

WINE News

*Italy's Lesser-Known Wines
Overdeliver on Every Front*



MARCH 21, 2022 FEATURES

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La Dolce Vita, Off the Beaten Path

By Greg St. Clair, K&L Italian Buyer



As I write these newsletters—and I have done so for more than 25 years now—I always seem to focus on Brunello, Barolo, Super Tuscans, or the latest exciting vintage. There is enough depth in just one of these topics to fill pages and pages. Yet, so much of the wealth of Italy's wine experience lies in the "other" regions or varieties that don't get the same level of press coverage.

The problem is that there is so much in Italy to write about you can't possibly do it in six or even 12 articles a year—nearly the whole of Italy is covered in vines, many of which are varieties of grapes that grow nowhere else in the world! So, this time around I decided to shine a light on the many "other" exciting wines being made across the country. In these pages, but you'll read about some of them, e.g., Schioppettino and Enantio, but you'll also read about some of the best under-the-radar Nebbiolo and Sangiovese finds, as well (maybe you'll be saying, *Barolo and Brunello who?* by the end). I hope you enjoy!



2020 I Clivi Schioppettino Venezia-Giulia \$29.99 You might not be familiar with the grape—Ski-op-pet-tino: easily pronounced but oh-so-complex. I am not a fan of big, heavy reds that drink as if someone has bopped you on the forehead with a sledgehammer. This wine

is the opposite—a myriad of sparkling facets with unique flavors. Friuli is not known for its reds, but, when you taste this, you will find it fascinating. Its vibrant, dynamic flavors and uplifting texture will give you pause. I like that part—I prefer to ponder a wine like this with so much going on. While this might sound difficult, it is anything but. In fact, it is so easy to drink, it gets me excited just thinking about it. Roast chicken would be my ideal match.



2018 Avignonesi "Grifi" Rosso Toscano \$29.99 When I started selling this Cabernet-Sangiovese blend an enormous number of years ago, it was during the first wave of "Super Tuscans," and it was a wildly crazy combo at the time. It was owned by the Falvo brothers then sold to

Virginie Saverys, a Belgian who has elevated a very good winery to the next quality level. With biodynamic practices, the vineyards now produce startlingly expressive grapes, and the wines are wildly interesting. Both the Cabernet Sauvignon and Sangiovese sizzle with depth and flavor. Drink now but keep a few bottles in your cellar because it will age very well. Pair with rich dishes like braised meat or vegetables.



2018 Roeno Enantio Terradeiforti \$19.99 One of the joys of Italian wines is constantly being surprised by grapes you've never heard of. Enantio is a new one for me. The tiny quantity of this rare variety comes from Trentino—without a doubt one of one the most beautiful parts of

Italy. An unusual name and an obscure DOC, but I think with our help this could become a staple at K&L. This is a supple, smooth, and delicious dry red with high-toned fruit notes. The nose is elegant and exudes effortlessness, while on the palate there is body and weight. The finish shows a certain lift that gives it a weightless feel, yet it maintains persistence. I'd try this with a charcuterie board and some cow's milk cheeses, or Parmigiano Reggiano.

Friuli's Fresh, Elegant Whites

Friuli, or Friuli-Venezia-Giulia, is one of the most confusing regions in Italy—just the name alone! Culturally, it has more of an Eastern European feel and flavor. Geographically, it is a large, glacially flattened plain with a few hills squeezed up against the Slovenian border. Familiarity comes with exposure, and I'm guessing you know almost no one who has ever been to Friuli!

It wasn't until the 1980s, when Pinot Grigio became internationally popular, that Friuli earned some recognition—but perhaps not the best kind. Producers planted too much of it in order to jump on the PG-bandwagon, and soon there was an ocean of simple Friulian Pinot Grigio flowing into the glasses of Americans.

Although grapes have been growing in Friuli for millennia, it was the work of a few producers in recent years who have turned the tide with their quality-over-quantity approach. Here are a few we're very proud to be selling.

Livio Felluga

One of Italy's most famous white wine producers, Livio Felluga, passed away six years ago at the ripe old age of 102, still sharp as a tack all the way to the end. He set the framework for Friulian wines and led the way for all future producers.

I recently got to taste the new releases with Laura Felluga, Livio's granddaughter, and I was truly impressed.

Their flagship wine is made from the Friulano grape—it's what the locals drink, and the **2019 Livio Felluga Friulano Friuli Colli Orientali \$24.99** shows the classic Friulano weight and dynamism while laced with hints of tarragon, stone, and white flowers.



While Pinot Grigio can produce some really bland examples, the **2019 Livio Felluga Pinot Grigio Friuli Colli Orientali \$24.99** is certainly not one of them. The wine shows loads of richness but with an earthier, more savory character instead of being fruit forward. It's a serious wine that shows what Pinot Grigio can be like at its best.

In general, I find Italian Sauvignon Blanc a bit funky until it gets a few years under its belt—it always seems too musky for me—yet this **2018 Livio Felluga Sauvignon Blanc Friuli Colli Orientali \$24.99** shows complexity, weight, and depth with a citric center. It is just now opening. It's really a super wine, and I'm pairing it with shrimp creole.

