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LIFE | FOOD & DRINK | ON WINE

Push Past Pinot Grigio: Italy's Unsung Whites

Producers across Italy are turning out white wines full of character. It's time drinkers caught on. Here, 5 bottles worth seeking out



By

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Italian red wines and Italian white wines seem to exist in two separate worlds. The reds are sought-after, prestigious and often high-priced. The whites are mostly an afterthought. Ask most wine drinkers to name an Italian white (save for Pinot Grigio) and you'll be met with blank stares. Even those passionate about reds like Brunello and Barolo rarely show the same affection for Arneis and Pigato; often, they don't even know what they are.



PHOTO: JAMES ALBON

One reason may be the relative lack of celebrated names; most Italian white wines are priced and styled for easy drinking. In the seminal 1982 guide “Italian Wine,” Victor Hazan noted, “What’s absent from the spectrum of dry Italian whites are examples that match the power, fullness and intensity of a few expensive [white]

Burgundies and their counterparts, the California Chardonnays.” For a long time, the Italian whites available in the U.S. were primarily mass-produced brands like Corvo Bianco, Bolla Soave and Fontana Candida—bland wines that created an image of mediocrity that’s been hard to erase.

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In retail stores, Italian reds are granted multiple sections, with shelves subdivided into regions such as Piedmont and Tuscany, while Italian whites are lumped together in a single section. Even at Eataly Vino, an all-Italian wine store

in New York, the selection skews 80% red—a ratio determined by shoppers’ preferences, according to general manager Leonard Rankin. He added that some of their wine-club members even request that their monthly allotments be limited to red.

Mr. Rankin has introduced Eataly Vino customers to many lesser-known whites, including Pigato from the Liguria region—at its best, a lively and aromatic white. In fact, he noted with seeming pride, “We have more Pigatos than Pinot Grigios. We’re that kind of store.” He hand-sells the wines to shoppers. “I’m talking with them just like I’m talking to you,” he said as we surveyed the store’s multiple shelves of white wine. (Even at 20%, Eataly Vino carries more Italian whites than any other store I know.)

As Filippo Rondelli of Terre Bianche, a top Pigato producer in Liguria, noted in an email, the grape requires a “professional taster” to describe it—and they aren’t always on hand when you need them. I recently observed a well-meaning, clueless waiter at an Italian restaurant in Carmel, Calif., trying to explain Falanghina, a similarly unsung white from the Campania region, to two women. “It’s kind of oaky,” he said about the decidedly mineral, floral white grape. When the women pressed him for a further description, he suggested they try a Sauvignon Blanc from California instead.

I included the northern Pigato and southern Falanghina grapes in my recent tasting of whites across Italy, as well as other key varieties from other parts of the boot.

In the north, I focused partly on Arneis, one of the most important white grapes in Piedmont, sometimes called the “white Nebbiolo.” According to Luca Currado Vietti of Vietti winery, only a few Arneis vines remained in Piedmont by the late 1960s. But his father, Alfredo Currado, so loved the fragrant white grape whose

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White wines From Italy, Ready
For Their Closeup



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name means “little rascal” that he planted more and produced a wine that won the praise of Italian critics. Today Arneis is one of the most popular white wines in Italy, said Mr. Currado Vietti. His family’s 2015 Vietti Roero Arneis (\$20) tasted soft and fruity but still lively.

Another northerly Italian wine region, Valle d’Aosta, turns out several notable white grapes, including my favorite among those I sampled for this story, Petite Arvine. Technically Swiss, the grape grows in Italy, too, and produces wines of uncommon richness and concentration, particularly those from the Grosjean

‘Small producers began turning out wines full of character, from little-known native grapes they rediscovered or revived.’

Frères winery. I found the 2014 Grosjean Petite Arvine Rovettaz (\$25) a lush, textured white with more than a passing resemblance to Pinot Gris.

South of Valle d’Aosta, along Italy’s northwestern coast in Liguria, the Pigato grape and its genetic cousin Vermentino are the stars. Pigato expresses itself

nowhere better than in the Riviera Ligure di Ponente region. Wines made with this grape range from medium to full bodied, and from floral with a citrus note, like the 2015 Bruna Pigato Le Russeghine, to a leaner example such as the 2015 Terre Bianche Pigato, reminiscent of a vibrant village Chablis. (Both were good buys at \$17 and \$20 respectively.)

On the opposite coast in the Marche and Abruzzo regions, the white grape of note is Pecorino—and yes, it's a grape as well as a cheese—though even wine producers in other parts of Italy may not know it. A few years ago a famous Super Tuscan producer corrected me when I called Pecorino a grape, to the general merriment of the table. (Thanks to a quick Google search the last laugh was mine.) A pleasantly tangy note animates this citrusy white—especially the 2015 Tiberio Pecorino (\$18), from a family in Abruzzo whose first Pecorino vintage was just 13 years ago.

In the south, in addition to the aforementioned Falanghina in Campania, Grillo is the grape of Sicily and the fortified wine Marsala. Grillo almost disappeared a few decades ago when producers ripped out vines in favor of grapes easier to grow. Thanks largely to Marsala producer Marco de Bartoli, a dry style of Grillo debuted in the 1990s. His 2015 Marco de Bartoli Vignaverde Grillo (\$22) stood out among the examples I tried: full-bodied and rich with excellent acidity and a pleasing bitter note.

These are just a handful of the hundreds of Italian white grapes worth a search. And who knows? If enough wine drinkers go looking for them, perhaps wine retailers will add a few more sections to their Italian-white shelves.

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