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Guide to Italian Wines

VinItaly 2006

Article and photos © by Tom Hyland

I attended the 40th edition of VinItaly, the world's largest wine fair, held each year in April in the lovely city of Verona. This was my third visit to the fair, and as usual, I tasted some great new Italian wines and caught up with many of the most influential personalities in the Italian wine industry today. You'd have to call that a pretty successful trip!

While five days of tasting wines seems like a lot of time, you'd be surprised how short it can be, especially when you're always bumping (literally) into a winery owner or winemaker that you've come to know over the past few years. That happened a lot to me this time around, which meant that I couldn't taste as many wines as I would have liked, but how can you not stop to say hello to dear friends?

So, while I don't have as many wines to report on as usual, I still tasted hundreds of wonderful new releases. Here are notes on some of more intriguing:

MARCHE

During the fair I tasted wines from only one Marche producer, but it was an impressive one. **Conte Leopardi** has a nice range of white and red wines, some of them quite good, a few excellent. The best included a 2005 Verdicchio di Castello dei Jesi Classico named "Castelverde." This non-oak aged Verdicchio has great depth of lemon and apple fruit with light spice in the lengthy finish. This is one of the most flavorful examples of Verdicchio I've tried in some time! Also noteworthy is the 2005 Bianco del Coppo a Sauvignon Blanc made from French and Italian clones that is rich with delicious spearmint fruit. My favorite red from this producer is Fructus, a fruit-forward, easy-drinking style of Rosso Conero, the region's best-known red. Both the 2004 and soon to be released 2005 have soft tannins and ripe, fresh cherry fruit that make this a tasty wine to enjoy on its own or with salami. Many estates make simple reds like this, but few succeed quite as well. Maybe I shouldn't be surprised as the famed Riccardo Cotarella is now a consulting enologist here. Conte Leopardi is definitely a producer to watch for over the next few years!

CAMPANIA

Likewise, I only had the chance to try wines from one Campanian producer at VinItaly, but it was one of the signature estates of this region, **Mastroberardino**. This famous producer has always been at the forefront of the region's indigenous varietals, but as there has been so much attention paid to big white and red wines from other regions of Italy (such as Friuli, Piedmont and Tuscany), the winery had lost some of its luster. But like fashion, wine styles are trendy and today more consumers (as well as wine journalists) have discovered the glorious wines of Campania.

The 2005 whites are truly stunning here. Piero Mastroberardino explained to me that 2005 was an excellent vintage, one that produced wines that were lighter in body than the heralded 2004 vintage, but ones that he felt were better balanced. I would certainly agree that these wines are in equilibrium, as they have striking acidity that rounds everything out and invites you back for another taste. The 2005 Greco di Tufo "Novaserra" has notes of almond and Bosc pear with good weight on the palate and a rich, lightly spicy finish. Even more impressive is the 2005 Fiano di Avellino "Radici" which offers layers of ripe pear and lemon fruit and a big, flavorful finish with great persistence of fruit. Also highly recommended is the 2001 Taurasi "Radici", this producer's most famous red wine. Medium-full, this has chocolate cherry flavors, rich but polished tannins and the structure to age for 15-20 years. Mastroberardino is definitely on a roll!

ALTO ADIGE

This has become my favorite region in Italy for white wines, so I made sure I tried as many examples of these wines as I could (white wines are so refreshing after all the big reds you taste at the fair!). There are so many choices I could write about; I'll start with the excellent offerings from **Elena Walch**. The 2005 whites here are quite special, as this was a vintage of slightly smaller quantity than normal, but one that was beautifully balanced and displayed great character. Try the "Castel Ringberg" Sauvignon (Blanc) that offers flavors of yellow pepper and spearmint with vibrant acidity. The "Kastelaz" Gewurztraminer is splendid again this year with delicious grapefruit and lychee flavors with notable spice.

