

# VINOTIZIE®

*Enter the World of Italian Wine*

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## Is the DOP-IGP System Immutable?

by James M. Johnson

The DOCG, DOC and IGT system that assures the authenticity of the declared origin and therefore the quality of Italian wines has something of the character of Janus, the Romans' two-faced god of the New Year. It looks to the past and seeks to maintain the tradition upon which the many wines of Italy are based. However, it also looks to the future because it permits adjustments, ranging from minor fine-tuning to complete overhaul, in the production codes of the wines it regulates and guarantees. In the category of food products, however, the more recent Denominazione di Origine Protetta (DOP) and Indicazione Geografica Protetta (IGP) systems, inspired by and chiefly modeled on the structure in the wine sector, concentrates primarily on the preservation of the specialty food products of the past. The aim is to assure their survival in traditional, recognizable form and to prevent their debasement by unscrupulous or merely ignorant imitators.

Fine hams can be and are made in many countries but Prosciutto di Parma, San Daniele and Carpegna are made only in specific areas in Italy. And their special characteristics, which set them apart from one another and from hams cured in other parts of the world, are attributable to the physical and climatic conditions of specific places or territories, according to those who regulate and those who produce these hams. The experience and knowledge of those who process and cure the hams must also be preserved because their effects on the final product are as much a determinant as the nature of the territorio or terroir, terms every Italian winemaker appears to have vowed to utter at least a hundred times a day.

The DOP-IGP system is much wider than the cured meats sector but its orientation toward the past is apparently always the same, no matter the type of product. It will remain immune, therefore, to sudden outbreaks of short-lived trends or fads,



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while the wine sector often takes off on a tangent. Even if it soon returns to the straight path, as when winemakers seemed to want bubbles in everything, a certain amount of energy and resources is lost. But a sudden enthusiasm can also lead on to permanent benefit. The market seemed so enamored of wood that one exasperated Italian producer, a woman, angrily declared at a tasting years ago, "I'm operating a winery, not a lumber yard." Once they had accumulated experience in the use of small oak barrels, however, Italian producers sent to the market wines that were substantially superior in quality, whether they benefited from exposure to wood or were unsuited to such contact. Experimentation has led to important changes in wines and their production process but because of their DOP status various Italian cheeses—Asiago, Canestrato Pugliese and Gorgonzola—have reached a point of stability, so that they will, apparently, remain what they always have been.

However, the DOP-IGP system is still young and there is always a possibility that at some point in the future it will begin to develop along the same lines as the DOCG-DOC-IGT system in the wine sector. Isn't it possible that the Cappero di Pantelleria, an IGP caper, will mutate over time, necessitating an alteration of the IGP production code?

While some of the crazes that periodically sweep through the world's marketplaces result in permanent shifts in tastes, others produce more noise than substance before ceding the stage to some other folly. For example, the current fuss over the Atkins Diet, with its emphasis on low consumption of carbohydrates, has pasta-makers worried. However, pasta has been recognized as a healthy (and delicious) food for more than 2,000 years and there's every reason to believe it will weather the "storm." It may have already. 🍷

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# The IGT Opened Up a Whole New World

by Dan Berger

The history of the designation Indicazione Geografica Tipica is fascinating although the IGT remains a designation in a state of flux that is still confusing for many consumers. That history starts dozens of years ago with the disparaged term vino da tavola, a designation for wines that were not up to the standard of DOC and thus wines with a poor image. By the 1970s, some producers believed that DOC laws prohibited them from making a quality statement, so they began to develop proprietary wines and to aim at a little more credibility. They used VDT, for that's all they had.

Many of these producers knew these new VDT wines were one small step below what the DOC regulations called for but two large steps above the traditional VDT wines. Many of these winemakers thumbed their noses at the law, did what they wanted to do and gained a reputation for being iconoclasts. They used different clones, new varieties, lower yields, and greater or less time in barrel. Some of these new wines weren't as great as their winemakers had hoped they would be and the new wines continued without much growth for a long time. By the mid-1980s, many of these newer wines were above and beyond what anyone was doing but only a handful gained recognition.

Among them was the Tignanello of Antinori and then Maurizio Zanella's dramatic breakthroughs in Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Merlot at Ca' del Bosco. Consumer demand was rising and panache and splash were arriving in fancy bottles with wines that suddenly were competing on the world stage. The IGT designation, when it arrived, gave them a credibility that VDT never could. What was odd about all this acclaim was that, although indigenous grape varieties were what historically sold, to be competitive on the world stage, most winemakers couldn't make Barbera or Sangiovese. The grape that seemed to be the key to IGT wines was Cabernet Sauvignon; Cabernet-based wines were dominant.

Even today, it must be judged in that same world, even though some producers struck out on their own and made a Pinot Noir or a Chardonnay. Thus IGT allowed a region such as Umbria to make a statement with an international style of wine that otherwise would gain little fame if made entirely of local varieties. It has been said that little is guaranteed in an Indicazione

Geografica Tipica wine except the geographical origin of the grapes used. And without some explanation on the label, the consumer often has little clue as to what's in the bottle. So although IGT sounds like it may be a refuge for ultra-high quality wines, it is actually a curious category that has in it a number of inexpensive wines and a number of elaborate and dramatic international stars.

Thus it is not "better" than DOC; there are wines at both ends of the scale.

Today, the high end is represented in a number of Chianti-like wines with Cabernet added for an international flavor. One example is Poggio Amorelli's highly acclaimed Oracolo, a blend of Sangiovese and Cabernet Sauvignon. Moreover, the development of an official IGT seal also

helped some regions develop cultivars that previously had not been permitted or desired. Such is a wine called Bradisismo from Inama, from the general area where Soave is made in the Colli Berici near Verona in northeastern Italy. This region had few international red grapes until IGT came along. Today, Bradisismo is a blend of 30% Carmenere and 70% Cabernet.

Were it not for the development of the IGT designation, the region might never have developed a reputation for its red wines. 🍷

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# Organic Wines: When More Means Less

by Bill Marsano

Organic wine? The mere mention of it once sent folks edging silently doorward, desperate to escape the inevitable brown grape product “fresh” (so to speak) from the trunk of someone’s car at the farmers’ market. The stuff—“plonk” is too good a word—virtually oxidized before your very eyes. It was usually made by tie-dyed hippies who were eager, earth-loving and blindingly ignorant. Their all-too-simple method was to banish all the -cides (herbi, pesti and fungi) and simply let Mother Nature fend for herself.

How times have changed. In recent decades Italian winemakers have joined others in treating organics more intelligently, respecting the old ways handed down over centuries while scientifically investigating and improving them.

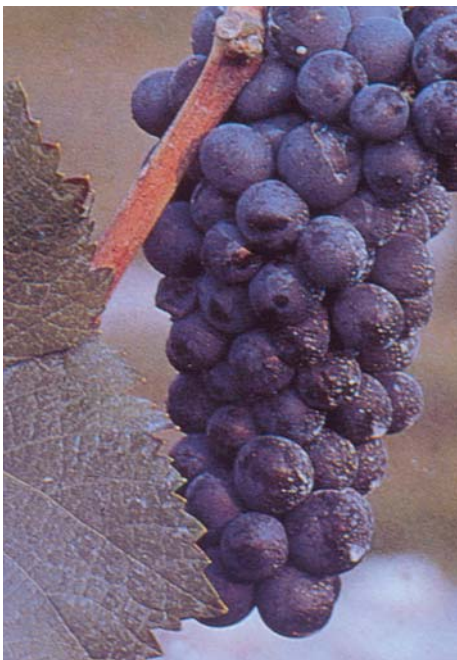
These new-style organics (vini biologici in Italian) “benefit greatly from consumer demand for pure, natural, artisanal foods,” according to a New York-based food-wine specialist. “Italy is in the forefront of that sector, which consumers are extending to include wine.” Tastings have fueled Americans’ interest. In New York in November 2003, five dozen wines from Tuscany, the Abruzzi, the Veneto, Emilia-Romagna, Apulia and other regions were presented. Judges placed Fasoli Gino, Bioitalia and Agriverde first, second and third, respectively, among the white wines; first through third among the reds were Ca’ Selvatica, Agriverde (also praised by Gambero Rosso) and Vini in Cornice.

