voted on whether to keep Brunello 100% Sangiovese. The vote was almost unanimous, so we look forward to seeing fewer Brunelli that are opaque in colour. There is, however, talk of a change to the law for Rosso di Montalcino. This would, as usual, be complicated, as a new ‘Classico’ or ‘Superiore’ level, made solely from Sangiovese, would be introduced, while the producers of basic Rosso would be allowed to supplement Sangiovese with ‘a small percentage’ of other varieties. As yet, this remains a proposal.

Maremma

The Maremma experienced similar weather conditions to Montalcino. In September, warm days and cool nights ensured harvest under the perfect conditions at Fortediga, which is situated on the coast just north of Castiglione della Pescaia. This took place from 20 September until 15 October. Due to very hot summer temperatures, they were expecting the grapes to ripen earlier than usual. However, with the help of irrigation and cooler weather in September, harvest was only brought forward by a few days.

The style of wines produced in 2009 is seemingly very elegant and well balanced.

At Le Pupille, the first ten days of September were very hot, slowing down the maturation of tannins. Light rain mid month moderated the temperature, giving good day/night temperature variation until the end of October. Harvest of the red grapes was later than usual, starting mid September with the Merlot and early October for Sangiovese. The grapes from the Poggio Valente vineyard were the last to be picked on 25 October, about a week later than usual.

The wines are similar to 2008 with slightly lower acidity, a softer and more rounded character and higher alcohol. Comparatively, the wines most resemble those of 2001.

Montepulciano

At Avignonesi, the 2009 winter was cold and the early spring humid, conditions which allowed the vines to collect ample water reserves for the growing season. The late spring was temperate, without late frosts. The summer was hot and dry, with more moderate temperatures, however, than in 2003 or 2006. The white grapes were harvested in late August and early September, earlier than usual to preserve freshness and aromatic complexity in what were already phenolically mature grapes. Rain in early September refreshed the later-maturing varieties such as Sangiovese and allowed them to continue maturing for another warm and dry month. The fermentations were regular and relatively short, with gentle extraction, which, according to Avignonesi was the key to successful vinification in 2009.

Bolgheri

A warm spring without any excessive peaks or dips in temperature ensured a uniform budding. A hot, dry summer ensured ripe, healthy grapes, but the lack of rain resulted in lower yields than in 2008.

At Poggio al Tesoro, harvest of the early ripening Merlot grapes and younger vines began at the end of August, and finished in the second half of October with Cabernet Sauvignon.

The lower yields and smaller berries have, as in Montalcino, resulted in deep coloured, well structured wines that winemaker Nicola Biasi feels should age well.
The Marche is one of Italy’s lowest producing regions, responsible for around 780,000 hectolitres, second only to Sardegna (which produced 610,000 hl in 2009). Production has declined at an annual average of 100,000 hectolitres per year since 2004.

Roberto Potentini, the winemaker at Cantine Belisario, was delighted to see a return to a ‘normal’ harvest in 2009. In the Verdicchio di Matelica vineyards, winter was cold, while spring and summer were typically Mediterranean and sunny, with cool evenings allowing the Verdicchio grapes to ripen fully while retaining the punchy acidity characteristic of the variety.

Low rainfall in July and August meant that fungal diseases weren't an issue. Yields from the Belisario vineyards were between 4 - 5.5 kg per vine, producing 8.5 -11.5 tonnes of grapes per hectare. The harvest ran from 5 – 25 October. On the whole, says Potentini, “the 2009 vintage was without complication, producing very good, fresh wines with lovely richness and acidity on the palate.”
ABRUZZO

Abruzzo produced 2,600,000 hectolitres in 2009, a drop of 15% on 2008. Quality was a mixed bag. The winter was cold and wet, and the rain continued into the spring. This led not only to vigorous vegetative growth but also to problems with peronospora in those vineyards where the growers were less vigilant than they should have been.

Timely rain at the beginning of July helped ensure the vines didn’t shut down, something that often happens with Montepulciano in a hot summer, resulting in hard, aggressive tannins.

Alana McGettigan, the New Zealand winemaker and colleague of Matt Thomson who works for Liberty in Italy, and in the northern Abruzzo, reported that “there was some unseasonable weather at the end of June, including hail and rain, which caused damage to the fruit and resulted in some cases of mildew, which took local growers by surprise because that type of weather is so unusual in the area at that time of year. The vineyards on the hills seem to have been most affected. This gave us a reduced yield (specifically about 20% down in the San Salvo region), and also meant the winemakers had to work a bit harder with the fruit we were receiving! The weather during harvest was fairly standard for the area, with mostly warm dry weather and one spell of rain mid-harvest.”