The wines at **Cantina Tramin** are recommended across the board, as this cooperative deals with the finest growers in the area of Tramin. Seek out the regular 2005 Pinot Grigio with fresh apple notes or the single vineyard "Unterebener" bottling that has hints of cinnamon to go with the fresh apple and pear fruit. This has a long, complex finish and is one of the most memorable bottlings of Pinot Grigio I have ever enjoyed! The "Nussbaumer" Gewurztraminer has become legendary; the 2005 bottling is just a touch lighter than the 2004 offering, but still retains its great purity of lychee and pineapple fruit with lovely aromas of yellow roses and lilies. This is always limited, so grab this wine as soon as you can when it is released in June. Winemaker Willi Sturz is at the top of his game these days, making Cantina Tramin a must buy for anyone interested in Italy's finest white wines.

Two other wineries from Alto Adige caught my attention during visits after the fair. **J. Hofstatter**, located in the middle of the town of Tramin, continues its excellent record with white wines. The 2005 Pinot Bianco is so typical of this grape with its fresh apple fruit and snappy acidity, while the 2005 Gewurztraminer "Koblenhof" only hints at what is to come. This is always one of the region's finest Gewurztraminers as there is great concentration of fruit with the structure to age for 3-5 years in the best vintages, of which 2005 is certainly one.

Also impressive are the new releases from **Cantina Terlano**, located farther north in Alto Adige. The 2005 Pinot Bianco (also known as Weissburgunder) is excellent with rich pear and guava fruit and lively acidity. One of the signature wines here is Terlaner, a blend of Pinot Bianco, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc. Try this with just about any fish or with asparagus, a local specialty. Finally, the 2003 "Vorberg" Pinot Bianco is a single vineyard bottling that is one of the finest examples of this grape you will find anywhere.

VENETO

As I love Soave and Amarone, this is one of my favorite regions in Italy. The wines from **Igino Accordini** are always notable; the 2001 Amarone and 2003 Ripassa are excellent, with the 2003 Recioto (the sweet, dessert style of Amarone) outstanding with raspberry and plum fruit and medium sweetness in beautiful balance.



Exterior, Veneto Pavilion.

Also recommended are the wines from **Villa Monteleone**, a small producer in the Classico district of Valpolicella. Noteworthy here are the 2000 Amarone, made in a traditional style with lovely spicy flavors and the 2002 "Campo San Vito", a Valpolicella made in the Ripasso style. This is usually my favorite wine from this underrated producer and the 2002 is no exception.

Three Soave producers caught my attention at the fair. From **Coffele**, an excellent family producer, try the 2005 "Ca'Visco" bottling, which features tasty melon fruit and aromas of chamomile and lilacs; this is a textbook Soave. The 2003 "Le Sponde" Recioto di Soave is a flavorful dessert wine with apricot fruit and distinct nuttiness.

Ca'Rugate is another first-rate family estate in the Soave Classico district; look for the 2005 San Michele bottling, which is one of the finest regular bottlings of Soave you can find, while the 2004 La Perlara Recioto di Soave is splendid with flavors of pineapple, apricot and baked pear with overtones of crème caramel. Ca'Rugate is one of the top producers of this exquisite dessert wine and the 2004 is one their finest to date! (The winery also produces some noteworthy reds; look for the 2004 Campo Lavei Valpolicella Superiore, which is partially made from dried grapes and the 2003 Amarone, a medium-full effort with delicious fruit.)

A small but consistently excellent producer is **Agostino Vicentini**, who showed two separate bottlings of Soave. The 2005 "Vigneto Terre Lunghe" has beautiful honeydew melon and tealeaf aromas and very nice complexity, while the 2004 Il Casale (a DOCG Soave Superiore) is made from late harvested grapes and offers flavors of pineapple, quince and golden apples. Medium-full, this is a beautifully textured wine with wonderful complexity and subtlety. This is a great Soave and one I would love to taste again in three or four years.

PIEDMONT

Sublime reds from this great region are a certainty and while I didn't get the chance to try that many examples at this year's VinItaly, I did sample a few beauties.



Milena and Aldo Vajra, Vajra Winery, Barolo, Piedmont.

Aldo and Milena **Vajra** showed their beautifully elegant reds from their vineyards near the town of Barolo. The regular 2005 Dolcetto d'Alba has typical plum and black raspberry fruit and is very appealing now, while the 2004 Dolcetto "Coste e Fassati" is richer with more depth of fruit and greater complexity. This will drink well for another 3-5 years. The 2001 Barolo is very traditional with subtle herbal notes and excellent fruit, while the Barolo Bricco delle Viole from the same year offers richer fruit, more spice and has a very long, graceful finish. This is one of the top Barolos from this outstanding vintage.

