

Italian Varieties in SA

The dinners during Tasting Australia by our leading Italian restaurants, Chianti Classico (October 25th) and Cibo (26th) mark something of a watershed for Italian grape varieties in South Australia. And it may not even be that these people suggest the Italian varieties are part of their customers regular wine diet – we're probably still miles away from that – but more a recognition of the profound stylistic influence of Italian wines on our winemakers and on a growing number of consumers.

For Tuscany-trained chef Salvatore Pepe of Cibo it has really just been a style thing; the more savoury, less aggressive and more 'food friendly' nature of Italian wines meld more easily with almost all food. More easily that is than the Aussie 'bruisers', all alcohol, ripeness and wood, that have been seen by many as the ideal for a while now. Many of these are throttling back a bit lately.

For Salvatore it is an instinctive choice and in his selection he may not even stick strictly to Italian varieties; as long as a wine has that lively and drying palate. On the Italian table the 'loudest' wine is usually left behind.

For Frank Favaro at Chianti Classico it has been a long and patient journey, too. "You remember, we've had at least a couple of locally made wines from Italian varieties on our lists for years now. Rarely did they justify their position...and actually sell for us! But we stuck at it." For both restaurateurs, and for a few other adventurous types, there was more sales growth in the wines actually made in Italy.

Local pioneers of Italian varieties, like Joe Grilli or Mark Lloyd, would also agree that it has probably been a combination of better recognition of Italian wines for their relative quality (if you can, just cast your mind back 15 years to remember the reputation of Italian wines then!), the whole Italian 'thing', travel, food and culture, being more widely appreciated, along with the local winemakers adjusting their wines to be more...well, Italian.

A very rough recent count to make this article more scientific reveals a startling number of Oz-Italians now being made in SA alone! Some 30 producers are offering over 50 wines from more than a dozen Italian varieties. Here is a guide to most of these varieties, and a little of their context, what to expect and who's doing what amongst the South Aussie makers;

Whites

Pinot Grigio

Well, you have to start with this one, by far the most numerous in planting and in terms of wines released, Pinot Grigio (Pinot Gris in its French form) is enjoying a phenomenal boom in popularity, here and elsewhere, particularly in the US – where they joke that more Italian PG is sold there than is actually grown in Italy! “So what if we use a bit of Pinot Bianco, it all sounds the same.” This is the very model of Italian white, seemingly almost neutral, with a backdrop of faint minerals and herb characters over which the more assertive ones might show, pear or dried pineapple. Cropping, picking dates and various winemaker interventions can add substantially to these. A dry, ‘savoury’ palate, with an ‘x-factor’ of texture or ‘mouthfeel’, completes this ultra-versatile food wine.

In SA styles are settling down to the lower intervention ‘Italian’ style such as Nepenthe or JOSEPH, with bigger more ‘French’ versions from Henschke (Innes Vineyard) and Trevor Jones (Gris Blanc). There are plenty more out there.

Arneis (are-nay-ees)

This has enjoyed some resurgence, from near extinction in its home territory, Barolo country, in north west Italy. Over the same dry, mineral base good examples show lemon flower, herb and honey characters. Locally, nice wines are coming from Parish Hill and Beechtree (whose grapes hail from Cobdogla).

Garganega (gar-ganaga)

Like Arneis this is a senior variety of Italy’s north. It’s the base for the vast production zone of Soave over in the north east. The best, modern wines might show some flowers and tropicals, again over that zingy, drying and mineral base. But these are really about texture. This my ultimate all-rounder white; ready for all occasions and any weight or spice or fire that might turn up at dinner. So far the only wine of note is from Domaine Day, a beauty, which really shows the texture thing. Deserves more exposure. Test run your first bottle with sand crab in mayonnaise with good bread or a grilled fish finished with good olive oil. In Italy’s Veneto, many Soaves gain a little more character and complexity with the addition of a little of the next variety...

Trebbiano

I have to admit that this is mentioned without the evidence of a single local wine I can point to. But it is more important than that and deserves

better! It is still hugely important in Italy, where it makes absolute oceans of stuff, but with many delicious and even some dazzling examples (Valentini's from the Abruzzo fetches \$80 Australian!).

Trebbiano, aka 'the weed' to generations of Roseworthy-trained winemakers, has a long history in Australia, predominantly as a workhorse and bulk variety. At 10 tonnes per and more what chance did it have. My memories are of much more tasty examples, crafted with more site and cropping care; a couple of delicious and age-worthy wines made by Stefano Lubiana's dad Mario at Moorook in milder vintages and Henschkes Ugni Blanc (Tebbiano's French name), alas, long gone. But someone, somewhere has some in SA - there's supposedly 80-odd hectares out there. Unless somebody is prepared to have a crack we'll have to name a couple of excellent northern-Victorian examples of Trebbiano, still being made! So there.

Moscato

Alias White Fronti, the delicious grapey zing of Moscato needs little introduction. Most people have tried Italian Moscato in one form or another, especially as Asti Spumante or the superior, less fizzy version Moscato d'Asti. For years a local beauty masqueraded as Kaiser Stuhl Summerwine, but lovely versions are now made by Two Hands and the drier 'Bel Moscato' from Versace. Goes crazy with a fresh (real) peach.

Is That All?

Other significant Italian whites which are rumored to be in a vineyard somewhere are Cortese, creamy and mineraly, the premier white of Piemonte in Italy's north west and Vermentino, the fragrant and lively star of Italy's far south. Others fascinating grapes, like the spicy Malvasia of Italy's centre and south and the aforementioned Trebbiano will just have to await their pioneer. Or else we can get some from Victoria.

