

# THE GLASSHOUSE

## WINE APPRECIATION SOCIETY

### MODULE 12: ITALY PART 1

#### ITALY

150 YEARS OLD IN 2011 – SOMETHING TO CELEBRATE

Italy is such a huge and diverse and at the same time a very regional wine producer it is better to think of it as being a collection of regions. This is perhaps not surprising as there are still some historians who believe that the unification of Italy in 1861 was a mistake and that it would have been better if the five super regions of Piemonte, Venice, Tuscany, Naples and Sicily had all gone their own way! Furthermore the huge range of wines produced makes Italy a different proposition for review than say France, Germany or Spain.

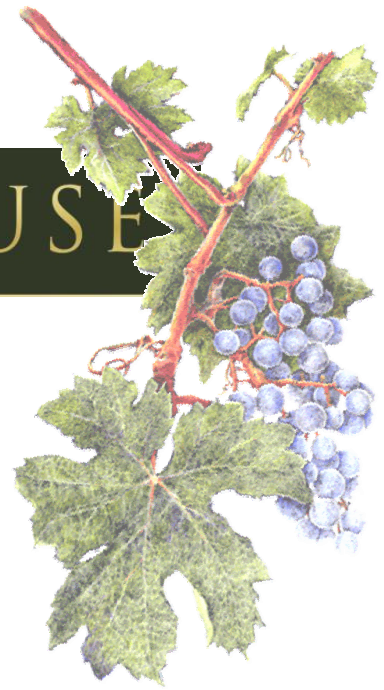
Accordingly we will divide this amazing wine country into three sessions. We will cover broadly speaking; the north – Piemonte, The Veneto and Alto Adige; the central area, principally Tuscany; and then the south.

But it is still worth considering the background of wine in Italy as this country has numerous interesting and some unique features.

#### BACKGROUND

Italy, along with France, is one of the two giants of wine production in the world. Producing even more than France at 60m hectolitres of wine, some of it awful, it has more vineyards under cultivation than any other country. Unlike the two other huge wine producers – France and Spain, wines are grown throughout Italy in every region and at times it seems in every nook and cranny.

'Viticulture impinges on the national consciousness, on the national imagination, and on daily life in a way that is hardly conceivable to those not accustomed to the Mediterranean way of life and its dietary trinity of bread, olive oil and wine' Jancis Robinson – Oxford Companion to Wine.



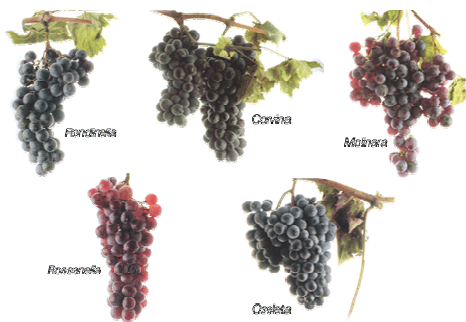
The history of its importance can be gleaned from the fact that the ancient Greek word for Italy was **oenotria** – or land of the trained vine.

But so embedded in the every day life and culture of Italians is wine that much of its history has been somewhat more prosaic. Huge volumes, of often rough and ready wine, with little hedonism or even appreciation of the culture of viticulture as has existed in France and Germany from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Until after the WWII most wine was made and sold in bulk – corkage and bottling came very late to Italy. There were no academic studies of the subject between the late 16<sup>th</sup> century and the late 1950s. Little of the country's wines were exported until the 1970s. Its hugely diverse grape varieties grow hardly anywhere else in the world – and there are more than 2,000 varieties of them! The systems used to grow the vines, until very recently, were also completely different to anywhere else in the world. Polyculture here, as nowhere else, saw grain grown between vines and vines were planted in olive groves. Until very recently – post war, wine production was mainly in the hands of small peasant farmers and the average size of a vineyard was 0.8 hectares.

There has been a revolution in recent years as some of the very ancient family houses such as Frescobaldi and Antinori began to grow and produce wine in ways that were much more similar to other major wine growing countries.

Many aspects of the Italian wine sector that we now think of as commonplace are in fact entirely post WWII phenomena. Wine, both in terms of quality and development, was in decline for almost three centuries until unification of Italy in 1861. And indeed the post WWII economic boom was the principal factor of this wine 'Risorgimento'.