At Gran Sasso, the team worked hard in the vineyards at the beginning of August to thin both shoots and bunches and ensure that the remaining grapes were brought to full maturity.

Valentino Sciotti of Gran Sasso feels it was a better year for white wines than reds. “Work in the vineyard and selection in the winery was the key to success in 2009,” he says.

Alana agrees. “With a very rigorous fruit selection, and careful handling in the winery - as always we were careful not to over-extract the Montepulciano - we were able to make some pretty decent wine this year. The wine style is more in the mocha and chocolate spectrum, with lifted darker fruit aromas of plums and dark cherry. The colour is good and the tannins relatively soft.”

Matt Thomson’s view of the vintage is: “There was significant rain during summer in this region and some growers were caught out with powdery mildew issues. Others, however, were able to capitalise on these conditions and get the grapes to full ripeness without the frequent shrivelling that occurs here. As a result the tannins are riper and the alcohol levels optimum rather than excessive. The wines should be more approachable and juicier than they often are.”
Campania accounts for about 4% of Italy’s annual production, with a predicted harvest in 2009 of 1,850,000 hectolitres, an increase of 5% on 2008.

In general, the growing season was favourable. Winter rains gave way to a warm, dry spring. July and August were characterised by hot days and cool nights. By the end of August, the vines were about a week ahead of average, but September rains combined with lower than average temperatures to slow down the ripening process.

The harvest for Falanghina at Vesevo started in the third week of September, while that for Greco di Tufo and Fiano di Avellino began in the first week of October. The cool nights in summer, allied to September’s unseasonably low temperatures, have given white wines with lovely perfumes and freshness.

The fine October weather helped bring the Aglianico grapes for Taurasi to full ripeness, and quality is excellent. The harvest in Taurasi finished on 8 November.

Valentino Sciotti of Vesevo feels that the white wines are excellent in 2009, while the reds are “above average”.

As in Puglia, grape prices halved in most of Campania. There are reports of wineries walking away from growers. Indeed, one major winery sold their grapes in 2009 rather than add to the wine they already had sitting in their cellars. Given the quality of the vintage, this is a pity. But it is also an indication of the purgative action of the bear market of 2009.
Puglia, with an estimated production of 6.2 million hectolitres, was about 10% down in volume on the 2008 vintage. But this region, stretching 400 kilometres from its northern border with Molise to the southern tip of the Salento peninsula, is greatly varied.

A great deal of the fall in production in 2009 was due to wet weather and subsequent problems with mildew in the northern province of Foggia. Peronospera was also a problem in the southern part of Puglia. Mark Shannon of A Mano and Promessa, who has lived and worked in Puglia for 13 vintages, says it started raining at the end of September 2008 and didn’t stop until the third week of June.

“It was very wet, and warm enough during the day for peronospera to develop and cool enough at night for oidium.” As these mildews aren’t often seen in Puglia, few growers were prompt enough to intervene, either with sprays or with crop thinning, to ensure that the grapes were ripe and healthy when picked.

“It meant leaving a lot of fruit on the vines and risking friendships by not taking fruit from people we’ve bought from for years. As a result, we produced only a small amount of good quality wines,” says Mark.

Mauro di Maggio of Terre di Sava, who produces the Masseria Pietrosa and Lamadoro wines for Liberty Wines, concurs with Mark. “The cold weather in spring meant that flowering was longer than usual, and this resulted in smaller bunches and berries. Because of our work in the vineyards, we were able to ensure the grapes were ripe and healthy at harvest, and the smaller berries have given us more intense red wines.”

Harvest for Primitivo started about 4-5 days later than average (due to the cool spring) on 7 September, while Negroamaro, a later budding variety, was unaffected by the inclement weather in spring, so vintage started on time on 18 September. Fiano and Greco were picked by Mark a bit earlier than usual in the third week of September. The new organic vineyard near Martina Franca that he harvested for the first time this year, producing Syrah and Merlot that will go under the Promessa label, came in on time in the middle of September.

The price of Primitivo grapes dropped dramatically this year. This is in part due to the decline in lower priced vino da tavola, where Primitivo is used as a cheap bulk blender, and in part to the difficult market for better quality wines. Despite the fall in prices, Mark Shannon paid 25% above the market rate to get the quality of grapes he wanted.

In general, 2009 was a difficult vintage in Puglia. But as usual, good grape growers and producers have made good wines in a trying year.
Production in Sardegna continues to decline. While the average annual production between 2004 and 2008 was 834,000 hectolitres, volume in 2009 was 610,000 hl, which was about 5% up on the drought-affected 2008 harvest.