One of the great producers in Piedmont - actually in all of Italy - is **Gianni Voerzio**. Gianni's brother Roberto is currently the darling of the media with his amazingly concentrated bottlings, very expensive bottlings of Barolo, but I think Gianni's wines are as good- and they are quite a bit less pricey!

The 2005 Arneis "Bricco Cappellina" is one of the best of its type with intoxicating aromas of pine, yellow peach and lemon oil backed by a long finish with vibrant acidity. The 2005 Dolcetto d'Alba "Rocchettevino" is another first-rate wine with fresh, delicious plum and black raspberry fruit and very good concentration.

Of all the outstanding producers of Barbera d'Asti, few are as consistently outstanding as **Giacomo Bologna** (the wines are also known as **Braida**). The single vineyard bottlings offered by his daughter Raffaella are almost unmatched for their depth of fruit, ripeness and structure. The "Bricco dell'Uccellone" has been the most famous and the 2003 offers plenty of ripe black cherry and plum fruit with big tannins (for Barbera, that is); this is an excellent wine. Even better are the 2003 "Bricco della Bigotta" and "Ai Suma" bottlings; the former has excellent concentration of black cherry and black mint flavors with an amazingly long finish, while the latter has ripe plum and black cherry fruit that is absolutely delicious backed by a generous mid-palate and a lengthy finish with polished tannins. Both wines are great examples of what modern Barbera is all about!

SICILY

I visited the Sicilian pavilion on two separate days and it was extremely crowded on both occasions. That should tell you something in case you didn't already know - Sicilian wines are hot! One of the hottest estates is **Donnafugata**, who gets my vote as one of the most influential and successful producers in Sicily and all of Italy. Every wine here is very good and most are excellent or outstanding. For a crisp, refreshing (and not terribly expensive) white, it's difficult to beat the 2005 Anthilia, a blend of local grapes, Ansonica and Catarratto, while the 2003 Chiaranda is a lovely Chardonnay with tasty tropical fruit and light spice. The two superstar wines here delivered again this year; the 2003 Mille e una Notte is a gorgeous Nero d'Avola with rich blackberry fruit, spicy oak and a long finish with great purity of fruit, while the 2004 Ben Ryé is a superb dessert wine made from dried Moscato grapes from the island of Pantelleria with flavors of golden raisins, apricots and hints of caramel. Enjoy this over the next 5-7 years.

From the Etna district in southeastern Sicily, **Benanti** is producing some of the most stylish wines on the island. The 2002 Pietramarina is one of Italy's most distinctive white wines, made from the local grape Carricante, which yields fascinating aromas of peony, lemon oil and fennel. Medium-full, this has very good concentration and a rich, earthy finish with a light touch of minerality. The 2001 Rovittello, a red made from two local grapes, Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Cappuccio, has flavors of cherry, mint and tobacco and a lengthy finish with lively acidity. This is a stylish, complex wine that is definitely NOT in the super ripe international style. Another intriguing wine is the 2003 Majora, a blend of Nero d'Avola, Syrah, Petit Verdot and Tannat. There is plenty of ripe cherry and berry fruit and a long finish with tart acidity and distinct spice.

Mirabile is a fairly new producer that has impressed from the start. The 2005 Viognier has exotic aromas of pineapple and quince and great fruit persistence in the rich finish. The 2004 Nero d'Avola is a fine value (retailing less than \$16) with tasty plum fruit and light herbal notes with round tannins, while the 2004 Rosso, a blend of Nero d'Avola and a few other grapes, takes things up a notch with more smoky and tobacco flavors. Drink the Nero d'Avola now and let the Rosso age for another 3-5 years.

Finally, how could I write about Sicily and not mention **Planeta**? This is one of the two or three most famous wineries in Sicily and perhaps the one that has influenced more producers here. The 2005 Cometa is a Fiano with fascinating aromas of honeycomb, apple peel and mango. Though not as fat as some years, this is quite rich and certainly one of the most stylish examples of this varietal.

