

DISCOVER ITALY'S WHITE WINES

By Jordan Mackay

Ask almost anyone to describe what Italian wine looks like, and the first thing they'll say is "red." Given humanity's penchant for pizza, salami, red sauce, and lasagna - the bias is understandable, as each food would be well-accompanied by an iconic flagon of vino rosso.

At the same time, it's surprising that Italy's white wines get such short shrift. Italy is just as rife, if not more so, with classic foods - pesto, scampi, vongole, mozzarella di bufala - that cry out for white wine. And let's not forget that a significant percentage of the country's climate and landscape is bright, warm, coastal, and beautifully paired with the cold, crisp, dry white wine at which Italy excels. And that's but one type of white in this long peninsular country, where white wine styles are as vast and diverse as an Italian's conversational hand gestures.

For those who claim Italian wine must be red, let us first note some essential concepts about white wine in general. When we speak about white wine, we're talking about wine made from green grapes. Sometimes, the wines can become colors other than "white," for instance a dark yellow, amber, or orange. We're open-minded about all styles and happy to include them in this survey. Producing a compelling, profound white wine is rarer than an equivalent red wine and thus more notable.

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You can dispute this, but to produce grapes whose juice can be fermented into a mind-bending wine without much or any extraction of the many compounds in the grape skins is a rare feat, as it's the skins that give red wine its color, flavor, and texture. Making compelling white wine without skins is like boxing with one arm tied behind your back. To make truly profound white wine, you need a remarkable site, the knowledge and skill to farm it optimally, and the fermentation and aging techniques to produce more from less. It seems all the more miraculous, the more you ponder it.

Ancient Romans understood this. Patrick McGovern, author of the book *Ancient Wine* and scientific director of the University of Pennsylvania Museum's Biomolecular Archaeology Laboratory for Cuisine, Fermented Beverages, and Health, notes, "Roman writings seem to point toward white being more special..." Italy's original cult wine (and perhaps the world's), which captured the imaginations and fortunes of its day, was a white wine. Falernian, as it was known, came from a specific mountainside in Campania and was swooned over for hundreds of years. It was known as a wine of terroir and was cellared and aged, sometimes for more than a century, before being consumed. Of course, all white wine needn't be so epic. Sometimes, the ambition is just to make something refreshing.

The kind of clean, zippy, refreshing white wines we generally associate with Italy today are anything but historical. Instead, they exist thanks to the technological revolution in global winemaking that, due to the slow recovery of economy and infrastructure post World War II, finally arrived in Italy in the 1970s. The changes caused by this leap into modernity can't be overstated. It replaced old, dank wooden casks with shiny, septic stainless-steel tanks and gave winemakers unprecedented control. Instead of being forced to accept whatever a fermentation wanted to do, a winemaker could dial up a desired temperature, allowing the juice to ferment more slowly or quickly or not at all. This and other modernizations affected all wine in Italy, especially white wine, allowing for styles that had hitherto been rare, if not impossible.

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Of course, it wasn't all smooth sailing. An overabundance of control and intervention risks the creation of wines with no stuffing and no soul, which became the reputation of Italian white wines in the 70s and 80s. These new clean whites were transparent and lacking character compared to the ragged, rustic wines of the previous era, some of which had more in common with Falernian than with the wines of just a few years later. Farming had to improve; winemaking techniques had to be refined for this new style of wine to become compelling.

FROM TOP TO BOTTOM

The two regions most associated with white wine - Friuli and Alto Adige - were among the first to benefit from modernization. They sit adjacent to one another in Italy's northeastern reaches, share an alpine influence, and reflect the culture of neighboring Germanic countries, but they couldn't be more different.

Producing Italy's most varied and compelling range of white wines, Friuli sits in Italy's northeast corner, sandwiched between the Veneto region to the west and Slovenia to the east, with the Southern Alps separating it from Austria to the north and the Adriatic Sea lapping at its southern shores. Each border and the history it represents acutely influences Friuli, which has amalgamated them into its own unique and curious culture. Friuli's climate has three faces: the southern plain facing the Adriatic is a warm, almost subtropical zone; the hills above, leading into the mountains, juxtapose the greater extremes of a continental climate with the moderating Adriatic forces; while the northern mountains are purely alpine. This flexibility makes Friuli suitable for red and white wine, both of which it does well. In centuries past, when it constituted the southernmost zone of the Austro-Hungarian empire, Friuli was relied upon to produce reds. But now that it is the northeasternmost corner of Italy, it is looked to for whites, the best of which come from the stony marl and sandstone soils of the hilly interior, which finds a perfect balance between the warmer, wetter influence of the sea and the cleansing, colder winds blowing down from the Alps.