The wet winter that characterised the winter of 2008/9 was more welcome in Sardegna than in most of Italy, as 2007 and 2008 had been badly hit by drought. Despite the rains, there were some vineyards that did not recover sufficiently from the depredations of these two dry summers to deliver a decent crop in 2009.

In Sulcis, in the island’s southwest corner, where Cantina Mesa is situated, it was an average summer – at last. There was sufficient rain in the spring to top up the reserves laid down in the winter, and excellent weather at flowering. A hot, dry summer, typical of Sulcis, followed. A torrid period in late July accelerated maturation. Towards the end of July, a maritime breeze (most of the estate’s vineyards are only a few kilometres from the sea) ensured a good diurnal variation in temperature, which in turn resulted in white wines with good acid and freshness. The harvest for Vermentino commenced about a week early on 10 August.

Sardegna was hit by unusually heavy and long lasting rains in mid September which caused problems for many growers. The rains in the southwest were not as intense as in the rest of the island, so the red grapes, Carignano and Cannonau, were healthy when picked.

SICILIA

Production in Sicilia was 5,560,000 hectolitres, down about 10% on 2009.

In Marsala, at the Donnafugata estates, autumn and winter rainfall was above seasonal averages. In April and May, there was a slight delay in budding and flowering. In June the vines were trimmed to facilitate the growth of new leaves that would be physiologically active in the final stages of grape ripening. Summer temperatures were slightly higher than usual but good diurnal temperature range aided development of the grapes, preventing stress from summer heat.

At the Donnafugata estate of Contessa Entellina in the hills outside Marsala, on one of the hottest days (16 July) the maximum temperature reached 39.5°C, while the minimum was 18°C. Throughout August the difference between highest and lowest temperatures was considerable.

The Viognier harvest took place from 19 – 27 August, then the Syrah between 27 August – 12 September, followed by the Nero d’Avola which began on 5 September and the Ansonica from 7-10 September.

The Cabernet Sauvignon harvest began on 9 September followed by Catarratto on 12 September. Rain delayed picking by about a week around 16-17 and 22-23 September concluding on 1 October for both varieties.

Quality of both white and red wines is excellent. Yields of red grapes were lower than previous years as the rain on 22-23 September meant a more thorough selection of grapes was necessary.

On Pantelleria, the Zibibbo (Moscato d’Alessandria) harvest began on 12 August in a few small vineyards and went into full swing from 17 August, ending on 19 September. Again good temperature variation between day and night helped enhance the fragrance of the Zibibbo, producing excellent quality grapes. Early tastings of the Ben Ryé show a wine of great harmony and elegance.

Medium to high yields at Villa Tonino produced excellent quality wines similar in style to 2008.
## 2009 OFFICIAL VITICULTURAL PRODUCTION FROM THE ‘ASSOCIAZIONE ENOLOGI ENOTECNICI ITALIANI’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>REGION</th>
<th>2008 Wine &amp; Must Production (hectolitres)</th>
<th>2009 Predicted Average Wine &amp; Must Production* (hectolitres)</th>
<th>Predicted % Change from 2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Piemonte</td>
<td>2,480,000</td>
<td>2,850,000</td>
<td>+15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lombardia</td>
<td>1,250,000</td>
<td>1,190,000</td>
<td>-5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trentino Alto Adige</td>
<td>1,140,000</td>
<td>1,190,000</td>
<td>+5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veneto</td>
<td>8,119,000</td>
<td>7,710,000</td>
<td>-5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friuli</td>
<td>1,014,000</td>
<td>1,010,000</td>
<td>=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emilia Romagna</td>
<td>6,340,000</td>
<td>6,660,000</td>
<td>+5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toscana</td>
<td>2,800,000</td>
<td>2,800,000</td>
<td>=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marche</td>
<td>871,000</td>
<td>780,000</td>
<td>-10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lazio</td>
<td>1,797,000</td>
<td>1,800,000</td>
<td>=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abruzzo</td>
<td>3,054,000</td>
<td>2,600,000</td>
<td>-15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campania</td>
<td>1,768,000</td>
<td>1,850,000</td>
<td>+5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puglia</td>
<td>6,949,000</td>
<td>5,900,000</td>
<td>-15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sicilia</td>
<td>6,180,000</td>
<td>5,560,000</td>
<td>-10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sardegna</td>
<td>582,000</td>
<td>610,000</td>
<td>+5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others **</td>
<td>1,901,000</td>
<td>1,990,000</td>
<td>+5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>46,245,000</td>
<td>44,500,000</td>
<td>-4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*This column shows the average quantities forecast for each region

**Valle d’Aosta, Liguria, Umbria, Molise, Basilicata, Calabria

Data Source: ISTAT – the Italian National Institute of Statistics