

The Italian revolution



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FRIENDS, COUNTRYMEN AND WINE DRINKERS, BRUSH up on your Italian. Change is afoot in our glasses and vineyards. The next wave of wines will have more than a hint of 'la dolce vita' with new tastes arriving, from arneis to zibibbo.

Imported Italian wines had a dismal start in Australia before the 1980s and Italian restaurants were the landing zone. Even now, very little of the best of Italian wine makes it to Australia. However, there has been a steady increase in the quality of Australian-made wines from Italian varieties. Internationally, the rapid growth of the sparkling variety Prosecco means the Europeans already see it being in global shortage next year.

Change happens in every industry but with wine, unlike fashion, it takes more than a season to effect. Changing a vineyard is positively glacial; new varieties need 15 years from planting to achieve reliable wine quality. The increasing availability of Italian varieties on wine lists is being driven by consumers who expect more choice, new winemaking styles, and new varieties, so they can drink different wines to their parents. The degree of Italian influence to the wines we drink in the future will be the result of demand driven by this generation. They may well be parents themselves, however, before the full impact of their current purchase decisions is felt.

The first and most obvious signs of change are in the names of wines found in inner city wine bars and restaurants. More subtle changes will be seen in the blends and descriptions of the techniques used to produce them. Terms such as ripasso, a form of fermentation with partially dried red grapes, will become common, as will the idea of blending four varieties to create new white styles.

According to Wine Business Solutions owner Peter McAtamney, sangiovese has seen a dramatic increase in the share of red wine listings in restaurants and bars, accounting for 5.6 per cent of red wine listings, up from 3 per cent in 2014. Barbera has also experienced growth in on-premise listings, albeit from a very low base, up from 0.4 per cent in 2014 to 1 per cent this year. Sangiovese is becoming a "mainstream variety based on share of listings" in the on-premise sector.

Sommeliers and their customers are looking for varieties that offer interest to their wine lists via medium bodied wines with fresh flavours and firmer tannin structures that better complement food. This heralds change on an epic scale as the Australian wine industry grapples with the enormous diversity

and opportunity in wine varieties and styles that Italy possesses.

Italy was once called Enotria, the land of the vine, and is home to unique varieties of whites that are medium bodied and low in aroma. Reds are drier in tannins and have savoury, less overt sweet fruit flavours that prefer very low levels of new oak and tannins.

Italy now rivals France as a source of wine. It might not be as fine but it is certainly as interesting. This is not a rejection of France but a reappraisal of Italy, which missed the first wave of critical awareness when wine reputations were formed because it was a politically fragmented and chaotic nation, geographically more isolated from the English market than France.

Get ready for a new deck of varietal names including aglianico, rondinella, corvina, barbera, sangiovese, lagrein, primitivo (or zinfandel), and sagrantino, as we raid Italy from north to south for varieties suited to our conditions. White wine will see a smaller set of varietal players as vermentino, verduzzo, fiano, Greco di Tufo and arneis take the stand in the court of public opinion. Pinot grigio is already accepted.

White wine will change in other more subtle ways as Italian wine thinking influences our wine makers via blending of multiple varieties. This idea has sway in Australia because of the complex, deeply textured, almost red wine mouth feel, and their ability to mature makes them interesting, food friendly styles.

Pockets of Italian varieties exist across NSW such as at Windowrie in Cowra, and the Freeman family at Hilltops. The Freemans led the industry by planting the varieties corvina and rondinella, which are the backbone of Italy's Valpolicella wine region.

Orange has something special with Tallavera Grove and its Carillion Vineyard growing a delicious white verduzzo and aglianico; Angullong provides consistently good and widely available mid-priced barbera and sangiovese.

The Mudgee region has the state's greatest diversity of Italian varieties, having grown sangiovese and barbera for decades. Di Lusso has the most extensive range I have seen at one cellar door, and Eloquesta has a very funky and successful dry red made from a blend of several vintages called "A Boy with Fruit No 1".

Notable contributions from the Southern Highlands are Tertini's arneis and nebbiolo (the nebbiolo is made from fruit grown in Hilltops). The alert reader will realise that I had not yet mentioned nebbiolo. That's because it is significant enough to be worth a column of its own at a later date. **HL**

top drops



Cherry Tree Hill 2014 Riesling (\$35, 92/100)

Fresh ripe limes and bath powder in varietal fresh aromas. In the mouth, the wine displays bright strong flavours and vibrant acidity; a flowery rose potpourri that is fresh with the ripe fruit. A lovely evolution through talc, flowers and citrus in the palate, today and for the next five years.



Zonte's Footstep 2012 Canto Di Lago Sangiovese Barbera (\$25, 93/100)

A very exciting blend in the context of regional development with dark cherry and kirsch aromas. A front palate of maraschino and plenty of drink-now sweet fruit. A full body and soft tannins mean it is a great style; more Italian tannin and acid elements keep the finish fresh.



Tertini Wines 2014 Private Cellar Collection Lagrein (\$40, 92/100)

This is the third vintage, and the aromas are complex, from berry, raspberry and celery stalk to savoury smoked meats and black pepper. In the mouth, the fruit impacts with juicy blueberry fruits. Flavours evolve from fresh berries to roast meat, black pepper and barbecue smoke.



Angullong 2014 Fossil Hill Vermentino (\$22, 90/100)

Fish and chips has a new partner. Funky yeast infused pear and apple aromas lead to a creamy round palate. The wine is slick textured with subtle tropical flavours, a great take on the variety. Full of flavour, this aromatic Italian variety tastes of mixed fruits with an appealing lusciousness.



Centennial Vineyards 2014 Bong Bong Quattro Bianco (\$19, 89/100)

An unusual combination of sauvignon blanc, pinot grigio, chardonnay and arneis leads to a pretty floral talc and rose floral with a banana fragrance and apple spice and cinnamon. Middle palate weight and freshness and a touch of dryness. Good summer quaffing wine for hot days.



Castagna 2012 Un Segreto Sangiovese Syrah (\$75, 95/100)

The beauty of this wine is the ripe black, creamy, dark berry, peppery charcuterie spice complexity of aromas; the finest tannin structure adds a light bodied, creamy texture to the ripe dark berry fruit. Finishes with a peppery, subtle tannin acid balance that is aromatic, savoury, refreshing and moreish.

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