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(Friuli)

Friulian white wines come in many styles - e.g., fresh and clean, rich and oaked, skin contact, and everything in between - and center around many grapes, both native and international: Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, (Tocai) Friulano, Pinot Grigio, Ribolla Gialla, and Malvasia, to name a few. Monovarietal versions of these wines exist, but Friuli also has a culture of complex blends, dubbed "super whites," a trend spearheaded by Jermann in the late 1970s with the wine called Vintage Tunina (Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Ribolla Gialla, Malvasia) and still important today in such wines as Flor di Uis (Malvasia, Riesling, and Friulano) from Vie de Romans.

Friuli's ancient, multi-faceted culture is reflected in its wines. On the one hand, the school of clean, fresh, modern whites that demonstrates the impact of early winemaking technology (like temperature-controlled tanks) on Italian wines is exemplified by the Sauvignon Blanc from Venica, expertly farmed and made; the wine is incisive, mineral, and powerful while still light on its feet. When it comes to wooded wines from Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc, wineries like Miani, Borgo del Tiglio, and Ronco del Gnemiz are famous. The border between Friuli and Slovenia is quite fluid, and exotic, Slavic, mystic-philosophical approaches to wine are found in the Italian growers in this zone, resulting in the contemporary origins of skin contact, amphora, and other antique-modern styles of winemaking led by highly influential vintners like Gravner and Radikon.

No other region in the world approaches the fermentative approach to white winemaking, the diverse stylistic range, and the unfettered freedom and creativity within the form found in Friuli.

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(Alto-Adige and Piedmont)

Only a few hours away by car, Alto-Adige, a region that climbs north from the Trento region with which it's conjoined, up into the craggy Dolomite foothills couldn't be more different from Friuli, but for the emphasis on white wine. If Friuli is split between Slavic and Italian influences, Alto-Adige is split between Germanic and Italian, with a sizable part of the winemaking population still speaking German as a primary language. As such, you often find less creative freedom in the wines in favor of a more strict, straightforward approach. This visually spectacular region can be considered ground zero for Pinot Grigio, as it is home to part of the Santa Margherita juggernaut. However, look to the excellent Pinot Grigio from St. Michael-Eppan for equal quality at a better price. However, in Alto Adige, Pinot Grigio is not merely a value quaffer. It also produces wines that can be considered the grape's apotheosis, including the long-aging, structured, and deeply mineral Pinot Grigio of one of the world's greatest cooperative wineries, Cantina Terlano (which also makes some of Italy's best Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Bianco, and Gewurztraminer).

Ambling back out of the Alps and heading west to the plains and hills surrounding Turin, you'll find yourself in the beloved Piedmont. With extraordinary mountain views and an epic food culture built around local delicacies like white truffles, hazelnuts, risotto, and hand-cut egg pasta, Piedmont is so famous for its reds that it's easy to forget the whites. Gavi is a clean, dry white (made from the Cortese grape), while Arneis brings a little more floral complexity to the equation. Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc are both grown here to some acclaim. But the grape exciting all the wine hipsters today is Timorasso, which was almost extinct until the 1970s when one grower revived it in his Tortona vineyards. Nowadays, people go crazy for this obscure grape that makes structure, complex whites with bounteous acidity.

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(Liguria and Veneto)

Head out of the Piedmont down toward Genoa on the Mediterranean coast, and you'll pass through the dramatically steep hillsides of Liguria until you reach its narrow band of precious beaches. Sitting just above the coast, though, is a small zone of vineyards that produce stellar white wines from Vermentino and Pigato, two different genetic types of the same grape. The wines are similarly herbal and saline; the former tends to be a little racier and mineral, while the latter is more perfumed and dense. Served cold, either would be perfect for a summer seaside lunch.

To squeeze the drops of white wine from northern Italy, we head back to the eastern seaboard to the Veneto, whose hills produce one dry white of note: Soave, the "OG Pinot Grigio." The name Soave does not derive from "suave" but rather from an obscure tribe that once inhabited the area. Nevertheless, it's a good name and better than calling it by its less sonorously named grape, Garganega. In the 1970s, Soave was a big deal, the best-selling Italian wine (even over Chianti) for a time. While famous, the wine wasn't very good. To the credit of the region and its top producers, Soave has come a long way since then. Better viticulture, clonal selection, and a concerted effort to limit yields have resulted in wines that can compete with Italy's best. Redolent of straw, white flowers, zingy citrus, and green pears, Soave can be brilliantly dry, mineral, and racy while still robust and weighty in the mouth. Producers like Pra, Inama, and Pieorpan have led the charge.