My favorite wine of the tasting though was the **2017 Livio Felluga Abbazia di Rosazzo \$49.99**, a Friulano-dominant, five-grape blend that always takes a bit of time to evolve but is really rocking now. I'd suggest decanting for an hour ahead of time to allow it to open. The wine spends time in neutral barrels. It's delicious.



Ermacora

One of our longest direct-import relationships is with Ermacora. We started importing with the 1998 vintage, and, wow, that seems like a long time ago. They are from the Colli Orientali or the eastern hills of Friuli, scant kilometers from the Slovenian border. Vineyards lie on a series of horseshoe-shaped glacial moraines called *ronchi*. In an otherwise flat region, they stand out as a distinct change in geography. These border hills, along with Collio, produce Friuli's best wines.



It might seem like I'm harping on how well some of these white wines age in Italy, but, when you've had the experience of a well-aged bottle, it is hard to get over the quality and depth of character. Every time I have visited Ermacora it has always involved a vertical tasting. I'd choose the varietal, and they'd return from the cellar with four or five vintages to go with dinner. A few years ago, I ran into a couple of misplaced bottles of Pinot Bianco in my cellar that were 10 years old—I usually don't have that kind of patience—but, the wine was just unbelievable! So much depth, aromatics...just wow.

This year's vintage has just arrived, and the **2020 Ermacora Friulano Colli Orientali del Friuli \$16.99** is dynamite. This is the wine Friulians drink daily. It's what they have with breakfast, breacktime, lunch, breacktime, after-work cocktail, pre-dinner cocktail...you get the idea. It isn't a varietal that has a super definitive aromatic signature like Gewürztraminer, but for me its emblematic feature is a coupling of richness with a hint of tarragon on the finish. This is a versatile wine made for food: Friulian cuisine has a lot of Eastern European influence, in both spice and substance. Lots of egg dishes, spiced meat and onion dishes, polenta, and of course Frico—fried cheese, preferably Montasio cheese with a glass of Friulano.



2020 Ermacora Pinot Bianco Colli Orientali del Friuli \$16.99 The Ermacoras are always most concerned about what I think of the Pinot Bianco; it's their best wine year in and year out. It has intrigue, balance, and palate presence. White flower, with hints of vanilla and bergamot on the nose. The palate has good richness, a dynamic mouthfeel, and very long finish. Follow my lead and hide a few bottles in your cellar for some real down-the-road enjoyment!



Every Friulian winemaker expects you will ask about Pinot Grigio. It's the ubiquitous Italian white that everyone knows, and it came to prominence as a reaction to the overly oaked California Chardonnay of the time. There's plenty of plonk out there, but the **2020 Ermacora Pinot Grigio Colli Orientali del Friuli \$16.99** is what the varietal really tastes like in the hands of quality winemakers. Full in body, unoaked, with a real structural center, acidic balance, and a place to hang your spice-laden fruit. This Pinot Grigio has facets and brilliant edges emphasizing the fruit and spice. It still has plenty of weight and richness, but, coupled with that central purity that provides a gorgeous lift to its flavors, the 2020 is one of the best Ermacora has produced.

Come for the Brunello, Stay for the Rosso

Sesta di Sopra

K&L Wine Merchants' first direct import from Montalcino and still one of our favorites is a tiny winery on the south slope of Montalcino. Tiny is hard to imagine, but they make 340 cases of Brunello, about 500 cases of Rosso di Montalcino, and 500 cases of a Sangiovese IGT—that's it! While we are always banging the drum for their Brunello—and it's exceptional, don't get me wrong—the wines in the less-expensive portion of their portfolio are truly mind-blowing for their amazing quality-to-price ratio!



The **2019 Sesta di Sopra Rosso di Montalcino \$29.99** once again portrays the luscious fruit quality of the vintage. It is pure and classic—that wild cherry Sangiovese just explodes from the glass. Spicy, complex, with wild cherry fruit, salted plums, and hints of sage and leather, it's intriguing, seductive, and inviting. If you can't afford to drink Brunello regularly, this will give you a fix.



While the **2020 Sesta di Sopra Sangiovese Toscana \$19.99** comes from a younger vineyard, it isn't any less expressive. It is just amazing that a wine at this price point has so much character. It reflects a lot of the flavors in the Rosso di Montalcino but is more exuberantly fruit-driven, which not to mean it's a fruit bomb because it most certainly is not. It is a savory,



driven, complex wine that's just a little fresher, easier, and makes you want to drink it by the bottle! Either of these wines would be perfect for pasta with a meat sauce or wild mushrooms.

Age-Worthy Whites for Under \$20 from Lake Garda

Tenuta Roveglia

I remember the first time I tasted the wines from Tenuta Roveglia, they were so good! I knew immediately the wines were great, and that they were unbelievably well priced. Subsequently, I made a couple of visits to the winery and found out how well they aged. Yes, that's right, age. BBC—that's Back Before Covid—I had a series of vertical tastings of the Lugana Limne from vintages that were 5, 10, 15 and 20-years old. I could hardly believe it, they were so exquisite and still going strong.



