

August 3, 2020

WINE News

*Italy: Super Tuscan
to Südtirol.*



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This August, Unwind With Italy—and Italian Wine!

By Greg St. Clair

Well, a lot has happened since my last newsletter came out March 16—I probably don't have to fill you in on that. But, I've been working from home since February 29, and I'm sure that like all of you, I'm getting a little cabin fever! I am lucky because my passion is my work, so tasting, writing, and talking about Italian wine goes on even while I am at home. The release date for this newsletter is August 3, and August is when most of Italy shuts down for two weeks and heads to the beach. We may not be doing that this crazy year, but we can celebrate with some delicious Italian wines. I have included a series of new arrivals that should be of interest to you—wines that outperform their price point and offer flavors

and profiles that you cannot find anywhere else. My timing could have been a bit better, because our next container also arrives August 3, and it takes a couple of weeks to get it all into the stores. But, it includes the new releases from Felsina; multiple Chianti Classico and Super Tuscan; a bundle of Rosso di Montalcino from Sesta di Sopra, Tenuta di Sesta, and La Fortuna; as well as my favorite summer sipper, Le Battistelle Soave. So, keep your eyes open for them! There are also a huge number of 2015 Brunello that are being sold as pre-arrival now, and will be fulfilled and available in the stores by the end of the month. So, here we go!

2018 Marchesi di Gresy Barbera d'Asti

(\$19.99) I had this wine last September at the winery, and was so blown away by the archetypal character of this Barbera, I had to convince the California importer to bring it in for us. The nose is incredibly pure: violet, plums, and hints of Middle Eastern spices. On the palate, Barbera's classic acidity freshens and lifts the wine, and while it still has weight and depth, it is classically fresh and elegant.



2017 Argiano "Solengo" Toscana (\$64.99)

A Super Tuscan from Montalcino's western slope, this blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Petit Verdot, Merlot, and Sangiovese is aged in barrique. For you lovers of big, rich California red blends, this is your wine—powerful yet supple, and immediately drinkable, it just flows across your palate, creating a sensual delight. The finish shows hints of Argiano's terroir of warm sun and wild brush, but the density is buoyed by a chocolaty lushness, and freshness.



2018 Marotti Campi "Luzano" Verdicchio

Castelli di Jesi Superiore (\$15.99) One whiff of the nose of this wine and you will be hooked. It's so inviting, full of ripe pears, lemon verbena, and hints of pistachio. On the palate, this wine has weight and density that gives it size and determination, filling your mouth with richness, accented by a vibrant acidity that cleans and lifts off your palate. The finish is superb, and beckons you back for sip after sip. I simply love this wine.



100-Point Brunello di Montalcino

Ciacci Piccolomini d'Aragona is one of Montalcino's most storied names in wine. However, the real story starts in 1985, when estate foreman Giuseppe Bianchini inherited the entire estate from the heirless Countess Elda Ciacci.

Bianchini transformed the estate into one of Montalcino's best producers. Tragically, Giuseppe Bianchini died in 2004, but his son Paolo and daughter Lucia have taken over and have not missed a step. They have continued to upgrade and refine vineyard techniques and cellar work. When I visited the estate for a couple of days last September, Paolo took me on a long drive through his ripening vineyards. I



Paolo Bianchini tours the Pianrosso vineyard.

could see in his eyes a neverending passion—constantly looking at his vines as if they were his children, correcting when necessary, but joyously living among them. And that same pride of accomplishment when we toured the cellar full of large, Slovenian oak barrels.

I had dinner with Paolo during my stay at one of the two restaurants in Sant'Angelo in Colle, a tiny hamlet south of Montalcino. He brought with him a bottle of the **2015 Ciacci Piccolomini d'Aragona "Pianrosso" Brunello di Montalcino (\$109.99).**

I am a big fan of points, as a retailer—it really drives sales. But personally, I have my favorites, and points don't play anything in selecting wines for my cellar. So, the fact that this wine received a 100-point score didn't faze me. That was until I tasted it. The nose of this wine is warm, broad, and flows from the glass with ease. It's filled with ripe plum, wild cherry, hints of smoke, and porcini mushrooms, and is like a warm, gentle breeze. On the palate, once again, the plum and wild cherry rise to the front, but deepen their power, making them more intense and delineated. This wine carries powerful structure beneath the surface. It's just sheathed in a supple richness that makes it a pleasure to drink now—but it has a long life ahead.

I remember the finish of this wine, as I sat there at the table—with Paolo averting his eyes so as not to challenge my thoughts—as it just seemed to go on and on. This wine is sublime. **100 JS**



Fuligni: Another 100-Point Brunello

Fuligni was one of the first Brunello that I was introduced to in Montalcino. That was back in an era when tannins were hard and gritty, and elegance was something you only saw after a couple of decades of aging. But, the wines from Fuligni stood out among the many overtly masculine-styled wines, as uniquely balanced, elegant—and dare I say, feminine. Feminine was the word that was—at the time!—used to describe wines that did not have palate-demoralizing tannins. Yet, few wines then had the supple ease and character to warrant interest to enjoy now, but also for long-term aging. Fuligni was, and is, one of those. The Fuligni estate is just outside of Montalcino, on the eastern slope. The vineyards rise from 1,200 feet to almost 1,500 feet, giving a little lift on the fresher side of the hill.