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(Le Marche and Tuscany)

South of the Veneto and poised between the Apennine mountains and the Adriatic, Le Marche is primarily associated with one white wine, the first of Italy's three V- grapes, Verdicchio. At its best, Verdicchio produces as complete a white wine as any in Italy: high in acid, complex in its mixture of citrus, melon, and pear flavors as well as its signature bitter almond, and beautifully modulated in texture between a mineral backbone and lithe, flowing body - delicious and satisfying wines that are both easy to drink and yet satisfy deeper investigations into their intricacies. Le Marche possesses two DOCG zones for its signature white: Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi and Verdicchio di Matelica, relating to villages where the wines are grown. The former tends to be a bit rounder and gentler, while Matelica's proximity to the mountains, elevation, and stony soils results in a more structured, steely, and powerful wine. Several producers make excellent Verdicchio, including Bucci, Sartarelli, Garofoli, and Andre Felici.

Back on Italy's western flank, we find ourselves in hardcore red wine country - Tuscany. But we would be remiss not to mention the white grape Vernaccia (the second of Italy's famous trio of V-named white grapes) and its home in San Gimignano, Tuscany's only white wine DOCG. All the rage in the Middle Ages, Vernaccia isn't exactly obscure now - you still see it on wine lists - but it doesn't possess any ambitions for world domination. Nevertheless, if you're summering in Tuscany and sweltering at lunch, you're not reaching for the Brunello. You'll want something cold and refreshing, and at its best - from producers like La Lastra, Montedoli, and Le Calcinaie - Vernaccia di San Gimignano can be just that, intertwining lemon and dried herb flavors in a medium-bodied, golden-hued wine. The colder the better!

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(Umbria and Lazio)

Just beneath Tuscany lie Umbria and Lazio. The former is a hot and dry interior region known primarily for its massively scaled reds; the latter is best known for containing Rome and its popular coastline. Neither region is esteemed for white wine, though we must mention the natural wine producer Paulo Bea, who makes some of Italy's most unique and compelling white wines. At the estate in Umbria, Giampiero Bea produces the complex and alluring Santa Chiara (a significant inspiration for the Massican wines, both for its blue label and its masterful winemaking) - made from a blend of Grechetto, Malvasia, Chardonnay, Sauvignon and Garganega - and the skin contact wine Arboreus, made from Trebbiano Spoletino. Bea also oversees the production of the most notable wine of Lazio and an American favorite for years, Coenobium, which Catholic nuns make at a convent eighty miles north of Rome. The sisters work the vines organically and by hand and naturally ferment this complex blend of Trebbiano, Verdicchio, and Malvasia. The wine is waxy and complex, redolent of almonds, tea, fennel, and honey. there's the cult wine by Valentini, which many blind tasters mistake for Grand Cru white

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(Abruzzo)

Back on the peninsula's eastern coast, we cross over the Apennines to get to the coastal edge of Abruzzo. In this rustic and beautiful land, the mountains meet the Adriatic in a dramatic collision. It's on this narrow band of transitional hills where the vines are grown, including the alluring grape Trebbiano Abruzzese, which makes the wine Trebbiano d'Abruzzo. This little clerical distinction is necessary because there are countless varieties of Trebbiano grown worldwide, including in France, where it is known as Ugni Blanc. Despite the fact that few producers make truly great examples, Trebbiano d'Abruzzo is essential to note because these examples are so compelling. At its best, Trebbiano d'Abruzzo doesn't wow with flamboyant aromas or electric acidity. It's more than the assembly of its constituent parts, so artful and complex that the mind boggles at its cleverness and singular presence. On the nose, the wine irresistibly invokes white flowers, subtle stone fruits, and orange peel. Texturally, it's a marvel - creamy, full-bodied, and soft, yet also somehow structured and solid with surprisingly well-integrated acidity embedded in the wine's expansive mouthfeel. Somehow, within this richness is a place for a jolt of minerality that pushes on into the citrusy finish. Three producers make the iconic examples of this wine. Tiberio's Trebbiano is gorgeous, multi-faceted, and the most accessible. Emidio Pepe's is long-aging and voluptuous, seeming to gain vitality as it gets older and more complex. Incredibly delicious. And, of course, there's the cult wine by Valentini, which many blind tasters mistake for Grand Cru white Burgundy on first approach, but the body is much broader and more significant than anything Chardonnay would provide, and the crackling acidity and salinity in the finish tastes very much like the Italian coast.

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(Sardinia)

From here, we head west from the coast and, once we hit the water, keep going en route to the massive Mediterranean island of Sardinia, rustic and gorgeous, known for its austere beauty, savory salumi, and its white wine from Vermentino (the third of the three Vs). Sardinia owns over 75% of Italy's total plantings of this grape - which may or may not be the same as Pigato (the debate rages on). Vermentino produces a vast range of wine styles depending on ripeness levels, barrel usage, and environmental factors. Thus, its flavors may range from overwrought tropical notes on a high-alcohol wine to a light, floral number with a citrusy zip. The best, of course, lies somewhere in between, where green almond and herbal flavor interact with concentrated citrus and green melon, leading to Vermentino's perpetually salty finish, fitting for a grape that loves the hot sun, poor, rocky soils, and saline winds of a craggy island in the Mediterranean.