“These were wines from organically grown grapes,” one of the organizers of the tastings said, “not organic wines.” Biologico wines still require sulfites to ensure stability. (For wines without sulfites, see Paragraph One, above.) So do biodynamic wines, made according to theories and practices far stricter—biologico-plus, you might call them.

Sebastiano Castiglioni’s Querciabella wine estate had been biologico for a dozen years before he turned biodynamic in 2000. “It takes 10 years for chemical residues to leave the soil,” he explains. His wines are darlings of Gambero Rosso and recently won the Best

Italian Wine award from Guida delle Guide, an annual digest of ratings by five major wine guides.

Nevertheless, Querciabella’s biodynamic certification is never mentioned on Sebastiano’s labels. “The seal, which must be prominently displayed, is very large and very ugly,” he says, “and the point about my wine is quality, not process.” More important is the company his wine keeps: “For some producers, biodynamic and organic are the last resort because they know some customers care only about organic and nothing else. So they make deals with organic chain stores in Italy and France. OK, but then you can forget about quality.”



Some producers practice “low-input” viticulture—what Franco Bernabei, a leading viticonsultant, calls “soft organics.” Peter Femfert is one. His award-winning Fattoria Nittardi: “is certainly three-quarters organic, using almost no chemicals at all. Twenty years ago, our workmen thought ‘more is better.’ Now we measure the dosage with a pharmacist’s balance.” Nittardi may be fully organ-

ic one day, but not certified. The time, money and bureaucratic tedium involved, Femfert says, are forbidding.

At Poggerino, one of Chianti’s “tiny giants,” Piero Lanza says “We use mainly copper and sulfur [which are permitted], and as little as possible. He rejects certification for a different reason. “If the vintage is threatened, we must spray. We absolutely cannot risk losing the crop.”

In the end, biologico labels may signify quality—or sales pitches—but their absence doesn’t necessarily mean a lack of organic or biodynamic fruit. Italy is no place to look for absolutes.

Still, wine-lovers can appreciate the fact that when it comes to chemicals, Italian wineries—whether as small as Poggerino or as vast as Castello Banfi—are doing more and more to use less and less. 🍷

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# Italian Wine Labels by the Alphabet

by Bill St. John

Italy's law of Denominazione di Origine Controllata (DOC) regulates the production and labeling of a significant share of Italian wine. The law intends to give purchasers of a DOC wine a reasonable expectation that a wine labeled as, say, Barbera d'Alba, will be Barbera d'Alba both in fact and in style. That is, it will look, smell, taste, feel and age like a Barbera d'Alba—because it is.

The words Denominazione di Origine Controllata roughly translate as “laws governing the making and naming of wines originating in select areas of Italy.” The underlying idea of DOC is to demarcate the regions—small and large—that produce Italy's superior wines.

Each DOC circumscribes its winemaking zone, the grape varieties that are permitted there, minimal alcohol levels (to assure sufficiently ripe grapes), maximum yields per hectare (to ensure concentration of flavor) and other factors—such as permitted winemaking practices or aging regimens—that affect quality.

At present, 310 zones throughout the country carry a DOC designation and 29, a higher one, DOCG (DOC + Garantita, “and guaranteed”). Quickly put, DOCG imposes slightly more stringent controls on its wines than does DOC.

Above and beyond delimiting winemaking areas of superior quality, DOC and DOCG wines also may categorize wines by type (sparkling, say, or semi-sweet), by grape variety (Pinot Grigio, for example), by age, or riserva, or by sub-classifications, such as classico which defines a historic or classic district within a DOC/DOCG.

Two other designations control the production and labeling of Italian wines—Indicazione Geografica Tipica (IGT) and Vino da Tavola (VDT).

Indicazione Geografica Tipica literally translates as “typical geographic indications” and means that a wine so-named is characteristic, even exemplary, of its wine producing area. Vino da Tavola translates simply as “table wine”—but its meaning isn't so simple.

Like Janus, the two-faced deity, VDT looks in two completely different directions. On the one hand, VDT is the name for those rivers of Italy's straightforward and inexpensive (usually red) wines meant for everyday drinking. On the other, VDT is the category that—willy-nilly—some of the country's most expensive and rarest wines can fall into because they do not fit under DOC regulation.

In the recent past, because many enterprising Italian winemakers found the DOC laws constricting, they worked outside them—especially by using “international” grape varieties such as Syrah or Merlot. For example, an all-Merlot wine, made in the Chianti district, did not qualify for oversight under DOC. As a consequence, the sole classification that it could use (at the time) was VDT—“table wine”—notwithstanding its price at, say, \$50 a bottle.

In 1992, the DOC laws were abridged to address the puzzle of why some of Italy's best wines were sold under its most humble designation—and, for that reason in part, the IGT designation was born.

At present, Italy sports 117 IGTs. In concept and force, they equal the French vin de pays or German Landwein appellations.

Like VDT, the guarantees under IGT are more elastic than under DOC/DOCG. However, IGT raised the bar on “table wine” so understood, regulating anew a substantial portion (about 40%) of traditional or everyday wine. Each IGT specifies which grape varieties, mix of grape varieties and winemaking practices it allows within individual designated (typical) territories. 🍷

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**VILLA ROSSI**  
PRODUCT OF ITALY

**NEBBIOLO DI ABCDE**  
DENOMINAZIONE DI ORIGINE CONTROLLATA

1996

ITALIAN DRY RED WINE

ESTATE BOTTLED BY VILLA ROSSI S.P.A. CASEPARSE - Italy

Net Contents 750ml      Alcohol 12% by Volume

IMPORTED BY XYZ IMPORTERS, NY

The Brand name of the producer

Origin required by US law

The generic name for the Wine

Wine Classification: DOC shown, DOCG add "e Garantita" Other Categories. IGT for typical Wines. Vino da Tavola (table wines)

Year grapes harvested (vintage)

Clear description required by law

Name and location of bottler

Facts required by US Law

Name and location of importer

**READING AN ITALIAN WINE LABEL**

# Exciting Elixirs for Today's Lifestyles

by Anita issen Mizner

**C**ontemporary aperitifs have taken center stage in our social life as recorded in books, print media, TV, cable shows and the Internet. What's more, each week brings word of new drink-focused cafes and bars. Long before the Christian era, use of botanical wine nostrums spread eastward from gurus in Asia, to Aegean and Mediterranean counterparts.

Actually it was Hippocrates' honey-sweetened absinth wines, aromatized with healing herbs, like bitterish wormwood blossoms (*Artemisia absinthium*) that resulted in the popularity of absinth wines in Italy from Roman times on. Post-Renaissance trade in exotic spices and plants from Asia and Africa, and Peruvian cinchona bark (quinine), boosted production of tastier aromatized wines, eventually called vermouth from the German term for wormwood, vermut. These, plus unlimited Alpine botanica established Turin as vermouth's capital in the 1700s. Only yesterday as centuries go.

