

Going native

With 2,500 grape varieties to choose from, Italy is the place to go to satisfy the trend for authenticity and discovery. **Ian d'Agata** picks out ten to look for, and considers what it means to be 'native'

ITALY 2012 • DECANTER

WITHOUT DOUBT, THE ace up Italy's vinous sleeve is the jaw-dropping array of indigenous grape varieties that its winemakers have at their disposal. Unlike France or California, where roughly the same 15 varieties are used to make 95% of its wines, Italy can count on over 2,500 cultivars (cultivated grape varieties) to choose from. True, the precise figure depends on who's counting – stoically attached to their grapes, Italians don't look kindly on foreigners (or even Italians) telling them that one of their cherished local varieties might actually hail from Spain or Croatia. In truth, only about 1,000 cultivars have been genetically identified to date; 600 of which are used to make wines in

Photograph: Simone Simone/Alamy

Above: flags on display for the 150th anniversary of Italian unification. Locals are equally proud of their vinous heritage

commercially significant numbers. That impressive figure partly explains the magic of Italian wines: they offer something new, interesting, even wild and wacky, to jaded palates everywhere.

In recent years, such characterful wines have finally been generating a groundswell of support, with several varieties being championed by the wine trade, notably in the restaurant sector. 'Authentic' wines are ever more fashionable given the similar trend towards local produce in food. The result is that many new bottlings are appearing on the shop

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floor, with producers, and even some consultant winemakers (many notorious for having previously recommended planting Merlot or Chardonnay and uprooting the natives) now falling over themselves to appear 'native-worthy'. The exact acreage of those long-abandoned native grapes is small at best, however, and their history takes some fathoming...

Understanding 'native'

Indigenous grapes result from the centuries-old process of domestication of local wild varieties, but many of Italy's so-called natives were imported from the Middle East and Greece thanks to conquering Roman legionnaires, traders or colonists. Sangiovese, the grape behind Chianti and Brunello, is a true native, while Aglianico, the force behind Aglianico del Vulture and Taurasi, is a Greek import. The name tells the story: Aglianico derives from *ellanico*, or Hellenic in English.

In some instances, therefore, it is more accurate to speak of 'local' varieties than native, but grapes are considered 'native' when their existence is charted in a place for 1,000 years. 'International' varieties, on the other hand, are found everywhere in the world, and are those only recently planted in a specific country. An international variety becomes 'traditional' if grown in an area for 300 to 500 years (different experts favour one cut-off or another). Hence why Cabernet Franc and Pinot Bianco are traditional, not international varieties of Veneto and Friuli Venezia Giulia; Venetians and Goriziani have been clamouring for them in their favourite local watering holes for centuries. Ultimately, for a variety to be viewed as an integral part of a specific terroir or ecosystem, and be accurately labelled as native or traditional, it has to have lived there for a very long time.

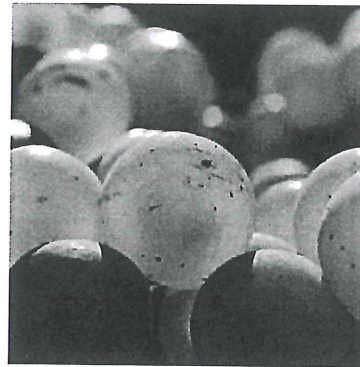
Local identity

Native grapes and wines are of cultural, intellectual and financial significance. Many native varieties excel only in specific, local terroirs. A good example is Nebbiolo, the grape from which the world-famous Barolo and Barbaresco wines are made. Outside of Piedmont (and parts of Lombardy and Valle d'Aosta) it yields disappointing results at best.

Not found anywhere else, wines made with local grape varieties are special. They are intimately linked to a specific area, and speak of traditions and identity: Puglians are Puglians not just because they were born in Bari or Lecce but also because they drink Negroamaro and Verdeca. Similarly, Lombards will drink Bonarda or Barbera with their beloved *risotto alla milanese* or *cotoletta*.

Wines made from native grapes remind us Italians who we are and where we have come from; their roots dig deep within our collective memories. And there is no future, without a past.

Photographs: Bureau Vista Images/Getty Images.com; Ben Appetit/Alamy; Hebert Lehmann/Cephus



Coda di Volpe

Potentially one of Italy's greatest white wines, though Fiano, Greco and Falanghina, also from

10 native varieties worth seeking out

Unfortunately, many of the better wines are available in limited quantities and not exported. Wines made by large-volume producers are most easily found, but don't always represent the most characteristic example of the wine. Even in Italy, grapes such as Vespolina, Pignolo, Mayolet, Malvasia Puntinata and others are little known outside of their immediate production areas. The following 10 varieties and wines are just a few of those deserving a place in the sun.

Campania, are better known. Grown mainly in Irpinia, Beneventano and Vesuvio, it yields very mineral wines (Irpinia, Vesuvio) or textured and honeyed ones (Beneventano). The name Coda di Volpe is due to the grape cluster – big and bushy like the tail of a fox. Of course, this being Italy, there is a Coda di Volpe Rosso too.



Try: Vadiaperti, Irpinia, Campania 2007

★★★★18

£10 Exel, Slurp

Intensely mineral, with hints of menthol, fresh herbs and white stone fruit. Ages amazingly well. Drink: 2012–2020. Alc: 13.5%

Try: La Rivolta, Taburno, Campania 2008

★★★★18

£10 London Wine Dellverles

Lemon, iodine and herbal, finishing long and complex. Firm acidity and a welcome note of austerity. Drink: 2012–2018. Alc: 13%