

The white icons of our times



Ian D'Agata draws together his top 20 white wines from Italy's treasure chest of varieties, terroirs and talented producers. A stellar array, many offer incredible value

ASK ANY WINE lover which might be the world's greatest dry white wines and Burgundy inevitably monopolises the conversation. But what about Italy, you ask? While the country's reds have recently become a matter of interest for collectors, its white-wine production has never really resonated with wine experts or collectors. Plus it's rare to taste older Italian whites unless you've purchased them on release and cellared them yourself.

This is a shame, since almost every Italian region now boasts at least one truly world-class dry white,

'Almost every Italian region has at least one world-class dry white, many of which age well'

many of which age well. What also appeals about Italian wines is that they offer aromas and flavours that are, for the most part, easy to grasp and not found in wines made elsewhere.

What follows is my introduction to Italy's greatest white wines, presented by estate and in alphabetical order. They have been chosen based on each wine's track record, its historical significance and its trueness to type – if a wine label reads 'Falanghina' or 'Pecorino', then the wine will be reminiscent of that variety, not of Chardonnay or Sauvignon Blanc.

Admittedly, other wines might have featured, especially one of Italy's world-class Sauvignon Blancs (for example, San Michele Appiano's Sanct Valentin, Terlano's Quarz or Venica & Venica's Ronco delle Mele), but they are not dissimilar to other Sauvignons made elsewhere. There's no such worry with Italian Chardonnays, most of which (with few exceptions) are overoaked or replicants of a New World style that doesn't speak of Italy at all.



Benanti, PietraMarina, Etna Bianco Superiore, Sicily

MANY EXPERTS CONSIDER Pietra Marina (the name was changed from Pietramarina to Pietra Marina in 2009) to be Italy's best white wine. It was the first to showcase the merits of the forgotten Carricante variety, an aloof sort of grape that grows best on the highest slopes of the Etna volcano (at a dizzying 900m above sea level). Imitation being the highest form of flattery, Sicilian heavyweights such as Planeta and Firriato are now also making Carricante wines, and Tuscans have bought into the action too. Not unlike a dry Riesling, Pietra Marina offers more in the way of yellow flowers, flinty minerals, dried herbs, fresh citrus and diesel fuel, but less of Riesling's juicy sweetness and tropical fruit notes. Lack of oak ensures the aromatic bonanza reaches your tastebuds blessedly unadulterated.

First vintage 1991 (first sold in 1995); the 1991, 1992, 1993 and 1994 vintages were sold under the estate's old name, Tenuta di Castiglione, later changed to Benanti

Production 9,000 bottles/year

Best recent vintages 2009 (by far); if you can find them, 1997, 1999, 2001, 2005

Current release 2010, £30.18, **Exel Wines**

Other wines of note Tenuta delle Terre Nere, Cuvée delle Vigne Niche, Etna Bianco, Sicily

Pieropan, Calvarino, Soave, Veneto

LEONILDO PIEROPAN FIRST bottled this single-vineyard Soave in 1971, but the Pieropan family has been making wines in Soave since the 1860s, so it's no surprise that they're good at it. A blend of 70% Garganega (which provides structure and acidity) and 30% Trebbiano di Soave (providing perfume), this sees no oak and offers a smorgasbord of white flower, apricot, marzipan and mineral notes. After Valentini's Trebbiano d'Abruzzo, this is Italy's most ageworthy white wine: taste the 1992 (a rather miserable year) and you'll realise the talent

that Pieropan, one of the nicest people in all Italian wine, is blessed with. The 1979, tasted in 1983, is the first wine that showed me Italy could make great whites.

First vintage 1971

Production about 48,000 bottles/year

Best recent vintages 2006, 2010, 2011; but if you can find them, don't miss out on the three best vintages ever: 1978, 1985, 1997

Current release 2012, £18-£25; **Widely available**

via its UK agent,

Liberty Wines

Other wines of note

Gini, Soave Classico Salvarenza Vecchievigne, Veneto; Pra', Soave Classico Staforte, Veneto



Tiefenbrunner, Feldmarschall von Fenner, Alto Adige

ANYONE WHO THINKS that Müller Thurgau cannot deliver a world-class wine is either a wine snob or just hasn't tasted a good one.

Tiefenbrunner's Feldmarschall will show them what they're missing. There's about 500 vines of Kerner peppered in between the 22,000+ vines of Müller Thurgau, but let's not quibble. The vineyard, planted on a calcareous-clay plateau situated at roughly

1,000m above sea level, helps explain the wine's laser-like acidity, purity and freshness. Besides one of the world's truly magnificent labels, Feldmarschall offers a plethora of spicy jasmine, sage and white stone fruit notes, complicated by hints of liquid slate, and ages splendidly. About 30% of the total volume ages in large, used oak casks. The 1979 was one of the greatest white wines ever made in Italy (I mourned the replanting of the vines in the 1980s) but recent vintages have also been outstanding.

First vintage 1974

Production about 18,000 bottles/year

Best vintages both 1985 and 1979 were stellar

Current release 2013; 2011: £21.55-£27.10, **Armit Wines,**

Exel Wines, Hedonism Wines

Other wines of note

both from Valle Isarco, Alto Adige: Köfererhof, Müller Thurgau; Manni Nossing, Müller Thurgau Sass Rigais ➤



Sartarelli, Balciana, Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi, Marche

THE SINGLE-VINEYARD BALCIANA is a wine that transcends Verdicchio, taking the variety boldly where it has never gone before. Made in specific years only when late harvesting is possible (Balciana wasn't made in 2002, 2005, 2006), the wine often has a hint of noble rot. It's velvety and honeyed, and not unlike a great Alsatian white. Aromas and flavours of tropical fruit and sweet spices are lifted by lively acidity. A few vintages have been almost off-dry, but recent versions are fresher and less opulent than those of a decade ago. I'm still not sure which I like best, so I drink them all any chance I get.

First vintage 1971

Production about 10,000-15,000 bottles/year

Best recent vintages 2008, 2001

Current release 2011, £30, **James Nicholson**

Other wines of note there are no other producers



'Feldmarschall's Müller Thurgau offers spicy jasmine, sage and white stone fruits, and ages splendidly'