



Introduction to Italy

After France, Italy is one of the most important wine regions of the world. Although it comes third in the rankings for area covered by vines, it is second for output. This is one country which is able to produce wine from its most northerly point, all the way down to its most southerly: Piemonte to Sicily.

This gives a variety of climates and geogrpahy, enabling the whole spectrum of wines, from dry to sweet, to be made. Wines in the north tend to be light-bodied with high acidity; wines in the south are fuller-bodied, fruit-driven wines.

Note: "Classico" on the label refers to the 'traditional' or 'original' part of the region, and differentiates itself from other wines of similar names. For example, there are 8 Chianti regions (all next to each other in Tuscany). Each one has a different name, such as "Chianti Ruffina", but it is "Chianti Classico" that was the original Chianti region. "Classico" does not mean that the wine is necessarily any better though.

Piemonte

Barolo and Barberesco are the two big names here. Both wines are made solely from Nebbiolo grape. Barolo produces big, punchy fruity reds with high tannins, acidity and alcohol. These wines need to be aged, and the best ones compete with Bordeaux in their quality (and price). With age, the strawberry flavours will develop other flavours such as mushrooms, leather and tar. Barbaresco is similar to Barolo, but is less 'full-on'. As will all wine regions, there are many wines which use the name of Barolo and Barbaresco without delivering the quality that their name was built on. The Sampler sell some cracking wines: see their [Piemonte selection](#) .

Piemonte is in the north-west of Italy and, although warm in summer, benefits from temperature fluctuations of the seasons (a good factor for grape growing).

Other wines worth looking out for are Barbera d'Alba and Barbera d'Asti. These two wines are both made from the Barbera grape (coming from around the towns of Alba and Asti) and offer quality red wines with good acidity, but low tannin. These wines are best consumed young. Try [M&S Barbera d'Asti](#)

Tuscany & Central Italy

Tuscany is probably the most famous wine region of Italy, and is the home of Chianti. There are 8 separate Chianti regions: the oldest is Chianti Classico, but others include Chianti Rufina and Chianti Colli Senesi. These wines must be made predominantly from the Sangiovese grape (sometimes you'll get 100% Sangiovese) and are high in acidity and tannin, with medium body. You'll get a flavour of sour cherries (and sometimes tea), with a dusty/earthy character. These are a perfect accompaniments to tomato-based foods. Most Chianti is made for early drinking; however, wines marked "Riserva" will have been aged for 2 years already but need further ageing. Try [Chianti Classico Poggerino \(2007\)](#) .

Brunello di Montalcino is another quality wine, made from 100% Sangiovese grapes. This wine benefits from ageing and should be decanted a good few hours before drinking to allow the full flavours and aromas to develop. By law, this wine must have been aged for a minimum of 4 years before it is sold.

Vino Nobile di Montepulciano is another Tuscan wine which is similar to Chianti, but is fuller and richer (although lacks some of the finesse that good Chiantis have). This wine is from the town of Montepulciano: it must not be mistaken for Montepulciano d'Abruzzo which is made from the Montepulciano grape and comes from the region of Abruzzo (in eastern Italy).

What is a Super-Tuscan? The classification system for wines in Italy (like France's Appellation Controllee system) dictates grape varieties, production methods, volumes , etc. However, a group of winemakers wanted to make quality wines outside these limitations: and produced some of the best wines in Italy! However, these wines aren't allowed the top classifications of DOCG or DOC because they do not follow the rules set by the establishment. Some of these, for example Sassicaia, now have a cult following and command very high prices.

Umbria is a particular favourite region of mine. It is slap-bang in the middle of Italy, between Florence and Rome, and is a true farming region. Being next to Tuscany, much of the winemaking follows their Sangiovese-based wines, without the accompanying price. Some

interesting whites are also produced. I have yet to find quality Umbrian wines in Britain, so please let me know if you find any.

Northeast Italy

Eastern Italy holds a variety of wines: Valpolicella, Bardolino, Prosecco, Soave, etc. Most of these are lighter than the rest of Italy, with many whites and lighter reds. However, the acidity in these wines is still high. Bad Soave reminds me of water, but good examples are worth drinking.

Valpolicella (made from the Corvina grape) is made in a few styles: basic Valpolicella is light and fruity, and should be consumed young. It has high acidity so is a great match with spicy tomato meatballs, pizza and similar dishes. Valpolicella "Ripasso" means that the wine will have a bit higher alcohol, tannins, concentration and complexity.

Valpolicella's more respected brother is Amarone. Also made from the Corvina grape, this wine is produced by drying the grapes after picking. This causes the grapes to shrivel up and concentrates their flavours. What results is a powerful, red wine with flavours of chocolate, leather and rum. Some, newer style Amarones, have sour cherry flavours, but are still full-bodied. Although it is rare to find a cheap Amarone, be careful of ones that are around the £10 mark. These often piggy-back off the good name of Amarone, without offering you its class. Try [Allegrini Amarone classico \(2004\) from The Sampler](#) .

Soave is a hugely popular wine, but has lost some of its market share to Pinot Grigio. Thankfully, the mass-produced, tasteless Pinot Grigios of the 1990s have become less common. As Andrew Shaw says, "Pinot Grigio has lost its insipid and fruitless reputation...". Soave's strength used to be that it was an easy-drinking, simple wine but has recently pulled its socks up. The best wines are from the "Soave Classico" region and have a distinctively grapey flavour (yes, they actually taste of grapes which is rarer than you'd think!) with some additional aromas of flowers. Cheaper versions are still pretty plain, neutral glugging wine.

Southern Italy

Below Tuscany is Rome: the home of many white wines. Probably the most well-known is the

neutral Frascati. These had their heyday in the 80s (the Pinot Grigio of its time), and has a fresh, clean, neutral taste that can be a good match with delicate seafood.

Puglia (on the eastern coast) is a hot climate which also seems to be a supermarket favourite at the moment. The possible reason for its popularity is that it has a hot climate which generates a large volume of wine at a pretty basic level. Much of these are produced using well-known 'French' varieties but there are moves to use grapes that are native to the region, such as Primitivo. Unfortunately, although I have no doubt that good wines are made here, I think that most of the wine that is finding its way onto our shelves is over-rated. If you want to try some Puglian wine, I suggest that you buy it from an independent wine shop or specialist dealer (such as Majestic); steer clear of the supermarkets.

Right at the bottom of Italy, is Sicily. This is the largest region in Italy and has the most vines too. It is hot and produces some great wines – especially from the local Nero d'Avola grape (and other 'International' varieties like Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot). The quality of wines in the region do vary (as with every other region) and Sicily has its own quality award which is symbolized by a 'Q' on the label. Try [Milani Nero d'Avola Sicilia \(2008\) from Naked Wines](#) .