In 1786, Antonio Benedetto Carpano opened a cafe, wine bar and workshop, on Piazza Castello, introducing tutto Torino to commercially produced vermouth. Patrons could also order flavorings in specific amounts to be mixed into their vermouth: herbs, spices, vanilla, bitters and sweetening. In 1876, Punt e Mes was created by a broker who ordered--in trader-signage--a blend of Punt e Mes (one point bitters and a half-point sweetener). So great was demand for this blend it had to be bottled. It's still the most dynamic tasting of all vermouths. Vanilla-scented Carpano Antica Formula, the original sweet vermouth, is special, too. Others to try: Gancia, Riccadonna, Stock, plus the greats: Martini & Rossi and Cinzano. They also launched the first of today's elegant versatile styles: Dry White, rounder Bianco, and Sweet Red, colored with caramel. Rose vermouth is also available in Italy.

Martini & Rossi have benefited greatly from the naming--and wild success--of the greatest cocktail of all time, the modern Martini. Though its provenance is attributed to several bartenders, it is classic in its simplicity; three-fourths gin or vodka; one fourth dry vermouth, and a plain olive. The olive's salt fuses the

## THE MARTINI

An Italian journalist has suggested that the diamond-shaped Champagne glass is better for Martinis than the traditional goblet. Surprisingly, The diamond shape produces a deeper sensory experience. See if you agree.

## NEGRONI

One ounce each, Campari, Punt e Mes, Gin, Orange Twist Pour Campari, Punt e Mes, and Gin into a tall graceful wine glass almost filled with ice cubes. Stir well. Garnish with orange twist or slice.

## THE AMERICANO

1 1/2 ounces each, Campari and Carpano Antica Formula. Flamed Orange Twist or slice of Blood or Coral Orange. Pour Campari and Carpano into an Ice-filled highball glass. Top with soda water. Stir well. Garnish with orange twist or slice.

flavors. However, premium dry white wine grappa seems to have an affinity for vermouth. Jacopo Poli's exquisite aged wine brandy, Arzente, makes a heavenly Martini.

Nonino, Poli, Nardini and others distill small-batch, elegantly clear fruit brandies, too. Nardini is also known for its Grappa Ruta (rue). Candolini, too. And not to be missed is Marolo Grappa and Camomile. Nardini's smooth, lower alcohol cocktail, Tagliatelle is a blend of distillates. And the citrus cocktail, Acqua di Cedro, tastes like orange blossoms.

Bitterness works differently on the palate than sweetness, saltiness and acidity. People talk about "having to get used to" bitter drinks. If you enjoy bitter beers, you'll be in tune with Fernet Branca and minty Brancamenta. Fernet Branca and Brancamenta's ingredients include myrrh, saffron, angelica, mint, chamomile, cardamom, quinine and about 30-plus other beneficial plants. Italy is bitters' true home.

Among lighter amari, Quintessencia, Nonino's amaro of Alpine Herbs made with separately distilled grape liqueurs is enchanting. Other alluring lovelies: Amaro Meletti; Nardini Amaro Felsina with licorice accents; edgy Borsci San Marzano Elisir and Luxardo Amaro, also Bitters, and Cynar, made of artichokes.

Between these is Martini & Rossi's ChinaMartini. ChinaMartini, Branca's Fernet--also Luxardo's--are true gifts from ancient physicians. Some versions of the Hippocratic absinth wines are made with anise, like arrack and ouzo. They also become opalescent when mixed with chilled water, Try that mix with premium Meletti Anisette or Molinari Sambuca.

Other liqueurs that add pizzazz to aperitifs have to start with Limoncello. What choices! Three with lively, non-bitter flavor come from Mezzaluna, Argiolas and Baco de Limone. Argiolas also brings in myrtle-based, purple-hued Mirto. Stock has a great portfolio including historic Rosilio. 🍷

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# Friuli's Red Wine Focus Recharged

By Eleanor & Ray Heald

In Italy's northeast, the region formally known as Friuli-Venezia Giulia is generally simplified to the lyrical Friuli. Before the Pinot Grigio craze swept Friuli, it was best known for red wine. Today, savvy producers have recharged that fame.

Bordering Austria and Slovenia and divided climatically north and south, Friuli, boasting a continental climate, lies between the protective geographic umbrella of the Alps to the north and the moderating climate derived from the Adriatic.

Couple favorable climate with gravel-rich soils and Grave del Friuli, often shortened to Friuli Grave, becomes red wine utopia. Friuli Grave takes its name from the same "gravelly" root as the Graves region of Bordeaux in France.

Less than four decades ago, 80% of the region's wines were based on red grapes, principally Merlot, planted after phylloxera. With the Pinot Grigio trend tamed now and red wines gaining favor with consumers around the globe, Friuli's producers, particularly in Friuli Grave, are regaining their reputation for reds, not only Merlot but also Bordeaux blends of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Merlot.

In tandem with this is the evolution of a splendid tradition in Friuli Grave: barrel-aged red wines made from traditional varieties like Refosco, Schioppettino and the once rare Pignolo, hallmarks of Friuli's cultural wine identity. Friulian red wines are marked by elegant and soft aromatic impressions as opposed to the tempting riper aromas of red wines from southern Italy, grown in Mediterranean climes. Refosco dal Peduncolo Rosso translates as "Refosco with the red stalks." Considered the best Refosco sub-variety, reputed as the favored wine of Livia, the second wife of Augustus Caesar, it creates deeply colored, engaging, spicy red wines with intense dark plum underpinnings and notes of almonds.

Comparable to Syrah in aroma and flavor characteristics, Schioppettino, a native to Friuli, produces a more tannic wine than most Syrahs from either the northern Rhône Valley of France or California. When aged, Schioppettino evolves into a luxurious and richly textured red wine with violet scents and peppery-spice notes in the finish.

Also considered native to Friuli, Pignolo, which means fussy in Italian, was nearly extinct until a group of local winegrowers reintroduced it from vineyard cuttings found at the 11th-century Abbey of Rosazzo. Pignolo makes dense, darkly colored wines with concentrated black fruit characters and spicy notes. Of the indigenous



or nearly indigenous Friuli grape varieties, Pignolo shows the best affinity to barrel aging and extended cellaring after bottling.

Red wines from Friuli Grave can be barrel aged to develop bigger, richer styles or they can be unoaked in pure fruit-forward styles, unencumbered by oak influences. They have their place at the table next to similarly styled foods. Unoaked reds suit lighter dishes such as gnocchi or pasta e fagioli, the region's prized San Daniele Prosciutto or a tasty Frico, the delight made from Montasio cheese, which is often served as an antipasto. Frico con le patate (frico with potatoes) creates a stellar match with Refosco.

Lighter Friuli reds also pair with jota, a typical savory bean and pork soup of Austrian origin that's very popular in Friuli. Barrel matured wines take to heartier, richer dishes, grilled meats, stews, venison and other game. The regional genuineness of Italian wines begins with the prime selection of raw materials. In Friuli, the return to a focus on red varieties is being greeted with enthusiasm in the world marketplace. 🍷

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# Stretching Vines to the Upper Limit

by James M. Johnson

The wine promotion people with the regional government of the Aosta Valley, tucked away in the mountainous northwestern corner of Italy, have shown commendable restraint. They could be describing their products as “scaling the heights” or offering the “peak of pleasure” but they’re not, for the rock-solid reason that the valley’s wines need no promotion. Each year, the producers’ cellars are virtually bare by the time the clusters are filling out on the vines for the next vintage. Many of those wines are unique, made from varieties that are found nowhere else. The reason why they are hard to find on the market has little to do with demand. Because of the rugged nature of the terrain and the truly impressive altitudes at which the vines grow, production is limited. In view of the difficulties, it is surprising the area turns out any wines at all.



