



The Fine Art of Italian Wine

In providing a brief insight to Italian wines, one should start by understanding the complex nature of the country and its offerings to the oenophile. Some of the greatest wines of Italy had no legal standing until the mid-1990s, many of its most prestigious producers have also made wines of inconsistent quality, and most of Italy's grapes are unique to the country. Beyond that, some of the highest-rated wines in the world are now produced in Italy, including Ornellaia, Sassicaia, Tignanello, and the wines of Angelo Gaja. The variety and quality of wines produced in Italy also continue to increase and improve dramatically. All of this contributes to a terrific location for anyone who enjoys a taste of the grape, either seriously or occasionally.

Italy continues to be among the world leaders in wine. Based on statistics through 2005, Italy is second in the world (behind France) in the production of wine, third (behind Spain and France) in total area of vineyards, and sixth in the world in per-capita wine consumption, with the Vatican City ranking number one. Imagine that!

There are some nineteen varieties of red grapes (led by Sangiovese and Nebbiolo) and fourteen varieties of white grapes (led by four permutations of Trebbiano) that are widely grown in Italy. Most of these grapes

are not in major production in other parts of the world, which means many of Italy's wines have unique flavor characteristics.

Sangiovese is the mainstay grape of Italy. It flourishes in the northern regions, especially in Tuscany where it is the prime ingredient in Chianti and many other wines. At best, it produces wines with bright fruit flavors and very good acidity. In most cases a taster will get notes of cherry and currants in the glass.

Nebbiolo is the most illustrious grape in the Piedmonte region, especially in Barolo and Barbaresco. These are slow-developing wines of intensity, austerity, and refinement. Some are more fruit-forward and can be drunk at a younger age. The upper range of this grape from the better producers provides notes of strawberry, raspberry, and roses with great concentration and the ability

to age for substantially more than a decade.

The Trebbiano grape is widely prolific, low in alcohol, and high in acidity. It can be found in virtually any Italian white wine, and is even allowed by law to be blended into Chianti and Vino Nobile di Montepulciano, although Tuscan producers seldom follow the practice anymore. In most wines you will find floral hints with honey, lime, and some mineral qualities.



OPPOSITE: The famous wines of Tuscany as displayed in the tasting cellar of Villa di Pizzano. THIS PAGE: In Italy, more so than in much of the world, wine is made to go with food; La Bucaccia Ristorante's wine cellar offers over two hundred different regional wines that servers astutely pair with authentic Tuscan cuisine.



THIS PAGE: Properly pairing wine and cheese is artfully accomplished at Val d'Aosta's Hotel Bellevue. OPPOSITE: Salami, prosciutto, and cheese—an Italian meal wouldn't quite seem the same without this customary antipasti dish, served with a light, fruity red wine. Image courtesy La Bucaccia Ristorante.

Italian Wine Classifications

In 1963, the Italian government established a system of *denominazione di origine*, or denomination of origin, following the lead of the French methodology of categorizing quality production of wine. These laws govern the geographical limits of each wine-producing region, the grape varieties that can be used, the percentages of each grape that can be used in specified blends, the maximum amount of wine that can be produced by acre (hectare), the minimum (but not maximum) alcohol content of the wine, and the aging requirements—whether in glass or in wood. Prior to 2006, only about 10 percent of the entire Italian wine production was regulated by these laws. This continues to change, with new laws incorporating more wines into the categories.

Overall, there are two major categories of wine—quality wine (DOCG and DOC) and table wine (IGT and VdT). DOCG (*Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita*) is the top echelon of Italian wine. Even though the system was established in 1963, there were no DOCG wines acknowledged until 1980.

Today there are some thirty-six wines in this classification, including Barbaresco, Barolo, Brunello di Montalcino, and Vino Nobile di Montepulciano. Of these, nineteen are in the area described elsewhere as Northern Italy, including Piemonte, Lombardia, Veneto, Friuli-Venezia-Giulia, and Emilia-Romagna. The highest category of Italian wines are those that are categorized as DOCG. These have strict guidelines on both the type of grape and the harvest yields, and the wine must be analyzed and tasted by a special panel before achieving DOCG status.

DOC (*Denominazione di Origine Controllata*) applies to wines made from specific varietals grown in specific zones and aged by specific methods. DOC wines do not always guarantee quality, as they tend to protect the more traditional production methods, grapes, geographies, and history. As of 2006, there were more than 300 DOC-classified wines.

IGT (*Indicazione Geografica Tipica*) was created to be the Italian version of the French designation *vin de pays* as a higher level of table or daily wine. These wines typically carry a geographical description on the label, followed by the name of the grape varietal. As some producers have struggled with the DOC classification and may not be eligible for DOCG, some of Italy's greatest wines carry the IGT designation.

VdT (*Vino da Tavola*) is the most basic classification, and there will be no indication on the label of the grape varietal or the geographic production region. This group also does not allow for

the listing of the vintage on the label, which forces most producers up at least one level in order to comply with the laws.

Italian Wines and Food

In Italy, more so than in much of the world, wine is made to go with the food. No meal, with the exception of some breakfast items, is served without wine being available, and for good reason. There are so many varietals in Italy, it is difficult to provide a suggestion for each. Here is a representative selection of the more common grapes that may be found throughout the country, along with suggestions for pairing them with food.

These suggestions are based on personal experiences as well as what some producers and other cognoscenti have enjoyed. Please don't accept these suggestions as dictums. Get a bottle of wine, select a tasty dish, *mangi*, and make your own determinations!

Barbaresco – Tailored for veal and meat dishes, pasta with Porcini mushrooms, as well as mature cheeses such as Fontina.

