

Get schooled
in the country's
cool whites
and hot reds

BY KELLY A. MAGYARICS

Italian Lessons



Italy has often and quite accurately been described as “one big vineyard.” Indeed, a veritable bevy of both indigenous and international varietals thrive in the mountainous, Germanic-inspired Trentino-Alto Adige region in the north, all the way down to the balmy, Mediterranean coastline of Sicily. But restricting yourself to familiar, tried and true wines like pinot grigio and Chianti is as limiting as never venturing beyond the backyard of your Tuscan villa. Beautiful as the view may be, there’s a lot more out there to see (and sip).

Though tricky-to-pronounce labels and uncommon grape varietals may seem daunting to the uninitiated, wine consultant Hudson Austin of Philadelphia’s The Wine Merchant encourages enthusiastic wine lovers to jump right in and experiment: “There are so many great regional wines in Italy that many people never have because they fear trying something that doesn’t sound familiar. Step out of your comfort zone and explore!”

Easy-drinking, citrusy pinot grigio is often the go-to Italian white wine, but it’s not the only game in town. Jason Lonigro, general manager at Emeril’s Chop House at the Sands Casino Resort Bethlehem, suggests budget-friendly bottles from the country’s northeastern Friuli region as a great option for guests looking to experience other types of Italian white wines. “With notes of pear and citrus, nice acidity and mild herbaceousness, Friulano makes medium-bodied, aromatic wines that are great alternatives to pinot grigio, and often a better value.” When seeking out bottles, *(continued on page 80)*

STEPPING OUT

Looking to venture beyond Chianti and pinot grigio? Then, try reds and whites from the lesser-known regions of wine-soaked Italy.

ITALIAN LESSONS

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keep in mind that labels may reflect the grape's former name, Tocai Friulano, recently changed to avoid confusion with Hungarian wines made with the Tokaji grape.

Similar in its refreshing profile and seamless ability to pair with food, Vermentino's mouthwatering, vibrant acidity balanced by green fruit and minerality lends it an easy-drinking style.

Vito Girasole, floor manager of Girasole Ristorante in Pittsburgh's Shady-side neighborhood, says it's one of his most popular white wines, a sure-fire winner among even the self-proclaimed chardonnay set. Marc Hazur, supervisor of wine education for the Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board, points out that Vermentino from the Liguria region, where it first came to market, is sharper and higher in acidity, but newer examples coming out of Sardinia and Tuscany are a bit softer, with a broader appeal. This zesty wine deftly stands

in for a squeeze of lemon when served alongside simple grilled fresh fish with olive oil and herbs.

Speaking of fish, Verdicchio, from the Marche region bordering the Adriatic Sea, had traditionally been sold in a fish- or amphora-shaped bottle. Hazur notes that while this unusual packaging was sometimes a purchasing deterrent, many wineries have given their bottles a facelift, and he encourages customers to give Verdicchio a second look. "It's gained some respect," he says, with herbal undertones like fennel, and a tangy lime-like quality similar to that of the sauvignon blanc-based Sancerre from France's Loire Valley.

Though the Piedmont region produces two of Italy's most famous, powerful and expensive red wines—nebbiolo-based Barolo and Barbaresco—the area is also home to other more approachable, easy-to-drink reds. Dolcetto has been called the "Italian Beaujolais," and Lonigro especially touts bottles produced around the town of Alba. "Softer and rounder, these are fun-to-drink wines and an incredible value, with low tannins, fruity qualities and notes of toasted almond." At Emeril's Chop House, he recommends versatile Dolcetto with everything from lamb, veal and beef carpaccio, to spicy seafood and pasta dishes.

Red zinfandel lovers will find a worthy substitute in Primitivo. Grown in Puglia, Italy's "heel of the boot," primitivo shares DNA with zinfandel. The two also have similar flavor profiles, including powerful spice and berry flavors, and are full-bodied. As with zinfandel, Primitivo can benefit from 20 minutes in the refrigerator before serving.

