



Roman Conquerors

Italian Wine in Renaissance

The Globetrotting Wine Guy

There is no question that Italy ranks among the world's top producers of premium wines. In many countries, as in the United States, it is the top import. Placed at the heart of Old World wine producers, Italy is finding its export business in jeopardy due to the increasing success of New World producers.

In the United States, Italy remains the number-one imported wine by cases, but recent reports indicate Australia has now surpassed Italy in terms of dollar sales—a development sure to horrify Italian wine devotees from Franco's Pizzeria in Westfield, New Jersey, to Wolfgang Puck's trendy fast-casual at the LA Airport.

Unlike Chile, which exports 90 percent of its premium wine, Italy exports about 25 percent; 50 percent goes to France, while about 7 percent goes to the United States. Italians consume over 13 gallons of their wine per head per year, not to mention the consumption of touristas crowding restaurants in search of the ultimate Italian food and wine fix.

Unlike France, Italy is proving it is in the infancy of an Italian Wine Renaissance. Look at its Super Tuscans, such as Tenuta dell'Ornellaia Masseto (about \$300), Antinori Solaia (about \$130), Tenuta dell'Ornellaia Ornellaia (about \$145), Tua Rita Redigaffi (about \$175), Tenuta San Guido Sassicaia (about \$170), Fattoria Petrola Galatrona (about \$90), Fattoria Corzano e Paterno Il Corzano (about \$38), and Barone Ricasoli Casalferro (about \$45). There is its Chianti 2000 Project to improve quality. And don't overlook its thundering Bolgheri district or "Golden Oasis of the Maremma" along Tuscany's Mediterranean coast, home to some of the world's top producers of ultra-premium wines (including Super Tuscans such as Antinori, Gaja, Allegrini, and the Mondavi and Frescobaldi partnership), and new estate entries such as Rossorosso, 100 percent barrel-aged Merlot by Castellarin in Friuli imported by Marie Brizard Wines & Spirits.

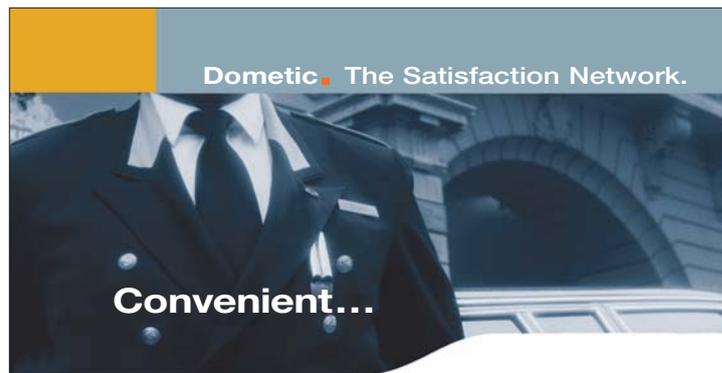
For whites, Pinot Grigio is proving to be the fastest-growing contender to Chardonnay. On the red side, the Super Tuscans, the Bolgheri elites, and their ultra-estate cousins are writing a new chapter in the annals of Italian winemaking.

With these developments, why is Italy concerned? The answer is the New World reality that branding and emphasis on varietals familiar to American consumers is responsible in great part for the market share advances of the New World. It is this and the retrenchment of the Old World best typified by Italy's region-oriented system and official classification system, which 99 percent of consumers have no clue how to decode.

The solution to Italy's disadvantages seems simple: Create "brand Italy," like "brand Australia" or "brand Chile," and forget about the confusing classification system.

Try convincing one million Italian growers with a total of about 800,000 hectares they should do an about face and emulate the New World. It would be easier to brush your teeth with unleaded grappa than expect one million Italians to agree on anything.

The best quote I have on the subject of creating and marketing a "Brand Italy" is from Italian wine authority Philip Contini: "How can a nation create a national consensus for wine when the extreme diversity and competition between regions, cities, zones, appellations, and neighboring producers is at the heart of the success of wine-making in Italy? It is like asking Ferrari, Lamborghini, Masserati, and Fiat to all look the same so we can better understand Italian cars."



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Italy excels in the economy and ultra sectors but has yet to conquer the middle range, one of the strongest characteristics of the most successful "New World" producers.

Yet, the Italian Wine Renaissance is real, and in a decade or less my bet is that in the United States a trip to your favorite wine merchant or Italian restaurant will yield a very different selection of Italian wines.

It may well be that what is "new" will not be the New World, but the "New Italy," be it the tenth consecutive sold-out vintage of Rossorosso or the royalty of Italy's Napa Valley, the (then) world-famous Bolgheri district of the Maremma.

Post Script

As a result of Europe's summer heat wave, thousands of vineyard workers were recalled from their annual holiday to harvest the 2003 vintage because severe heat prematurely ripened the grapes. Sugar levels were such that the balance between sugar and acid was in harmony a full 15–30 days early. For the first time in memory, Italian vineyards resorted to night harvesting to ensure a cooler process and better quality.

Fred Tibbitts, president Fred Tibbitts & Associates, is the foremost wine by the glass consultant for chain hotels and restaurants in the world.

STYLE . . . (cont.)

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