The principal approach to the valley, at least from the south, begins at the border with Piedmont at the point where the Dora Baltea River breaks out of the mountains and rushes down to join the Po. The valley extends toward the north and then angles to the left to run along a virtually perfect east-west line. The neat little city of Aosta, the regional capital, is situated in the center of the valley. It contains numerous traces of its Roman past—the name is derived from Augusta Praetoria, an outpost founded by the Emperor Augustus after he defeated the indigenous Salassi. The conquered people, presumably a Celtic tribe, had held onto the valley even though the surrounding zones had long been subjugated by Rome. The highway then climbs the lower slopes of Monte Bianco to reach the tunnel that links Italy with France and northern Europe. Along the route there are dozens of castles of every size, shape and period.

The highway parallels the Dora Baltea, which is fed by melt from the glaciers on Monte Bianco, the highest peak in Europe, and other mountains surrounding the valley, including the Cervino (Matterhorn), Monte Rosa and Gran Paradiso. The vineyards grow mostly in the valley on both sides of the highway. They are small—viticulture in the Valle d’Aosta is highly fragmented even by Italian standards—and the vines are usually trained to trellises supported and enclosed by walls made of rough stone slabs. The same stones are used in

the roofs of older houses. The summers in the valley are hot and surprisingly dry, while the winters dump enough snow on the slopes to gladden the hearts of avid skiers. However, it’s all a bit tough on the vineyards—those at Morgex and La Salle are said to be the highest in the world at 4,265 feet.

All those skiers work up powerful thirsts, which explains why the valley’s cellars are usually drained dry by the time the first swallows appear on the horizon. But the regional administration is doing its best to expand familiarity with the valley’s wines and other products by promoting awareness abroad and exports. The valley has much to offer, especially many dozens of wines made from native varieties that are not cultivated elsewhere. The entire output is covered by a single appellation, Valle d’Aosta or Vallée d’Aoste—like other border areas, the valley has developed its own dialect, a blend of Italian and French (or earlier languages).

The wines are identified by colors and varieties and there are seven subdenominations. The usual Bianchi, Rossi and Rosati are in evidence but visitors will also be offered such “new” (to most of them) wines as red Cornalin, Fumin, Mayolet, Petit Rouge and Premetta and white Petite Arvine, Prié Blanc and Vien de Nus plus Moscato and Malvoisie. Valley winemakers also use the now-standard international varieties—Chardonnay, Pinot Bianco, Rosso and Grigio, Syrah, Merlot, Müller Thurgau and Gamay—and the principal red variety of neighboring Piedmont, Nebbiolo. They are made in a wide range of styles, dry, off-dry, sweet, raisin, sparkling, semi-sparkling, young and fresh or moderately aged. ❁

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# For Piedmontese, Barbera means Home

by Morton Hochstein



On a recent trip to Italy, I asked some of the leading winemakers of the Piedmont what wine they had enjoyed with dinner the previous night. To a man, they answered Barbera.

Barbera is the everyday wine of the Piedmont. This popular red cultivated in far greater quantities than its better-known neighbors on hills along the Po River, is one of the region's two most widely cultivated grapes. The other is often overlooked in all the attention lavished on the super premium Barolo, Barbaresco and Nebbiolo wines. That grape is Moscato Bianco, which gives us sparkling Asti Spumante and the only slightly less ebullient Moscato d'Asti.

Even though sweet sparkling wine may have fallen out of fashion in the press, Asti's sparkling wines arrive in amazing quantities on store shelves and dinner tables. In 2003, DOCG producers turned out 14 million gallons of bubbly. Asti is the most productive DOCG zone of Italy.

Asti Spumante is usually crisper and more aromatic than its serious but sweeter Moscato sibling, although winemaking techniques often alter those differences. The best Spumante and the best Moscato are distinguished by their harmonious blend of peach and apricot sweetness and tangy but pleasing acidity. The Spumante is preferable as an appetizer and the Moscato as a dessert wine, but they are interchangeable and are pleasant companions with any course at table.

Barbera is the most widely planted red grape and the most varied in style. Basic Barbera is a fruity wine most often ruby colored, low in tannin and much easier to cultivate than the more delicate Nebbiolo. The Piedmont is its natural home but it grows widely throughout Italy and is second only to Sangiovese in hectares under cultivation. Depending upon vineyard location and the winemaker's goals, it can vary from

a rustic, cherry-scented wine to a silky, elegant, powerful and versatile red. Innovative producers are experimenting with this sturdy grape, just as they have with other Italian varieties, and are elevating it to stylish heights.

Dolcetto, meaning little sweet one, is the earliest of the three major Piedmont reds to ripen. It is low in acid, deep purple to black in color and is the fruitiest and juiciest of the Piedmont reds. Like Barbera, it is now being produced in many styles from light and soft to plump and sweet. It is a wine to be drunk young, a perfect choice for today's market. Dolcetto is often blended with sturdier reds to soften their sharp edges and many producers are now vinifying it in oak barrels to produce a more age-worthy version. In the northern Piedmont, the Nebbiolo grape yields an even more robust wine, which is frequently blended with lesser regional varieties to tone down its powerful acids and tannins. The finest Nebbiolo from Gattinara and Ghemme, unblended, can rival Barolo and Barbaresco for concentration and appealing aromas. Brachetto, not widely available, is an indigenous red that yields sweet wines and a delightful pink sparkling wine.

Chardonnay, now widely planted in the Langhe hills, competes with native whites such as Arneis, Cortese and Erbaluce. Erbaluce, which flourishes in far northern areas, is a hardy, herbal and extremely acidic varietal, which evolves into dry whites and fragrant sparkling wines. The Cortese, at its best in the Monferrato hills of the Piedmont, is the basis for Gavi, an acid-rich wine well mated with fish. Arneis, once used primarily as a blending grape to soften Nebbiolo, is prized for distinctive citrus and sour apple scents and flavors and is perhaps the most elegant of the Piedmont whites. 🍷

*Mort Hochstein, a former writer and producer for NBC's Today program, has contributed to Saveur, Wine Business Monthly, Wine Spectator, Decanter, Wine Enthusiast and other leading journals. His book, "The Art of the Wine Label," will be published in 2005.*



# Chianti Is a Plural Noun

by Tom Maresca

Chianti is probably the best-known wine name in the world, but few who know the name realize the complexity it covers. Chianti wine, classified DOCG since 1994, comes from eight different districts in Tuscany—Colli Aretini, Colli Fiorentini, Colline Pisane, Colli Senesi, Montalbano, Montespertoli, Rùfina, and Chianti Classico. Chianti the wine name originated from a place name, a fraction of the district now known as Chianti Classico, lying between Florence and Siena. The name spread to other nearby areas as the wine gained in popularity and more and more growers planted their fields with the grapes of the traditional Chianti blend.

Those other zones now share their own DOCG, separate from Chianti Classico's. Like winemaking areas throughout Italy, they have benefited from the wave of modernization that over the last 25 years has transformed vineyards and cellars up and down the peninsula. Now, many wines from the "other" Chianti districts have become serious contenders in excellence with the best that Tuscany can produce. White grapes were originally included in Chianti but they aren't needed any longer. On the contrary, current taste runs to the kind of body and fruit intensity that the classic Tuscan red grapes, such as Sangiovese and Canaiolo or Colorino, provide in abundance, so they have assumed pride of place throughout the Chianti kingdom. This doesn't mean there are no differences among the many Chiantis. Given the highly broken-up terrain of Tuscany, there can be large differences in soil and exposure and even temperature range, not just from one zone to another but even from one hillside to another. In addition, different producers set different goals for themselves.