Some of the best known Italian wines such as Frascati, Orvieto, Chianti, Verdicchio, Soave, Brunello di Montalcino – all took on their modern forms in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and through to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The crisp white wines of the Veneto and Friuli, which we will cover tonight, are entirely modern developments with Pinot Grigio, perhaps the most recognisable Italian wine in the world, only taking on its real development in the 1980s and 1990s – and this wine is made with a French grape – Pinot Gris!



The most famous grapes of Italy are:

**Reds** – Nebbiolo, Barbera, Dolcetto, Corvino, Molinara, Rondinella, Refosco, Sangiovese, Cabernet Sauvignon, Aglianico, Primitivo, Uva di Troia

**Whites** – Moscato, Cortese, Arneis, Garnega, Trebbiano di Soave, Chardonnay, Greco

## THE STRUCTURE OF THE WINE INDUSTRY IN ITALY

Italy's wine trade is similar to that of other European countries – individual properties, commercial and negociant houses, and co-operatives. What makes Italy different though is the relative absence of individual 'Domaine' type properties. These occur mainly in Piedmonte, Tuscany and Friuli – which explains to a large extent why these areas produce the best wines in Italy.

Also more evident than elsewhere in Europe is the importance of negociants and co-operatives. This is a result of the very fragmented nature of the bulk of wine owning and wine growing in Italy with the average size of vineyard at 0.8 hectares. – with 40% of all agricultural properties in Italy producing some wine.



Piedmonte is most noted for its two great red grapes. The most famous grape of this area is Nebbiolo. Together with Sangiovese in Tuscany – these two varieties are responsible for virtually all of Italy's 'great' wines. Nebbiolo – from the Italian for fog – produces Barolo and Barbaresco. This late ripening grape – akin to Pinot Noir – produces similarly magnificent wines in the hills around Langhe in surroundings of great physical beauty under the backdrop of the Alps. Barolo is known as Italy's 'wine of kings and king of wines'

Barbera is the grape also associated with Piedmonte and is the 'workhorse' grape responsible for huge quantities of wine. Barbera is a crisper and livelier wine than Nebbiolo.

White wine is not greatly associated with this area. However the Cortese produces the world renowned Gavi and there is also the cheap fizz of asti – as in spumante, made from the Moscato grape.

Dolcetta -meaning 'little sweet one' will grow in the areas that the fussy Nebbiolo won't and makes for some very easy drinking wines.

## The Veneto

The largest wine growing area of Italy centred around Verona. Stretching westward to Lake Garda and northward to the Alps and the Austrian border from Venice. The city of Venice was an important centre for the medieval wine trade. The Veneto overtook Puglia and Sicily in the 1990s to become the largest producer in the country. Much of this recent success has been the explosion in production and exports of Pinot Grigio. The huge growth of this wine has been driven by some very entrepreneurial co-operatives which produce great quantities of what can at time be quite bland wines. Some of the finer Pinot Grigios come from Friuli to the northeast and Alto Adige to the north.



Like other Italian regions there is a huge quantity of wine production that is of distinctly average quality due to the imprecision of the Italian DOC system.

The well know wines of this area are Valpolicella, Soave, Bardolino, Prosecco as well as PG. The Corvina grape produces Valpolicella and the Gargenega grape produces Soave. The best quality of these are to be found in the hilly areas near Padua, and Vicenza.

Valpolicella is also famous for its technique of drying grapes. This process concentrates the natural grape sugar and results in alcoholic, concentrated wines. The most famous of these being Amarone. Once a part of the Valpolicella DOC it now has its own classification and has seen a growth in popularity in recent years. The idea with Amarone is to produce in the wine the intensity of colour, flavour and tannins of the dried grapes.

There are a lot of wines here grown to fill the Italian restaurants around the world. It is useful to look for 'classico' wines which here mean that they are produced within the original central zone of the classification rather than from the much larger regions often cynically expanded to make the most of the 'famous' name.

Valpolicella when described as 'Superiore' means that it must be at least 12% ABV and aged at least for a year before bottling. Basic Valpolicella is usually a thinner 11% and is more akin to Beaujolais Nouveau!