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(Sicily)

From here, we'll jump over Italy's southeastern tip on our way to the middle of the Mediterranean and Sicily, a remarkable place for white wine. Because it's so close to the tip of northern Africa, you might think it is too far south for white wine grapes. But nothing could be further from the truth. While the altitudes of Mount Etna provide the much-needed cooler temperatures to produce the truly exciting wines from Carricante, several Sicilian grapes make delicious white wines at lower heights. But let us first go to the literal top, the slopes of Etna, where Carricante is planted at viticultural extremes of altitude, where these vines withstand the cool temperatures in a world often socked in with fog and rain. Some people believe Carricante to be Italy's greatest white wine grape, producing complex wines of powerful minerality and shattering acidity, linking lemon and lime zest with floral high tones. When farmed well at low yields (which the tough conditions suppress), it can make wines of great aging potential, as we see with the most famous of all Carricante, Benanti's Pietramarina. Carricante is also the principal grape in Etna Bianco wines, though usually blended with small amounts of other grapes like Minnella and Cataratto. Look for delicious examples of Etna Bianco from Graci, Biondi, and Girolamo Russo. Grillo is the other famous white grape of Sicily, which grows primarily on the lower, western side of the island. In the hands of the famous Marco De Bartoli estate, Grillo represents many styles, from a fresh and breezy white to a rich, oxidative, long-aged, amber-hued Marsala, the fortified sweet wine.

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(Campania)

To conclude a white wine tour of Italy, we end up in Campania, where the great Roman Falernian hailed from the slopes of Monte Massico*, the peak that would inspire the Massican wines, which are meant as tributes to the underrated spirit of white wine in Italy. No one ever accused Campania of producing Italy's greatest whites, but in terms of its diversity of wines and great range of flavors they cover, it could be said to mirror Friuli, an entire country away. Where the two regions differ is that Campania's white wine specialties are entirely indigenous, many of which you barely ever see in the other areas at all. With great affection for the more obscure Aspirinio, Biancolella, and Coda di Volpe, we will focus on Campania's three major grapes: Falanghina, Fiano, and Greco.

Campania's most ancient white variety, Falanghina, has mounted a massive resurgence in recent times and should probably be given credit for the comeback grape of the millennium, given that its previous heights of popularity occurred sometime back in antiquity. While several types of Falanghina are planted up and down Campania's coast, producers don't bother to differentiate them. More important is the grape's high acidity and herby, green apple flavors. It tends toward racy and savory and is a brilliant summer wine with vegetables and seafood. Marisa Cuomo and La Sibilla are great places to start with Falanghina.

* Today the region of Monte Massico and the Falerno del Massico wines are predominantly red wines made from the Campania grapes, Aglianico and Piediroso.

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(Campania)

Greco is a fantastic grape and makes the famous Campanian wine Greco di Tufo. While Greco is often looped in with Falanghina, it has the greater potential for complexity, structure, and profundity. It can also make a simple, refreshing quaffer. We don't see as much Greco as we might if it were an easier grape to grow. A late ripener, it must contend with the cold weather and rain of the mountains, where it tends to grow. Likewise, its yields are frequently parsimonious, and the fruit it does offer is susceptible to disease. Tufo, its most famous area of origin, is difficult to farm, sporting steep slopes and high altitudes, though its mixed volcanic, limestone, and gravel soils produce wines of great minerally crunch. So, the growers that do produce Greco must be heavily committed, which is why their wines are often good. But, when the Greco is on - such as in the wines of Pietracupa, Mastroberardino, and Quintodecimo - it can amaze with its structural intricacy, textural complexity, and vibrant flavors.

As good as Greco is, some people think Fiano is not only Italy's greatest white wine grape but the world's. Another ancient artifact into which new life has been blown during Italy's modern winemaking revival, Fiano, is grown all over Campania but is most closely associated with the area around Avellino. While it always makes wines with a baseline of complexity and nuance, Fiano's gift is to credibly make several styles, dependent on soils, growing conditions, and the ambitions of its producer. Some winemakers, such as Ciro Picariello and Pietracupa, create a lively, jangly style that seems shaved from rock, with crisp acidity and apple, citrus, and herbal flavors. Others, such as Quintodecimo and Mastroberardino, embrace Fiano's richer side, as the grape is capable of making a weighty, full wine with an almost waxy texture and deeply savory flavors. Fiano gathers depth and power as it ages, the opposite of many white wines.

While this survey of Italian white wine overlooks plenty of the country's estimated 500+ wine grapes, it hopefully dispels the notion that an Italian wine's primary duty is to be red. Instead, an Italian wine's primary duties are to be delicious and honest, to bring happiness, and to accompany the food with which it is served. A white wine can accomplish those feats as well, and as often as a red wine, and probably more frequently. But who's counting?