Paolo Fabiani, Director of Tenuta Roveglia, among the vines.

The **2020 Tenuta Roveglia "Limne" Lugana \$15.99**—yes that's the ageable one—is floral, spicy, with a bit of beeswax and honey flowing from the glass. On the palate, the wine has weight and a distinct richness, yet you immediately feel the snap of acidity. That vibrant center-palate zing just lights up your mouth. It's a rarity to find wines that have this level of richness but are so clean on the palate. Coming in at at only 13% ABV, it's refreshing and light on its feet. Flavors of spice, brioche, and braised fruit are all offset by the focused central acidity that adds lift and drive to the palate presence. The finish is long, mineral driven, and shows incredible balance. Layers of fruit, spice and floral notes are consistently blossoming on the finish.



The **2017 Tenuta Roveglia "Vigne di Catullo" Lugana Riserva \$19.99** is a fascinating wine. It's full of aromas of white flowers, a creamy vanilla custard-like aromatic spice, and hints of Bartlett pear. As impressive as the nose is, it's the palate impact that will rock you. The Catullo Vineyard's 55-year-old vines give this wine a bold, richly textured body that plays out across your palate, while a strong mineral presence gives the wine real verve and direction. The flavors combine to provide a creamy texture and a leesy, custard character. It's fermented and aged in stainless steel so that those old vines really hold the spotlight here. Harvested in early October, the wine has complete physiological ripeness, and, even though it's rich, the vibrant acidity and minerality give it a super clean finish. I have no doubt you'll love it!



Cool Alpine air flows throughout the Langhe region of Piemonte, making the Nebbiolo grapes happy as clams.

Beyond Barolo and Barbaresco: Piedmont's Best Weeknight Nebbiolo

I frequently get asked to lead folks on a journey to learn about Barolo and Barbaresco, yet when I suggest they start with a humble bottle of Nebbiolo, they tend to suggest that those aren't good enough for them. *Au contraire!* Barolo and Barbaresco need long cellar aging to really unleash all their Nebbiolo character. As such, they really aren't your best bet for your weeknight drinking. In fact, if you dine with families in the Langhe, on a "normal" night, nobody is drinking Barolo or Barbaresco—they're all drinking Nebbiolo. Nebbiolo wines from Langhe show so much character, are more affordable than their famed brethren, and, more importantly, the wines are drinkable now!

The **2018 Cavallotto Langhe Nebbiolo \$41.99** might as well be Barolo! Cavallotto is a traditional winery where all the wine is made in big Slavonian oak casks. The wine is quasi-transparent in appearance but therein lies the deception: the wine is still powerful! Even better: the tannins are sweet and smooth, making this super drinkable now.

The fabulous vintage is on display with the **2019 Francesco Rinaldi Langhe Nebbiolo \$34.99**: the up-front aromatics and supple palate presence make this wine just delicious now, but still provide the structure to age for a decade. Another Langhe wine from Barolo, the **2020 Guido Porro "Camilu" Langhe Nebbiolo \$27.99** from Serralunga is just slightly rustic but comforted with a supple lush body. The aromatics are stunning—get out the Porcini risotto! Barbaresco produces their own Langhe Nebbiolo and the last of the **2019 Paitin**

"Starda" Langhe Nebbiolo \$22.99 is a super bargain. The 2020 is on its way but the last of this vintage will make you a believer: a subtle power in a supple and enticing wine. Paitin is one of the best bargains on the market—worth investing in now before they get found out!

Not all Nebbiolo is from the Langhe. I've always been a fan of the **2018 Cascina Val del Prete Nebbiolo d'Alba \$24.99 (coming soon)** from the Roero—the zone across the Tanaro River from Barolo and Barbaresco. The wines from the Roero have a bit more upfront in terms of grip and flavor. I would pair this with a bold pasta dish or an American-style lasagna. If you're looking for a T.V. wine (that's what I did with mine) the **2020 Ca' del Baio Langhe Nebbiolo \$26.99** is luscious and fruit forward with the structure to remind you that's it's a baby Barbaresco.

In the far western portion of Piedmont at the real foot of the Alps in the tiny DOC of Carema, the wines here take on a silky, wildly aromatic, and translucent character. Next up are two wines from an exquisite Cooperative comprising many tiny growers who banded together to have one voice. The **2017 Produttori di Nebbiolo di Carema Carema Classico \$26.99** is all Nebbiolo yet with a different take on the varietal: it's a bit gamier and yet still supple, elegant, and drinkable. The **2017 Produttori di Nebbiolo di Carema Carema Riserva \$34.99** is a slightly bigger and deeper version that would pair perfectly with a wild boar ravioli. If you're at Oakland's Belotti Ristorante, try it with their Polenta Tortelli with Rabbit and Thyme sauce—it would be bliss.

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