The various Chianti zones may identify themselves on their labels, though most just say Chianti. Rùfina (east of Florence: the smallest zone and the one with the most defined personality) most often announces itself because it has achieved the greatest reputation and distinction: Chianti Rùfina tends toward mouth-filling, dark-fruit flavors, with a characteristic earthy undertone, and—especially in its riserva form—it can take aging very nicely indeed. Chianti Montalbano (southwest of Prato) ought to be as impressive, but it shares its growing zone with the more prestigious Carmignano, with which it must compete for the best grapes. Much the same can be said for Chianti Colli Senesi—the hills around Siena, which faces even



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stiffer internal competition. Its growing zone includes the Brunello di Montalcino and Vino Nobile di Montepulciano denominations, which inevitably draw the cream of the Sangiovese crop, so its Chianti most often appears as a distinctly fruity and very pleasant wine designed for drinking young and without ceremony.

That too is the most common character of the wines of the Colline Pisane (from the hills around Pisa) and Colli Aretini (from the hills around Arezzo). The Colli Fiorentini (from the hills around Florence), and Montespertoli (until recently, the western part of the Colli Fiorentini) zones offer the most exceptions to that generalization. Geographically, they sit like a collar around Florence and atop the Chianti Classico zone. In the Colli Fiorentini, most producers are crafting a more serious, more full-bodied riserva to complement their zesty regular wine. In style and complexity, these riserva wines resemble those of the Classico zone they border on. 🍷

*Tom Maresca, a long-time partisan of Italian wines, is the author of *Mastering Wine* and *The Right Wine* (both Grove-Atlantic).*

# A Wine Conundrum

by William R. Nesto

**H**ere is a wine riddle for you to solve. What wine has a color that runs from pale yellow to dark amber and a heady perfume of molasses, dried figs, roasted nuts, varnish and burnt leather? Depending on the producer, it varies from bone dry to lusciously sweet and from tangy to soft. It usually weighs in at more than 16% alcohol. Its most lofty example is dollar for ounce the most expensive wine in Italy. At the same time, there are versions that are so light in flavor and devoid of character as to desanctify its holy-sounding name.

I am describing Vin Santo, an unusual wine made in Central Italy. While it is certain that Vin Santo is a vinous fossil, knowledge of its recent history, let alone its early history, is scant. This is because the “real stuff” (as opposed to the type that has “liquoroso” printed on the label and is fortified with grape spirits and sometimes concocted out of wines of dubious provenance) has always largely been a wine made by families, rich and poor, for their own consumption, usually as a treat at the end of a meal or as a gift for a friend or revered guest.

Cookies called cantuccini, aged pecorino with honey and homemade jams, dried fruits and nuts, and good conversation often accompany the offering. Because it is so time-consuming to make and because a large production of grapes yields a small amount of final product, a bottle of the “real stuff” is a special gift, one that deserves space quarried out of carry-on luggage. In Italy, priests often serve it to parishioners as part of the communion ceremony. This practice supports the translation of its name into English. Vin Santo means “holy wine.” Since I have not partaken in this manner, I cannot vouch for the quality of the offering, though I have heard that it is not high.

There are many appellations in Tuscany that contain disciplines (production codes) for its production. The Chianti, Chianti Classico and Montepulciano zones are vibrant centers of pro-



duction. Neighboring Umbria has a similar Vin Santo tradition. More rarefied native versions appear in the Gambellara zone in the Veneto, in Trentino and in the Cinqueterre zone of Liguria, where it is called Sciacchetrà. Importers bring small amounts of expensive estate-bottled Vin Santo into the United States. Americans are most likely to have experienced Vin Santo in Tuscan restaurants where Vin Santo is offered with cantuccini as an after dinner treat. Unfortunately, this is rarely the “real stuff.” Patrons are encouraged to dunk the cantuccini. The poor biscuits!

Though Vin Santo made at the family level may consist of a mix of white and red grapes, usually Vin Santo is made out of the two white grapes, Trebbiano Toscano and Malvasia del Chianti. There exists a Sangiovese-dominant Vin Santo, called Occhio di Pernice, but it is difficult to make and find. The harvested grapes are dried for several months in naturally ventilated rooms, then pressed, put into small, preferably old barrels called “caratelli.” The wine ferments in these caratelli for several years in lofts where the temperature varies greatly during the seasons. When the caratelli are opened, each one has its own individual character. After the barrels are blended, the Vin Santo is bottled.

There are variations in production strategy, which separate Vin Santo producers into traditionalists and modernist camps. The traditionalists make Vin Santo in an oxidative style, which emphasizes nuttiness. Modernists prefer fruitier versions. Though some producers have made efforts to modernize and standardize production methods, overall production remains highly traditional and individual. Vin Santo is so costly to make that its sale is rarely profitable. “For me,” Marco Ricasoli-Firidolfi of Rocca di Montegrossi, a Chianti Classico estate, declares, “Vin Santo is pure poetry in liquid form. I’ve always had a special passion for it and I will continue to make it...whatever the market thinks. 🍷”

*Bill Nesto is a Master of Wine. Currently he is a Senior Lecturer at Boston University's Elizabeth Bishop Wine Resource Center, a contributing editor to Santé and a regular contributor to Massachusetts Beverage Business.*

# Dry or Sweet, Sagrantino di Montefalco Is a Big Wine

by Tom Hyland



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You could be forgiven if Umbria wasn't the first region you thought of regarding Italian wine. Located in the middle of the country, this landlocked territory is often overlooked by many Italians as well. To combat the lack of familiarity in the marketplace, some producers in Umbria have been producing red wines from Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, two of the most recognized grapes in the world. Impressive as these wines are, in fact, they have little or nothing to do with Umbria, as they often taste much like a big red wine from California or Australia.

Thankfully, there are vintners who want to preserve the indigenous grapes of Umbria and craft wines that are truly distinct and display the unique flavors of this region. The most shining example of this is in a small area near the town of Montefalco where a few dozen producers work with the Sagrantino grape.

Montefalco, a town known equally well for its splendid olive oil as well as its wine, is located in south central Umbria, about halfway between the towns of Spoleto to the south and Assisi to the north. This is the only place in Italy where Sagrantino is grown and, at a total of roughly 250 acres, it's easy to see why so few consumers know much about this grape. But the complexities of the wines made from Sagrantino make it worth seeking out.

The first thing you need to know about Sagrantino is that it is tannic. You may think of Nebbiolo from Piemonte as a tannic grape but Sagrantino does not take a back seat in this category. How to deal with the tannins is a constant learning experience for the area's vintners and recent wines have shown a softer edge with sweeter tannins, due to aging in small oak barrels as well as a bit more time aging before release.

There are two major dry red wines produced from Sagrantino. The first is Montefalco Rosso, which is actually produced primarily from Sangiovese (60% to 70%) with a small percentage of Sagrantino (10% to 15%) along with the possibility of Merlot or another red grape in the blend. As Sangiovese is much less tannic than Sagrantino,

this type of wine can be consumed in its youth and is at its best two to three years after the vintage, though in the finest years a few examples drink well at five to seven years of age.