Barbera – Chicken and lighter foods including simply prepared pork.

Barolo – Lamb. Nothing else to be said. Unless you include a roast in its own sauce or meat cooked with the same wine such as wild rabbit, duck, or risotto.

Brunello – Most meat dishes, but especially the stronger ones of grilled steak, wild boar, pheasant, and other game. Great to try with some aged Pecorino Toscano cheese as well.

Dolcetto – First courses of antipasti, including those with tomato sauces and pasta, but not with seafood. Also with strawberries or peaches for dessert.

Nebbiolo – All types of red meat, especially roasts. Also excellent with cold meats such as salami and most hard cheeses.

Trebbiano – Game dishes including rabbit and cubed lamb.

Vermentino – Fish and shellfish of any variety.

A Note about Grappa

Considered Italy's brandy, Grappa is a grape-based spirit of between 80 and 100 proof, made from the distillation of pomace. Pomace (also sometimes called marc) comprises pieces of grapes, including the stems and seeds, which were pressed for the winemaking process. Originally conceived as a way to prevent waste by using leftovers at the end of the wine season, Grappa is currently produced throughout the country and has become commercialized and widely exported.



THIS PAGE: Spello is one of the most charming medieval towns in Umbria and also one of the least crowded with tourists. OPPOSITE: La Bucaccia Ristorante creates a dining experience that is the perfect expression of Tuscan culinary traditions from the Arezzo area: simple, refined, and harmonious in proportion and taste.

fish-based dishes, especially when drunk young. Good Montepulciano wines come from Rosso Conero and Rosso Piceno Superiore. The area also produces some interesting and off-beat wines, including a sparkling red made in a sweet and dry style, called Vernaccia di Serrapetrona.

Umbria

Located in the middle of Italy, Umbria is the only region in the central part of the country without a coastline. Umbria is often referred to as the "green heart of Italy," with its medieval towns and characteristic lush, green rolling hills. The prominent towns include Orvieto, with its magnificent Gothic *duomo* (cathedral) and glittering façade; Spoleto, home of the *Festival dei Due Mondi* (Festival of Two Worlds), a worldwide attraction that includes music, dance, and theatre scenes; and Assisi, the birthplace of St. Francis. Perugia is the region's capital and a very important

Etruscan city, whose stunning architecture includes the Etruscan Arch and the Etruscan Well. Top museums include Perugia's National Gallery, with the largest collection of Umbrian art in the

world and a comprehensive collection of Perugian paintings. Imaginative palaces, monasteries, and churches enhance the region's distinctive hillside towns of Gubbio, Spoleto, Todi, Spello, Città di Castello, and more. Many of these architectural gems are also known for fine handmade ceramics and savory black truffles. Umbria is home to Lake Trasimeno, where you can take a jaunt by boat to one of its many islands with their beautiful beaches.

Classic Cuisine: Umbria's food consists of some basic ingredients: premium olive oil, Durum wheat pasta, hog, lamb, and *colombaccio* (pigeon). Two specialties of the region are *mazzafegati*, sausages made from hog's liver, pine nuts, orange peel, raisins, and sugar, as well as *tartufo nero* (black truffles), grown beneath the earth and served over everything including Pecorino cheese. Due to their limited quantities, these truffles are one of the most expensive foods in the world. Many variations of homemade egg pasta, notably *tagliatelle*, *ciriolo*, and *stringozzi*, are prepared in a decadent black truffle sauce unique to the region. Umbria is also responsible for the production of much of the dried pasta consumed throughout Italy. Umbrians cook a wide range of foods that incorporate fish, meat, game, vegetables, and rice, as well as a variety of herbs and spices. A classic menu may include *frittata ai funghi* (mushroom omelet), *minestra di riso* (rice soup with lentils), and *pollo alla cacciatore* (chicken with capers and olives).



RISTORANTE LA BUCACCIA



Via Ghibellina, 17 | Cortona (AR)

Tel. & Fax: +39 0575606039

E-mail: tipici@labucaccia.it | Web site: www.labucaccia.it

Within minutes of stepping into Ristorante La Bucaccia, you are no longer a stranger. Instead, you are showered with the kind of hospitality that makes you feel less like a customer and more like a member of the family.

Located in the restored wine cellar of a 13th-century palazzo in the heart of medieval Cortona, Ristorante La Bucaccia is owned and operated by Romano Magi and his wife, Agostina, with assistance from their charming and knowledgeable daughter, Franceschina. Together, the Magi family creates a dining experience that is the perfect expression of Tuscan culinary traditions from the Arezzo region: simple, refined, and harmonious in proportion and taste. Since opening the restaurant in 1997, Romano has brought nothing less than the finest local cheeses, meats, olive oils, and produce into his wife's kitchen. As chef, Agostina has earned accolades for her simple yet exquisitely flavored dishes, true to the time-honored Tuscan ability to "make a lot out of little." In her hands, dishes like chestnut ravioli or noodles with

garlic sauce become masterpieces of color, texture, and flavor. She works a similar magic with the meats of the Valdichiana: Cortonese beefsteak, roast cured pork, and wild boar. All are served with their traditional accompaniment of Tuscan white beans in an earthenware pot. Try to save room for Agostina's handmade desserts, which include everything from fruit pastries to tiramisu. The restaurant's wine cellar, the Vineria Cacioteca, offers over two hundred different regional wines, a quarter of which are from vineyards along the Arezzo wine route. In addition to lunch and dinner, La Bucaccia also features a cheese-tasting course and cooking classes, which are designed to further introduce guests to the products and methods traditional to Cortona and Tuscan gastronomy.