Prosecco is centred at Conegliano, is a favourite easy drinking answer to Chamogane and almost all other fizz. Conegliano is also the home to the centre of academic training of the Veneto.

### **Alto Adige /Trentino**

The two neighbouring wine regions of Trentino (the lower part of the Adige valley) and (upper) Alto Adige, also known as the South Tyrol produce Italy's most alpine wines. Trentino is the name given to the generic blends of wines from this southern Italian speaking part of the region.

Alto Adige is mainly German speaking and with higher altitudes come cooler nights and warmer clearer days. Schiava and Lagrein are the two most notable local wine varieties.



### **Friuli ( Friuli – Venezia Giulia)**

The Italians have a huge respect for this region due to the un-Italian nature of this region's whites and brought about mainly through the adoption of German wine making techniques. Its hills and proximity to Austria and Slovenia explain the preponderance of light crisp wines. Wine styles have developed out of the overlapping of three distinct cultures- German, Italian and Slavic. Here wines are made from 17 varieties and since the late 1960s wines of great distinction – with fresh, fruity, white wines -have been emerging, although now much copied elsewhere. These are expensive wines.

### **Valle d'Aosta**

It is a pity that very little wine leaves this alpine region bordering on France and Switzerland. Because there are some fantastic wines here. Skiing over to Cervinia from Zermatt a mountain restaurant called Il Refugio serves some fabulous red wines from the valley below to accompany some of the best food you will ever eat on a mountain.

There are a mix of ancient wine varieties here. Both red and white from Piedmonte, the Rhône, Burgundy and Switzerland. You will find names such as; Chambave, Morgex, Nus and La Salle on wine labels here.

### **Lombardy**

In the plains and hills north of Milan there are some interesting wines found nowhere else. There are some highly regarded sparkling wines made here such as Ca' del Bosco which some believe rival the best of Champagne.

### **Liguria**

Another great holiday location not far from Genoa where you will enjoy wines on your trip you will never see anywhere else. The vineyards along the coast and particularly around the Cinqueterre are stunning.

## **THE WINES WE WILL BE TASTING TONIGHT**

**This is an incredible treat of a range of fabulously interesting wines**

### **Carpènè Malvolti Prosecco Di Conegliano Extra Dry – The Veneto**

100% prosecco. The best way to start any evening. You can drink it all night and it won't produce a hangover! Antonio Carpene, a chemist, was fascinated by champagne and convinced he could make a similar wine in Italy. He founded the family business in 1860 and they are still one of the most respected producers of this fabulous drink.

### **Conte Olivi, Lenotti, Bianco di Custoza – The Veneto**

30% Trebbiano, 15% Friulano, 25% Gargenega, 15% Malvasia and 15% Cortese grapes. Located on the shores of Lake Garda the Lenotti family aim to make the freshest possible wines with low levels of oxygen and sulphur

### **Cantina Tramin, Pinot Grigio – Alto Adige**

Founded in 1898 there are 280 member growers in this co-operative, hand harvested from these hillside vineyards near to Tramin

### **Gavi del Comune di Gavi DOCG - Piemonte**

Made from 100% Cortese by one of Piedmonte's most respected wine maker Michel Chiarlo, He is considered to be one of Italy's finest producers of white wines.

### **Podere Castorani, Chambave Rosso - Valle d'Aosta**

Owned by racing driver Jano Trulli it is not often one can drink these wines. Made from 100% local grape chambave

### **Merlot del Pic, Collio DOC, Collavini – Friuli**

Young company with very high quality wines. An example of an 'international' grape variety taking hold in Italy

### **Cantina Tramin, Pinot Noir – Alto Adige**

Hand harvested pinot noir grapes and aged in French barrels

### **Barolo DOCG Tortoniano, Michel Chiarlo - Piemonte**

100% Nebbiolo in the Montferrato area of Piedmonte

### **Amarone della Valpolicella DOC Classico, Tedeschi – The Veneto**

30% corvina, 30% rondinella, 30% corvinone, 10% Oseleta and other local grapes! Made by the small family firm who came to Italy from Germany in 13th century - their surname in Italian means German.