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Journal

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Vino Is Italian for Great Variety

By [Jim Hammond](#)

Of the Journal

Italian wines have long been popular in the United States, beginning with the ubiquitous wicker basket Chianti bottle (great for candle holders) and moving on to other signature Italian wines, such as Sangiovese and Barbera. The diversity of Italian wines means they go well with local dishes, partly because Italian cuisine, like that of New Mexico, can range from subtle to spicy.

The four broad regions in Italy include the northwest, which encompasses Milan; the northeast, ending at Venice; central Italy, which surrounds Florence; and the south, which includes Rome and the southern islands. Unlike the short list of grapes that predominates in France, the grape varieties of Italy number more than those of any other country; many of local origin have been cultivated for thousands of years. Italian varietals have been eulogized by poets, including Horace and Virgil, for more than 3,500 years, and this long history, too, is part of the romance of Italian wines.

Confusing profusion

The focus here will be on central Italy, the shank of the Italian boot, and more particularly, Tuscany, home to Chianti, the most recognized of Italy's wines. With so many varietals and methods, it would take months to adequately cover the entire country.

Central Italy has a rich diversity of grape and wine, unique terroirs, varying wine-making methodologies and many different ways to capture these on a wine label. In Italy, the two wine regulatory organizations define more than 40 Tuscan wines—I'll spare you the details.

In the past, I would have read the label, clueless, scanning through the name of the grape, type, vineyard and regulatory symbols, and finally at the very bottom noted with relief, "Oh, it's an Italian wine."

With the renaissance of Italian wines, it's even more confusing. Classic French grapes such as cabernet sauvignon, merlot, sauvignon blanc and chardonnay have been introduced to the Italian wine registry, now the largest in the world.

Modern winemaking techniques have been embraced and exist side-by-side with the more traditional methods. The number of world-class wines also has increased dramatically in all four regions, often reflected in the prices many command in today's market.

Although prices for a Tuscan red such as a Montepulciano or a Brunello di Montalcino easily pass the \$50 mark, other Tuscan reds are available in the \$10 to \$20 range.

A Tuscan treasure

Chianti has always been a staple of an Italian meal. Although I eschew the wicker basket varieties and trust none of you are contemplating the fava bean and carne repast Hannibal Lecter chose to go with his bottle, Chianti can be a fabulous accompaniment to many Italian dishes. My first eye-opening experience with Chianti was, of course, in Tuscany.

Traveling from hill to hill in that region— many of the towns are also hill forts— I stopped at the Ricasoli winery. There we tasted their Chianti Riservas; these were their top-drawer wines, and just as free to taste as the rest of the wine list. I was convinced they used a different grape than the typical table Chianti. Boy, was I in for an education!

Riservas, similar to their Spanish cousins, are laid down for a longer period and taken from selected grapes. This term and treatment are also commonly applied to domestic wines in the United States, but, alas, not with the regulatory clout that is applied in Europe. In Italy, they really mean it.

A class of its own

While it is best to start with a known reputable vintner such as Ricasoli, a Riserva is in a different class. To begin with, a Riserva must be laid down for two years, which already assumes the end product justifies the means of waiting that long. The primary grape is sangiovese; it must be at least 80 percent, but up to 100 percent. Riservas are heavy-bodied, lush and complex. They pair nicely with food— the richer the better.

Chianti is a defined regional product with strict rules about grape varieties and fermentation methodology as created in the 19th century by Baron Bettino Ricasoli after he exhaustively experimented with different blends.

Chianti Classico covers the more limited geographic area between Sienna and Florence with stricter rules in its production. Chianti Classico must be aged a minimum of 11 months, in contrast to the Riservas.

The Italians price their wines differently. Later, when a group of us had dinner in Florence, I found the same bottle of wine offered at a minuscule premium over the winery's prices. If only restaurants did that here to support the local wines.

The other major select wines of Tuscany include Carmignano, Vernaccia di San Gimignano, Brunello de Montalcino and Vino Nobile di Montepulciano, which the poet Francesco Redi honored in a poem ending "Montepulciano of every wine is king." This wine has a long reputation for excellence.

The grape used in Brunello de Montalcino is a clone of sangiovese with

smaller berries. It is more resistant to phylloxera, a scourge of many grape varieties. Winemaker Ferruccio Biondi-Santi did extensive plantings with the grape, and by 1888 was making world-class wines. He required the wine to age in oak casks for four years before bottling, followed by an additional stay in the bottle. By the way, five bottles of the 1888 vintage still exist, the wine perfectly preserved. I don't think you'll see that vintage listed on any restaurant's wine menu. Salut!

Jim Hammond has been exploring wines in North America, Europe, and Australia for more than 20 years. A published author, he includes information about wine in every book. You can reach Jim at jim@jim-hammond.com. TOP: Concord grape flatbread is delicious warm from the oven, scented with fennel, rosemary and orange peel.

AT RIGHT: Granita made with Concord grapes and Beaujolais is gorgeous, with big grape flavor and the kick of pepper and clove.

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