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Journal

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URL: <http://www.abqjournal.com/food/09101555food07-09-08.htm>

Wednesday, July 09, 2008

## Italian labels tell grape tales

By [Jim Hammond](#)

*For the Journal*

Italy is the largest exporter of wines in the world, many with hard-to-decipher labels if you haven't studied Italian grapes and regions. Because Italy uses hundreds of different grapes in its wines, and grows them in a multitude of climatic regions, the work can be truly daunting.

To simplify: Three regions produce the majority of Italian wines found in New Mexico. These are Tuscany, Piedmont and Veneto. The focus here will be on the wines of Piedmont and Veneto.

(For my discussion of Tuscan wines last year, go to [ABQJournal.com](http://ABQJournal.com) and click on archives, the button under the search box. Home-delivery subscribers have free access to live stories; subscribers to the eJournal have unlimited access to the archive. Call 823-3490 for more information.)

In 1963, Italy formed the Denominazione di Origine Controllata (DOC) regulatory organization to ensure that high-quality wines were being exported. In 1980 it added the DOCG (G for Garantita) with more stringent requirements.

The only problem was that the rules each DOC/DOCG member adhered to severely limited experimentation and variability. The type and percentage of grapes, locations and aging were all prescribed, although some rules have since been relaxed. The majority of wines were labeled *Vino da Tavola* (VdT) or table wines. Just remember the acronyms; there's no test on this.

In 1992 a new designation, the *Indicazione Geografica Tipica* (IGT), was created. It allowed many other grapes and methods of vinification to be used to create wines, but still provided some assurance of quality. Some of the IGT wines, such as the Super Tuscans, can be of very high quality while others are mediocre. Without the DOC/DOCG seal of approval, buyers have to know their wines when buying IGT or VdT versions. Welcome to the new world of Italian wines.

Italian wine labels identify the grape, such as Barbera or Sangiovese, the village (Montalcino) or district (Chianti), or a proprietary name such as Tignanello or Sassicaia. Tignanello is a blend of Sangiovese, Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc, and Sassicaia is a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc. Both proprietary wines were defined as table wines since they used *Í* God forbid! *Í* French grapes.

Maybe that's why many wine shoppers just grab a bottle of Chianti and are

done with it.

### **The hills are alive**

Although 4,000 years of tradition are still well-represented in the modern world of winemaking, Italia has embraced modern technology, modern vinification procedures and updated vineyard management to produce some of the world's finest wines.

The Piedmont (Piemonte) region is the northernmost region on Italy's west side, and some grapes are literally growing up the slopes of the Alps. Piemonte literally means the "foot of the mountains." Most vineyards are planted on the surrounding hills and similar to wines of Burgundy. Piedmont is known for its many small, high-quality wineries.

The prominent grapes include Nebbiolo, Barbera and Dolcetto. Dolcetto, meaning little sweet one, is also a popular New Mexican grape, and Barbera, along with Sangiovese, is one of the great grapes of Italy. However, only the Nebbiolo grape is used to make Barolo and Barbaresco, Piedmont's most popular wines. The most significant white wine grapes are Cortese and Moscato, the latter being used to create the popular Moscato di Asti wines.

### **A big deal**

Italian wines are meant to be enjoyed with food. When was the last time you saw an Italian not enjoying food and wine together? My point exactly. While many other types of fare can pair with Italian wines, rotisserie-roasted chicken is heavenly when paired with Barbaresco. Barbaresco is made with Nebbiolo grapes, not Barbera as you might guess, and like Barolo should be aged several years.

Veneto is home to the Valpolicella grape, along with Bardolino and Soave. The Valpolicella's great expression is Amarone, Amar for bitter, and one (pronounced "oh-nay"), meaning big. Amarone doesn't have a bitter bone in its body if you ask me, but a big wine it is. After being picked, the grapes are laid out on straw mats until they become raisin-like. These produce big, lush, powerful wines of 14.5 percent alcohol or greater.

Trader Joe's once carried a Jeroboam (equivalent to four 750ml bottles) of Amarone for \$29, making it the best buy in the store. It sat next to single bottles priced at near \$16, but I seemed to be the major taker of the big boys. Either no one else did the math, or no one had any idea what to do with that much wine. I sure did. I'm sorry to report those big bargains are long gone.

So what do you do with a Jeroboam other than play biblical naming games (How many bottles do you get in a Nebuchadnezzar, and can you lift it? The answer is 20 bottles, and you better have a chain hoist.) I save my Jeroboams for birthdays and other significant events when eight or more friends show up (or six very enthusiastic wine lovers). The bottle does take a standard corkscrew, but I'd advise against a cheap one; it may break trying to pop the cork. It's also a good idea to keep your windows open when you do pull the cork.

Not long ago I brought a bottle to a dinner party. The hostess, Kim, was expecting me to provide the wine. When she met me at the door I kept the bottle hidden behind me. (I'm almost 6-foot-6. Trust me, I can hide it.) Her welcoming smile faded as I explained that I only brought one bottle. When I produced the Jeroboam her eyes popped almost as big as the Amarone. We did not drink it all, and I always wondered how Kim managed to fit the huge bottle in her fridge, but who says you can't have fun with wine Salute!

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