Trendy right now, Nero d'Avola is Sicily's most important red wine grape. Though Hazur notes that the traditional style was "earthy and funky," modern versions are more fruit forward, similar to some Australian shiraz, with sweet tannins, lots of black pepper and plum. Girasole says that Nero d'Avola is the most popular red wine by the glass at his restaurant, where guests crave its medium-body, touch of spice and earthiness. It's fabulous with well-seasoned, flavorful dishes like osso buco or braised beef.

Those used to New World bottles
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TASTING NOTES

FRIULANO

BASTIANICH FRIULANO 2007

Medium body, luscious ripe pear flavors, minerality and mouthwatering acidity.

BORGIO CONVENTI SAUVIGNON BLANC COLLIO FRIULANO 2007

Notes of apricot and lemon, steely and fresh, and mineral driven.

VERMENTINO

SELLA AND MOSCA VERMENTINO LA CALA 2008

Notes of sea salt frame the mid-palate fruitiness, ending with a long soft finish.

SANTADI VILLA SOLAIS VERMENTINO DI SARDEGNA 2007

Fresh and pleasant citrus nose, attractive mineral notes.

VERDICCHIO

MONCARO VERDE DI CA' RUPTAE VERDICCHIO 2007

Notes of stone fruits, green apples, almond and citrus. Medium bodied with bright acidity.

SAN LORENZO VIGNA DI GINO VERDICCHIO 2008

Light straw color, intense floral aroma. Full-bodied and dry with fresh and persistent aromas of honeyed fruit.

DOLCETTO D'ALBA

DE FORVILLE DOLCETTO D'ALBA 2008

Elegant cherry, earthy and brambly nose. Lean, dry tannins with mushrooms, bittersweet cherry and a touch of oak.

VIBERTI DOLCETTO D'ALBA TONI D'GIUSPIN 2007

Red garnet color, aromas of cherry and blackberry, approachable tannins.

PRIMITIVO

OGNISSOLE PRIMITIVO DI MANDURIA 2006

Spicy hints of clove, black pepper and wild cherry. Soft and consistent, finishes with lingering cocoa and coffee.

VIGNETI REALE RUDIAE PRIMITIVO 2007

Prune and cherry on the nose, with a warm delicate taste.

NERO D'AVOLA

DONNAFUGATA SEDARA NERO D'AVOLA

Aromas of tobacco, spices and mineral notes. Flavors of blackberries and cherries, and a persistent finish.

COLOSI NERO D'AVOLA 2008

Full-bodied, with sweet dark cherries, menthol, sage and flowers.

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FLUTES OF FANCY

Italy practically bubbles over with sparkling wine options. **Prosecco**, produced with the grape of the same name mainly in the Veneto region, is crisp, clean, budget-friendly and so appealing—great by itself or in a cocktail. **Franciacorta** from Lombardy uses the same varietals and production method as Champagne, lending it richness, complexity and toasty notes. **Brachetto d'Acqui's** red, fizzy, lightly sweet and fun quality deems it perfect for chocolate- and berry-based desserts, or with bleu cheeses like Stilton. **Moscato d'Asti** is less effervescent than its counterpart Asti Spumante, with attractive grapey and floral aromas. It's lovely served as an apéritif before a meal or with soft cheeses and fruit.

from the United States, South America and Australia may find that Italian wines' higher acidity levels (especially in reds) and toned-down fruitiness may take some getting used to. As Hazur points out, these qualities deem them incredible partners with food, apt to pair with rather than overpower or overshadow dishes. Still, he suggests that those new to Italian wines start with bottles from the southern part of the country, which tend to be a good value, fruitier and similar to New World wines when the producer favors modern styles. He also recommends finding the price range in which you are willing to experiment, realizing that there are differences between a \$10 expression of the grape and a \$30 one.

Above all, Hazur suggests looking at the vast variety of available Italian wines as an exciting opportunity, rather than an overwhelming challenge. Austin shares this philosophy, adding, "If you are willing to try something new, it is almost always a significantly more rewarding experience than having the same bottle of wine every day." Salute!