The leading red wine is Sagrantino di Montefalco, which must be 100% Sagrantino. Here the grape displays all of its unique flavors of blackberry, black cherry, sage and oregano. Aged for at least one year in wood, this is a big, gutsy wine that combines the ripeness of many of today's best-known wines from around the world with a traditional Italian red wine that emphasizes spice, earth and a bit of rustic quality. Generally released in its third year, Sagrantino di Montefalco could be enjoyed upon release (especially with an aged cheese such as Pecorino), but it is best savored when it is between 7-10 years of age with pork (an Umbrian specialty) or duck breast.

Sagrantino is also used to make the lovely dessert wine, Montefalco Sagrantino Passito. Produced exclusively from Sagrantino, this wine is made by drying the grapes on straw mats for four or five months before fermentation, much like another famous red Italian dessert wine, Recioto della Valpolicella from the Veneto. During the drying process, about a third of the grapes' water evaporates, leaving the berries to shrivel and intensify. The resulting wine is generally about 14% in alcohol and is quite sweet, with luscious flavors of black raspberry and blackberry with a touch of cocoa. Think of it as port without the high alcohol and you have a pretty good idea of how unique this wine truly is.

Whether you prefer a spicy, muscular dry red or a delicious dessert wine, Sagrantino delivers. There will never be much in the way of quantity of wines made from Sagrantino but we should be thankful to a small group of producers who realize the glories of this grape and present them to the marketplace. 🍷

*Tom Hyland writes and teaches about Italian wines. His articles have appeared in publications such as *Saveur*, *Decanter*, *Drinks and Quarterly Review of Wines*. He also publishes the newsletter *Guide to Italian Wines* based on his frequent trips to Italy.*

# The Wine Revolution Reaches Latium

by Renie and Sterling Steves

**L**atium (Lazio), the region around Rome, is historically known for two legendary white wines, traditional Frascati, and classic Est! Est!! Est!!! (both made mainly from Malvasia and Trebbiano). But wait... Adjust your vision—the sun is rising over Latium. A modern-day revolution is evolving in the countryside, both north and south of Rome, where the production, particularly of red wine, is serious business. Latium is the latest region to awaken and come forward to the quality wine market along with Apulia and Sicily.

In 1999 a group of winemakers formed an association, Le Vigne del Lazio, to promote the image and quality of wines in Latium. Antonio Santarelli of Casale del Giglio is president of the 20 members who are dedicated to high standards in the making of Latium wines regulated through inspections and taste tests. They organize conferences in the region, Italy and around Europe. “We have been promoting the wines of Lazio for five years,” Santarelli said, “so I guess it’s a 15-year project.”

Whites, still the bigger part of the market in Latium, have improved because of innovative technology, which has made them crisper and less fragile so that they can travel to foreign markets but it’s the reds that are the big surprise.

Cesanese, the only local red varietal of Latium, has tight clusters of small, thick-skinned grapes. Slow to ferment, it is not easy to vinify because it has abnormally high acidity and its own inherent spice needs time to become round and smooth. One answer is to blend it with Shiraz, Montepulciano d’Abruzzo, and Sangiovese. Castel de Paolis does this with its Campo Vecchio for a delicious spicy, slightly smoky result.

Giovanni Terenzi of Vini Giovanni Terenzi, whose main production is red, turns out five wines with the Cesanese grape. One look at Terenzi’s strong, rough hands tells of his love for the

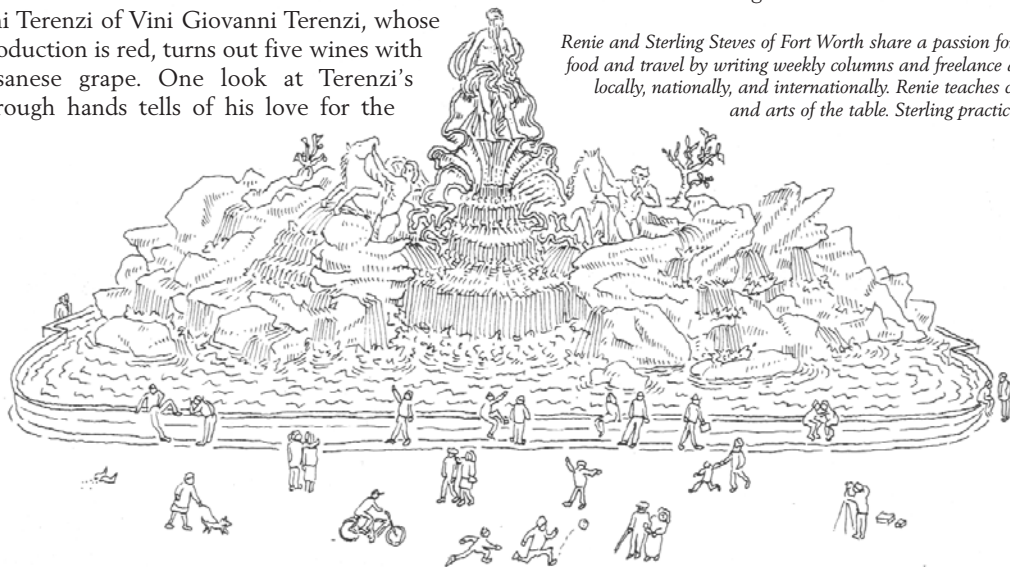
vines, the chalky limestone and calcareous soil, and his hands-on approach to winemaking. A partnership with the European Union is fueling this wine revolution by encouraging some winery owners like Terenzi to modernize. Terenzi proudly shows his new bottle sterilization machine. He gets back 40% of the money invested in two years from the EU. This is in line with his goal of producing more high-quality wine and less bulk wine.

Marina and Paolo Perinelli of Casale della Ioria are changing labels and marketing strategies. They took a risk and produced a more expensive wine, a success. They sell out each year before the next vintage is ready. A first for Latium—Ioria Torre de Piano 2001—won a gold medal at Vinitaly 2003, Merlot seems to be the most popular “foreign” varietal planted. Both Sant’Andrea and Mottura are producing 100% Merlot or blending it with local grapes for excellent results.

On the border of Latium and Umbria, brothers Renzo and Riccardo Cotarella are building a new Falesco winery. They have changed the grapes grown, the way of cultivating the vines, the amount produced per hectare and the image. Falesco Montiano 2001 of 100 % Merlot is soft but rich with spice that integrates with the tannins. A wine like this will get the Romans to drinking from their own region again.

“After a trip to Napa and Sonoma in 2001, we realized we have an incredible opportunity for wine tourism because we are so close to Rome,” Santarelli said. “Eventually we’ll have a tasting room and shop and space for wine culture such as dinners, education, talks and concerts.” Get ready to go to the countryside and experience the elegant, contemporary wines of the Latium region. 🍷

*Renie and Sterling Steves of Fort Worth share a passion for wine, food and travel by writing weekly columns and freelance articles locally, nationally, and internationally. Renie teaches cooking and arts of the table. Sterling practices law.*



# The Wines of Apulia: Now as Steeped in Quality as in Quantity

by Todd M. Wernstorm

Apulia, the southern Italian region typically referred to as the heel of the boot, has long been Europe's vineyard. With its long and mostly flat layout, Apulia has a correspondingly high percentage of arable land. This, coupled with relatively mild weather, almost guarantees that each vintage will be reliably ripe, a guarantee not easily made farther north. As a consequence, Apulia's wines, primarily its reds, have been surreptitiously used as blending components to lend backbone and color to bottles from the more hallowed vineyards of Piedmont and the Veneto, not to mention Burgundy and Bordeaux.