Roberto Guerrini, the next generation of ownership at Fuligni.

I do love the wines of Fuligni. They always have a softer, more ethereal, haunting, and inviting feel to them. They are texturally more complex, and velvety, coupled with a higher-toned, sweeter cherry and plum fruit that seamlessly blend together.

In this stupendous vintage, the **2015 Fuligni Brunello di Montalcino (PA \$99.99)** is amazing. The nose of this wine is warm and inviting, with waves of rose petal, wild cherry, and ripe plum. On the palate, there is a supple warmth that envelops your attention; and while the fruit is ever-present, a savory, umami-like complexity fills your mouth, followed by hints of leather, Tuscan brush, and porcini. The finish is powerful—the wine seems to bulk up, almost like it's flexing its muscles, yet it still has lift on the back palate. An amazing wine with a long life ahead of it. **100 JS**

2017 Fuligni "Ginestreto" Rosso di Montalcino (\$29.99) If you would like to taste the wines of Fuligni without spending top dollar, their Rosso di Montalcino is an ideal place to start. Here are the same inviting aromatics of wild cherry, with a bit more freshness, and it's ready to drink. **92 JS**

For the other side of the story, try their **2013 Fuligni Brunello di Montalcino Riserva (\$139.99)**, a truly majestic wine. It's a little less obviously muscled, and a bit more coy, yet has the same flavor profile. The wine is liting on the palate, supple, and complex. I love this one, too. **96 JS, 96 WE**



A Tasty Tour of Campania

Usually we do more producer profiles in our newsletter format, but Italy has so many different regions, I would need a dozen issues just to do them justice (just saying, Clyde!). Campania, the region best known for Naples and Mount Vesuvius, is also one of the hottest places in Italy for up-and-coming wines from the myriad wine grape varieties grown there. So, to kick things off, one of my favorite wines from any region:

2018 Casa d'Ambra "Frassitelli" Ischia Biancolella

(\$24.99) I loved this wine from the first sip of the first bottle I tried. This all stainless steel 100% Biancolella is grown at 1,800 feet on the side of a cliff overlooking the Bay of Naples. It tastes of the sea: salty, mineral-driven, but with an incredibly plump body that is the perfect foil for the acidity. Complex, long-lived, and a wine that's made for linguine and clams. 93 VN

2018 Marisa Cuomo "Furore" Costa d'Amalfi Bianco

(\$29.99) Many of you might be familiar with Marisa's other 60% Falanghina and 40% Biancolella blend from the village of Ravello. This Furore version is from a few miles west. All stainless-steel fermented, grown at 600–1,800 feet, and harvested in the



beginning of October, it shows more richness than the Ravello, yet still has exquisite balance, and shows off waves of flavor full of ripe pear, herbal tea, and lemon verbena, all in a complex, savory swirl.

In the shadow of the extinct Roccamonfina volcano, the 2017 I Cacciagalli "Phos" Aglianico Roccamonfina (\$29.99) was something new for me. I am not usually a big fan of the tannins in Aglianico, but this wine is different. It's made in amphorae, with wild yeasts, and a prolonged skin contact. The winemakers have tamed the powerful tannins (they are still there) while getting power and depth in a very drinkable Aglianico, which shows incredibly complex flavors without any wood aging. It really is intriguing.

One of the most fun wines we have now is the 2018 Cantine Federiciane "Gragnano" Penisola Sorrentina (\$15.99). This sparkling dry red wine is made from three grapes—Aglianico, Piediroso, and Sciascinoso—that produce a stunningly good wine when served cold. Among the locals, it is known as *pizzacola*, because it is the perfect pizza accompaniment!



Back to Basics in Barolo: Fratelli Barale

I am in love with the wines from Barale. It is not just the classic label or the outstanding pricing, it's the purity of the wines, a classic statement of place over winemaking. You could say the Barale wines are simple, and you would be correct. They do not try to be anything other than what they are: a reflection of their soil and the vintage. Simply classic.

The simply delicious 2018 Fratelli Barale "Le Rose" Dolcetto d'Alba (\$14.99)

is one of the Langhe's most overlooked wines. You might think that Barolo producers are drinking, well, Barolo, every night. But actually they drink a lot of Dolcetto and Barbera. Barolo is a special occasion wine. This wine is delicious and full of dark chocolate, leather, and has a tannic structure. It's a wonderful food wine for charcuterie, cheese, or a plate full of tajarin with butter and sage. Just remember to serve it at cellar temperature.



In the quaint village of Barolo, just down the street from the Barale winery: Greg finishes off his Fratelli Barale "Castlé" Barbera d'Alba Superiore before he dives into dessert.