Also impressive was the 2004 Chardonnay (arguably Sicily's most famous) and the 2004 Syrah with flavors of red plum, cherry and milk chocolate; this is quite delicious! The best wine I tasted from Planeta was the 2004 Santa Cecilia, a gutsy, spicy Nero d'Avola with layers of plum and black cherry fruit and a long, long finish. This is a great wine and one that should drink well in another 7-10 years.



Raffaella Bologna, Proprietor, Bologna Winery, Asti. Producer of some of the finest bottlings of Barbera d'Asti.

TUSCANY

I've saved Tuscany for last, as I tasted so many excellent wines from this region at the fair. There is not enough room to mention all of them, so I'll give you sketches of some of the best I tried.



Guido di Santi, winemaker, Querciabella Vineyards, Chianti Classico.

For Chianti Classico, the 2004 **Casa Emma** is outstanding and a first-rate Chianti Classico *normale*. There is plenty of ripe cherry fruit along with nicely integrated oak while the finish offers lively acidity and stylish tannins. This is a lovely, polished wine! The 2004 **Querciabella normale** has beautiful red cherry fruit and subtle oak with lively acidity. How nice to see a winemaker craft a modern style Chianti Classico without going overboard on extract or oak!

Also impressive were the traditional 2001 Riserva from **Badia a Coltibuono** as well as the 2003 *normale* from **Castello di Lucignano** with subtle oak and a rich mid-palate as well as the 2003 regular bottling from **Castello di Cacchiano**, an estate that has made great improvements with its red wines. Also, the Vin Santo, always first-rate here is more elegant with the 1999 bottling. There are still the sumptuous apricot and honeyed flavors, but they are not as lush and as heavy as in some years. Owner Giovanni Ricasoli-Firidolfi told me that local restaurant owners had requested a lighter, subtler Vin Santo and he has delivered.

2001 was a superb year for Brunello di Montalcino, and I had the chance to sample a few dozen at the fair. I'll report on this category as a whole later this year, but for now the finest examples of Brunello from 2001 I sampled were the

classically styled **Poggio Antico**, the ripe, more modern, but beautifully balanced **Casanuova delle Cerbaie** and the elegant, traditionally made bottlings from **Col d'Orcia**, **Innocenti** and **Il Poggione**. This last estate has always been one of my favorite estates in Montalcino and the wines from the last few vintages (especially 1999 and 2001) have been outstanding. There are no barriques used to age the Brunello here, only large oak barrels and there is great purity of fruit, silky tannins and beautiful structure. Buy a bottle of the 2001 Il Poggione when it is released later this year and cellar it for 12-15 years. Also buy a bottle of their excellent 2004 Rosso di Montalcino to enjoy now; this is one of the finest examples of Rosso di Montalcino you will find! Bolgheri on Tuscany's west coast is the home to several small estates turning out some very intriguing wines. **Batzella** showed a 2005 Bolgheri Bianco made from Viognier and Sauvignon Blanc that had lovely pineapple and grapefruit flavors and lively acidity. Also noteworthy was their 2004 "Pean" Bolgheri Rosso, a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc that offered bright fruit and round tannins.

A wonderful estate from Bolgheri that few people know about is **Guado al Melo**, owned by Michele Scienza and planted to 27 acres of grapes. Though only producing wines since the 2000 vintage, this is rapidly becoming one of Bolgheri's most exacting producers. The 2003 Bolgheri Rosso, a Cabernet Sauvignon/Merlot blend with plenty of ripe red fruit and stylish red spice with beautiful harmony throughout is typical of the quality at this estate.

The finest - and most intriguing - wine made here is Jassarte, a blend of 30 different grapes. Yes, you read that right - 30 different varieties! The blend is primarily Syrah, Alicante and Malvasia Nera, and the wine has rich cherry fruit with plenty of cinnamon and paprika notes. The finish has refined tannins, nice fruit persistence and the wine is structured for 10-12 years of aging. Named for the river that was thought to mark the end of the world in ancient times, Jassarte is a unique wine and one that was a fine way for me to finish my tour of Italian viticulture at this year's Vintaly.

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To contact Tom Hyland, visit his Website at <http://www.northshorewine.com> or write him at tnapawine@aol.com

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