Reds

Sangiovese (san-gee-oh-vay-zay)

Pretty well the first name in Italian varieties, everywhere. There's 15, or more, made in SA alone. Few producers have worked with it for well over a decade as Coriole have, but like them, everyone has struggled – with clones, siting, canopy and cropping – to get it right. Then they had to figure out how to make it, wrestling with its fierce acidity, drying tannins and a tendency to get easily swamped by oak and other varieties.

But the variety most identified with Tuscany and its famous Chianti, is worth the trouble; capable of a range of intriguing aromas, like prune/plum, cherry and tobacco along with a savoury, but quite long and very lively palate.

There are a few approaches to Sangiovese amongst SA makers: of the 'straights' perhaps Coriole and Versace's 'Ruspantino' are the most earthy and savoury and more modern and polished wines come from Pikes, Cardinham and a biggie from Aldinga Bay. There's also a nice chunky and well-priced wine from Step Rd and vivacious new Sangiovese Rose (05) just out from Yalumba.

Inspired either by the dryness and acidity of the variety or by lots of Italian examples, some producers here prefer to blend Sangiovese with another: Primo Estates 'il briccone' teams it up with Shiraz, a natural ally; Versace also uses Shiraz and cleverly includes Grenache too, nominally French, but also a Mediterranean variety, in their 'Casalingo' blend. Mitchells also pick up this Med theme and partner their Sangiovese with the chunky Mourvedre, echoing the use of Canaiolo as the traditional partner in the Chianti blend.

Sangiovese is exceptionally versatile for lots of food, but has a particular thing for tuna or mushrooms.

Zinfandel

Even if we call it by its Italian name, Primitivo, Zin is probably a bit of a stretch to include in a discussion of Italian varieties. A native of Puglia on the south eastern coast of Italy this unique grape, which treads the fine line between over and under ripeness, features rich aromas and flavours of berry, pepper and chocolate – but it does naturally deliver that savoury 'Italian' palate. A stylish example regularly comes from Kangarilla Road, with Nepenthe and Wayne Groom's 'Bush Block' being the bigger beasties.

Sagrantino

Just for the mo, the only other variety of Italy's southern half to even begin to feature here in Australia. Sagrantino, a native of Umbria, just below Tuscany, is the very model of the alternative to the less ripe and restrained reds going north; it's big, rich in characters of earth, ironstone, raisin and mushroom, yet has almost fierce structure and acidity to keep all this in shape. How appropriate then that we're about to see such a wine coming from the earth-meisters at D'Arenberg, to be followed by Domaine Day. Worth the wait.

Lagrein

A relatively obscure grape from Italy's far north east, Lagrein grabbed attention here when the Victorian Cobaw Ridge was voted best red at the Australian Alternative Varieties bash at Mildura – two years running. Locally Domaine Day have harnessed the variety's rich, deep and vivid cherry fruit character well. Heartland recently released it in a very successful partnership with Dolcetto, a grape from the far north west, which like Lagrein can generate rich and saturated fruit colour and which finishes quite dry and savoury. Dig out a recipe for that Piemontese springtime classic, Vitello Tonnato and put one of these wines to work with it!

Barbera

A personal favourite, Barbera seems to have it all; dark plummy juice and complexity, life and an easy food compatibility. It's a variety which likes oak and seems to turn out pretty well year in year out, young vines or ancients. Huge amounts are grown in northern Italy and it hits the high points in Piemonte as Barbera d'Alba and Barbera d'Asti. Here excellent, chunky and table-friendly versions are turned out by Viottolo, Aldinga Bay and Massina, with real eye-catchers recently from Chalk Hill and Coriole. See it as a good alternative to Pinot for Chinese duck.

Nebbiolo

Which brings us to the boss! The Americans call it Pinot Noir with 'tude' - attitude - combining as it can, a thrilling range of aromas, from earth, licorice and fennel, mushroom and spices, through flowers, berries and perfumes – sometimes a single wine from Piemonte's small zones of Barolo and Barbaresco may offer the lot! Just as easily, Nebbiolo can be what I call the talking dog; “ I tell you, this same wine sang like Bocelli and Jeff Buckley last night...” Sound familiar? Like that other Holy Grail variety. It's just that Nebbiolo has this fierce tannin which seems to shut it all down sometimes. A big double-decant is standard procedure. Slowly SA makers are coaxing the best out of Nebbiolo. Excellent and generous intros have been done by One Tree Hill, Mt Surmon and Longview, with more earthy and layered wines by Coriole and Bowe-Lees. Best so far are a lean and dry version with rose petal and fennel seed characters from Parish Hill and the darker licorice, truffles and finesse of the JOSEPH (02).

There's More

Even then, significant varieties with Italian versions freely available in Australia are just not grown here. It's quite surprising that the lovely fruity and structured Corvina, mainstay of the Veneto's famous Valpolicella and Amarone wines is not seen here. Likewise the early and generous Montepulciano grape of Italy's east coast has not made an appearance. If you scoot around to Bottega Rotolo and grab a bottle of the stunning D'Angelo Aglianico you might be tempted to plant some Aglianico yourself! So there are more discoveries yet.

To find some of the locals, the best ranges seem to be at East End and Edinburgh Cellars and the amazing Norwood Hotel. There's plenty of knowledge and enthusiasm on hand at each, to guide you.

Buon appetito!