2018 Fratelli Barale "Castlé" Barbera d'Alba Superiore (\$15.99)

The aromatics of this wine are tremendous: so pure, tight; just dark cherry fruit spiraling out of the glass. On the palate, it has weight and a flowing lushness, but it's classic Barbera, having that archetypal acidity that lengthens as well as freshens the wine. The finish is vibrant, lifting, and extremely focused. A perfect accompaniment to rich pasta dishes or roast pork dishes.

2018 Fratelli Barale Langhe Nebbiolo (\$19.99) The nose of this Nebbiolo says earth, smoke, and leather, with bits of sweet, dark fruit, all swirling toward you out of the glass. On the palate, the wine is supple and broad, with a bit of tannic structure that enlivens your mouth. The flavors are earthy, with hints of leather, but also vibrant, with hints of the classic tar and roses signature of Nebbiolo. Try it with a wild mushroom pappardelle!

2016 Fratelli Barale Barolo (\$34.99) This wine is the textbook definition for Barolo. The nose shows hints of smoke and dried rose aromatics, followed by hints of wild cherry. On your palate, the wine has weight and depth, while darker fruits come forward—but this 2016 vintage adds another dimension of power. It's still supple and graceful, but you know you are in the presence of power.



Under the Südtirol Sun: Alto Adige's All That, and Kerner, too!

I get asked on a regular basis for travel advice in Italy, and 95% of the time the question is, "Where should I go in Tuscany?" My regular answer is that you shouldn't—you're more likely to meet your neighbors there, and you won't get to experience what Italy is like for Italians. The place I usually like to recommend is Alto Adige. It's physically spectacular—much of it looks like Yosemite with a Swiss postcard painted in the middle. Breathtaking. Yet, it isn't the mere physical beauty, but also the cuisine, the wine, and the people that, together, make it one of my favorite places on Earth.



Does this alfresco lunch by Lake Como inspire the appetite? Here's the plan: we supply the Pinot Grigio; you scout for the mortadella. The scenery is strictly DIY at this time.

Last September, I visited with Peter Zemmer and tried his entire portfolio of wines. The tasting was an eye-opener, and we've had an array of his wines ever since. But for a shelter-in-place everyday white wine, the **2018 Peter Zemmer Pinot Grigio Alto Adige (\$13.99)** is hard to beat. I'm not a huge fan of Pinot Grigio in general (probably because I taste an ocean of over-cropped and simplistic versions) but this wine is superb. It has the characteristic fuller body of good Pinot Grigio, but also seams of ripe pear and elderflower in the nose, and an excellent acidic balance.



I also visited with the incredible Klaus Gasser, sales manager for Cantina Terlano. Here, we tasted an even larger lineup of wines, capped by a 1958 Pinot Bianco that was remarkable and still had years to go. The wine that sets them apart is the **2018 Cantina Terlano Terlaner Cuvée Alto Adige (\$23.99)**. From their first vintage in 1893, the tradition of blending 60% Pinot Bianco, 30% Chardonnay, and 10% Sauvignon Blanc has truly stood the test of time. The nose shows lots of floral aromatics.

Right now, the Sauvignon shows a little more. On the palate, Pinot Bianco is the backbone of the wine, giving it structure, balance, and longevity, while Chardonnay adds a supple layer of richness. Fermented in stainless, the wine is then aged 20% in large oak. You should give it a try. **93 JS**

Sometimes people think that because it's "alpine," they only make white wine here, but try the **2017 Cantina Terlano "Gries" Lagrein Riserva Alto Adige (\$36.99)**. To me, this varietal Lagrein most resembles a smoky Syrah—full-bodied, with a firm tannic structure, and perfect for roasted meats or aged cheese.

A long time ago, one of my colleagues expressed dismay that we didn't carry any Kerner. Most I had tried at that time were flabby, or sweet, and German, but he suggested I try one from this winery. And we've had it ever since. The nose on the **2018 Cantina Valle Isarco "Aristos" Kerner (\$34.99)** is striking, almost tropical. There is a haunting, inviting richness that beckons you to try it. On the palate, the wine has incredible weight, yet it's buoyed by exceptional acidity. Perfect for spicier dishes, or, if you are looking for the weight and texture of Chardonnay (without the wood), this Kerner is for you! **92 VN, 91 JS**

When I ask most Italian producers what their best wine is, where they make both Chardonnay and Pinot Bianco, they almost always say Pinot Bianco—it really produces spectacular, un-oaked wines. An excellent example, the **2018 Prackwieser Gump Hof "Praesulis" Weissburgunder Südtirol Alto Adige (\$26.99)** shows elderflower and bergamot aromatics in a powerful and creamy complexity. Not to be outdone, one of my favorite varietals (thank you, Kirk Walker) is Schiava, and the **2018 Prackwieser Gump Hof "Mediaevum" Vernatsch Südtirol Alto Adige (\$19.99)** is full of crunchy cranberry, savory, smoky, black pepper, and fresh herbs. Layer after layer, it just seems to go on and on. On your palate, the wine is supple, yet has a bit of tannin just to frame it, followed by a savory, spicy, black pepper-filled palate. Drink it cellar temperature with some prosciutto, and you'll love it!



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