But the wines of Apulia are now more than ready to be acknowledged on labels that trumpet their provenance rather than keep it a secret. Though the region annually vies with the Veneto and Emilia-Romagna for the top output by volume in the entire country, Apulia also produces a great deal of classified wine in addition to all that simple, if well made, bulk wine. Its 25 DOCs are more than any other southern region. Add to that six IGTs and it's clear that Apulia has a lot more to offer consumers than boxed reds and whites.

The region is fairly easy to understand for consumers. It consists of two "sections" north and south of an imaginary line drawn between Brindisi to the east and Taranto to the west. To the north of this "line" the vineyards are apt to be a bit elevated and slightly hilly. The climate, while mild, is less warm than on the southern side. As a consequence, whites do well here though Apulia as a whole is best known for its hearty reds. As is often the case in Italy, the grapes of choice are those with long histories in the area and not particularly well known outside of it—in other words, they're not French. Verdeca, Trebbiano, Malvasia and Bianco d'Alessano are the main white varieties. For reds there is Uva di Troia, Bombino Nero and the more familiar Sangiovese and Montepulciano.

Perhaps the north's best-respected DOC is that of Castel del Monte, named for the fortress built there by Frederick II—better known himself as Frederick the Great. Unlike many of Apulia's DOCs, Castel del Monte permits a number of single-varietal wines, and consumers will even come across Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Bianco as winemakers attempt to capture some of the international market. Locorotondo is a well-known white DOC. French



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grapes will be encountered here too, but it is the perfumed whites (spumante and still, both dry) made from Verdeca and Bianco d'Alessano that are most associated with the whitewashed, single-room buildings with cone-shaped roofs called trulli that predominate in the area.

To the south of the Brindisi/Taranto line is the Salento Peninsula. While the climate is decidedly warmer than to the north, it is moderated somewhat by the presence of the Adriatic and Ionian seas. As would be expected, reds do best here. The most important grapes are Primitivo—a grape that has already captured the fancy of American consumers for its ability to combine muscle with fruit-forward flavor—Negroamaro (often seen as Negro Amaro) and Malvasia Nera.

Salice Salentino and Copertino are the two DOCs that consumers most likely will come across. In fact, Copertino may have the region's longest documented history of wine production dating back, as it does, more than 1,000 years. Negroamaro is the star in Copertino though there is some Sangiovese and Montepulciano as well.

The wines of Apulia provide just what world markets are in search of these days: Well-made, inexpensive, fruit-forward reds and whites of a delicacy enviable for a warm-weather production area. 🍷

*Todd M. Wernstorm gave up his 12-year law practice in 2000 in order to write about wine, particularly Italian and French. He is the executive editor of The Wine News.*

# On the Slopes of Etna



by Fred Ferretti

"We have made arrangements," Dottor Giuseppe Benanti, winemaker and Cavaliere del Lavoro, assured us. "We do not wish you to be disappointed, not when you have journeyed to Sicily, to the land of Monte Etna."

We had indeed come to the Benanti vineyards, not only to taste the whites and reds of one of the finest winemakers in the Etna region but also to enjoy his restaurant, Osteria I Tre Bicchieri in nearby Catania, reputed to be a special haven for the cooking of the region of Sicily surrounding Mount Etna or, as Dottor Benanti called it, the "Mongibello."

We had tasted some of his whites, notably a fruit-laden Minnella Bianca made from the indigenous Etna grapes of the same name, and a soft Pietramarina, from another native grape, Carricante. And we had drunk several reds including a Serra della Contessa, an Etna Rosso fashioned from the Nerello, Mascalese and Cappuccio grapes grown only on the slopes of Mount Etna.

Benanti had said that we would then motor back down the slopes in Viagrande to Catania for dinner. A treat for the eye, before satisfying the stomach, it would mean retracing our earlier drive upward, north from Catania—from the high and terraced vineyards surrounded by scrub vegetation, down through the broom and holly horn bushes, the cacti and the seas of violets through the pastures and red orange citrus groves of the Piana di Catania.

But it was not to be, Benanti said, for absentmindedly he had simply forgotten that his osteria was closed that day. We were not to despair however, since he had contacted his chef and a meal would be cooked at the estate. "A meal of Sicily and Etna. Out of adversity will come goodness," he said and it would be served in a reconstructed stable on long oaken tables strategically placed among a collection of old wagon wheels.

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*Fred Ferretti, food and wine essayist and editor, has been a writer and columnist for The New York Herald Tribune and The New York Times, a producer for NBC News and Contributing Editor to Gourmet magazine. A graduate of Columbia University, he is the author of 5 books and countless articles.*



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The former horse barn was in fact quite handsome, its old wood planed and stained and varnished and reflecting the candles set along the tables. And as we waited we ate from platters of sheep cheeses, a mild Provola, a cow's milk called Ragusano, and a Pecorino Stagionato, these with glasses of his Minnella, Things, I decided, were looking up.

We were asked to sit at the table and an astonishing parade of food began, with accompanying commentary from Benanti, "A caponata," he said, "but ours is different, alla Siciliana, of peperoni, eggplant and potatoes." It was fine indeed and served along with different renditions of its ingredients—charred peperoni arrostiti and an eggplant topped with Parmigiano-Reggiano®. "Catania loves eggplant," he said.

This was followed by two pastas, a timballo of thin layers of pasta casareccia (homemade) with eggplant and salted ricotta, and a Catania specialty, chiama vinu the "wine call," spaghetti coated with bread crumbs and finished in a pan with anchovy fillets. Wonderful." Benanti was happy because we were happy. "The evening has become better, si?" Oh yes,

Two meat selections were paired, a falso magro (thin rolled beef stuffed with hard boiled eggs and cured prosciutto and dressed with tomato sauce and fresh peas) and polpette con foglie di limone (fried meatballs accompanied by roasted lemon leaves from the trees of the Catania plain). Both were extraordinary.

We munched on cold, crisp stalks of fennel, until a local version of that Sicilian staple, a cassata, said by Benanti to be from Ninna di Sant'Agata, was brought along with cakes made from almonds and pistachios, those nuts for which the slopes of Etna are famed, and sweetened with honey from the hives of nearby Zafferana. With these Dottor Benanti produced a cool, slightly sweet Passito di Pantelleria. Perfect.

The doctor, who had been a pharmacist until he began making wine, asked how the meal had been. I suggested to him that I'd be happy to visit his volcano anytime. 🍷

# When a Vinegar Is Traditional

by Pamela Sheldon Johns

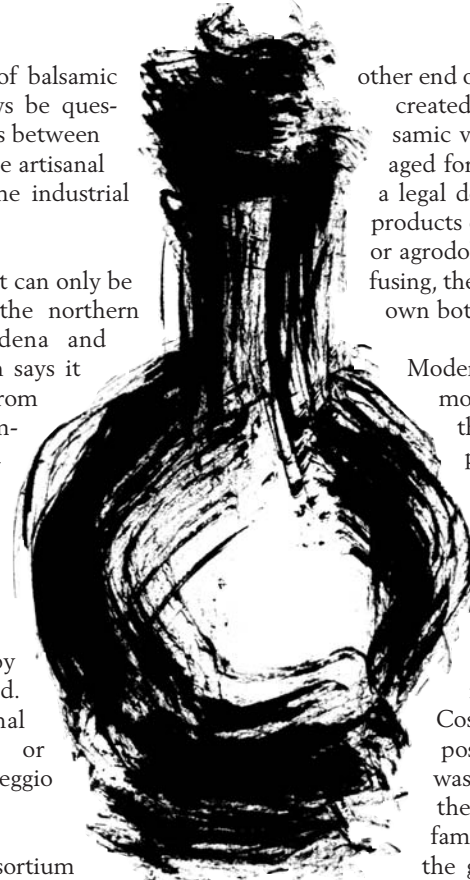
Even among the cognoscenti of balsamic vinegar, there seem to always be questions regarding the differences between the two legally defined products, the artisanal traditional balsamic vinegar and the industrial supermarket variety.

In a nutshell, the traditional product can only be made in two tiny provinces of the northern region of Emilia-Romagna: Modena and Reggio Emilia. The legal definition says it must be made in the historic way, from specified local grapes (most commonly used are Trebbiano and Lambrusco), cooked over an open fire, and aged in unsealed barrels made of aromatic woods for at least 12 years. It may then be bottled by the consortium, the protective organ of each province after being submitted to evaluation by master tasters. Nothing is ever added. This product is called Traditional Balsamic Vinegar of Modena or Traditional Balsamic Vinegar of Reggio Emilia.

Even though you can buy non-consortium approved vinegars, the safest bet has always been to go with the guaranteed traditional vinegars from the consortium. Since there are two provinces involved, the consortia are separate. There also exists an earlier group, the Consorteria in Spilamberto, whose original aim was to study and evaluate the tradition of making Aceto Balsamico Tradizionale. They now train and certify master tasters. In addition, there is a consortium for the industrial product.

The industrial product is called Balsamic Vinegar of Modena, a name discouragingly similar to the traditional product. The definition of this product is that it is made with wine vinegar and flavored with caramel coloring and caramel flavoring. It doesn't have any cooked grapes in it and it doesn't need to spend any time in wood.

These are the two legally defined products. If you imagine them at each end of a spectrum, you can see that there are many other products being sold in between. On one end are wine vinegar products that may contain some cooked must and may be aged in wood. At the



other end of the spectrum, are products that are created in the same way as a traditional balsamic vinegar, with only cooked grapes, but aged for a mere three to five years. Without a legal definition, regardless of quality, these products can only call themselves condimento or agrodolce. And, to make matters more confusing, there are some producers who use their own bottle for a traditional-style product.

Modena is, by far, more organized with more than 100 producers registered in the province. Granted, some of the producers only make enough for their own use but join because they want to participate in the prestigious annual competition. Still, Modena seems the giant as opposed to the 40 or so producers of Reggio Emilia. A few years ago, the consortium in Modena was run by a dynamo named Marco Costanzini, a man driven to catch every possible counterfeit product. His worry was that inferior products might ride on the coattails of the traditional product's fame. It was a valid concern because of the great surge in exports of traditional balsamic vinegar.

Unfortunately, Costanzini passed away two years ago. The awarding of a DOP in 2000 caused some changes. In addition to the self-governing tasting evaluations of the consortia, the acetaie are now subject to ministerial control with regard to barrel registration and bottling practices. Complex registers are kept detailing the dates and quantities of product in barrels.

Currently, there is a division in the ranks. Sixty of the approximately 100 producers in Modena have formed a new consortium called Consorzio Tutela Aceto Balsamico Tradizionale di Modena, headed by ex-agricultural minister Enrico Corsini. The producers who still adhere to the old consortium, Consorzio tra Produttori di Aceto Balsamico Tradizionale, tend to be those with high production numbers. By the end of the year the government will confirm just one governing body and it will be the one with the most producers. 🍷

*Pamela Sheldon Johns is an award-winning cookbook author living in Tuscany. In addition to offering weeklong food and wine workshops, she has an olive oil-producing farm and agriturismo (bed & breakfast). You can see more about her at [www.FoodArtisans.com](http://www.FoodArtisans.com).*

# Grana Padano: A Delicious Diversity

by Julia della Croce

**W**e all remember when non-descript grating cheese covered “Italian” food thick as sawdust over a carpenter’s bench. Today, Italy produces enough genuine cheese to force the pretenders into retirement along with red-checked tablecloths. Like extra virgin olive oil, Parmigiano-Reggiano® has become a standard,



not a luxury. We grate it (fresh, please), shave it and eat it at the table, chipping off flakes from a chunk. So why hasn’t its sister cheese, Grana Padano, more simply, Grana, become a household name?

Lou Di Palo, third-generation proprietor of Di Palo Fine Foods in Manhattan’s Little Italy, knows. Master of cheese-craft, history and culture rolled into one, he has probably single-handedly delivered the joys of artisanal Italian cheeses to more New Yorkers than anyone else around. He says that the producers were sending us what we wanted—young cheese. My colleague, Bill Marsano, who trekked the Grana trail with me in Lombardy, adds that most of America is oriented toward supermarkets, not specialty food shops, and that even many “gourmet shops” lean toward bagel chips and other “novelty foods.” But two years after the European Community conferred Denominazione di Origine Protetta (DOP) status on Grana and with the steady popularity of authentic Italian cooking, Lou began telling Grana producers it was time to send over their best—their aged cheese. Happily, they listened.

*Julia della Croce is a food consultant, writer, journalist and award-winning author of 10 cookbooks about Italian food and travel. Her most recent work is a trilogy on the food of Umbria, Veneto and Lazio (Chronicle Books, 2002, 2003, 2004). Contact: [www.juliadellacroce.com](http://www.juliadellacroce.com).*

Ask for Grana Padano in his intimate but awesomely stocked shop and Lou whips out at least four versions: winter (rich and relaxed), summer (Adriatic sun-drenched), spring (redolent with the season’s flora), autumn (mellow). Lombardy Grana, anyone (it’s creamy and sweet)? Try one from the Veneto (it’s drier, more intense). Have you ever noticed that a Venetian speaks differently than a Milanese? So it is with live cheeses. They are all different, Lou says with passion, and he loves them all.

Twelfth-century Cistercian monks in the Po Valley are credited with inventing the cheese but the producers in the 27 Grana-producing provinces of Lombardy, Veneto, Piedmont, Emilia-Romagna and Trentino will tell you that their ancestors were making versions of it before Roman times. In Ladino, the dialect of the ancient Alpine people, it was called “fromaj de grana.” Fromaj, (formaggio in Italian) derives from the Latin, forma, for the form in which the cheese is made. Grana, “grainy” describes its texture; “Padano” refers to its homeland, the pianura padana or Po Valley. “You can only get the real story from the old people who have lived it all their lives,” insists Lou Di Palo, who accumulates oral history when he goes there to buy cheese.

The official story is that, following the destruction of the vast Po regions during the Dark Ages, the hard-working and frugal monks reclaimed the area. The ox doubled as dairy cow and beast of burden and Grana was born, subjected to the same rigors of perfection as monastic life. The idea was to transform milk surplus into a nutritious cheese that would keep for long periods and to standardize and codify the method, the same one used today.

Regulations distinguishing Grana’s characteristics from Parmigiano-Reggiano’s were adopted in 1951 and consortia were established to maintain the quality and reputations of both cheeses. The differences between the two are simple but part of their makers’ heritage and identity. Grana is made from partially skimmed milk (Parmigiano-Reggiano is made with partially skimmed and whole milk) and it is aged less, making for a milder taste. But comparing the two is like comparing children, Lou says. Each is unique. That’s the beauty of artisanal cheese.

Every 70- or 75-pound wheel is thickly embossed with the Consortium’s diamond- and clover leaf-shaped markings, and numbers that identify the dairy farm, province, date of production and lot number. The DOP brand shows that it passed inspection in the aging facility, in short, that it’s Grana Padano—the real thing. 🍷

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