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Uncorked

Italy's fairer grapes

Red varieties get all the love, but whites make stellar wines too

By Bill St. John, Special to Tribune Newspapers

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Victor Hazan once told me, "The duty of wine is to be red," while sipping some of the same. Hazan, author of "Italian Wine," is famously known as the husband (and oft translator) of Marcella Hazan, the noted cookbook writer and cooking teacher.

Clearly, for Hazan, the duty of Italian wine especially is to be red.

In the U.S., we tend to share Hazan's dismissal of Italian white wines in favor of those made from the "nobler" grapes sangiovese, say, or nebbiolo.

We lionize Chianti, Brunello, Barolo and amarone, and purchase little but red from Sicily or Puglia, the latter two our favorite go-to best-buy Italian red wine regions.

But Italian white wines have advanced so greatly in the last 20 years that this dismissal of them is both sad and mistaken. This is especially true in the north of the country, an area felicitous for growing white wine grapes amid its cool climate and diversity of mineral-rich soils.


For example, the northern region of Alto Adige produces — at just less than 99 percent of all wine from there — the highest percentage of DOC wine (or highest quality designation) of all of Italy's 20 winemaking areas. Like many northern climes, it is surprisingly sunny (more than 300 days a year), making for extended growing seasons and, hence, development of greater flavor in its grapes.

Here is a lexicon of sorts of Italian white wine grapes, some unfamiliar, made into stellar wine in the north, as well as recommendations for wines made from each.

White grapes of the north

Pinot grigio: The great kickball of the north. Overcropped, crudely made (and often wildly expensive for what little it offers), tsunamis of pinot grigio wash over our meals to ill effect. In its stead, I often serve Evian for its greater flavor. But good pinot grigio does exist, if made by those who care. It's all aromas and flavors of green apple, just-ripe pear and minerals, sometimes hinting at spice, with whip-

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Under 18

18-49

50+

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snap acidity to cleanse the palate.

2009 Elena Walch Pinot Grigio Castel Ringberg, Alto Adige: Mix sliced Granny Smiths with honey, wrap in bracing acidity, and here's your wine; enjoy with any fish prep. \$24

Pinot bianco: Evolves from the same family pinot. It has the same apple-y notes as pinot grigio (more Golden than Granny), but sports a rounder, softer texture.

2009 Alois Lageder Pinot Bianco Dolomiti: Fresh and clean, with precise flavors of pear and Honeycrisp apple; happy hints of lemon peel; enjoy as an aperitif or with smoked salmon. \$14

Sauvignon blanc: Has been around the north of Italy since its introduction from France in the late 1800s. In good examples it turns out as it does in the Loire, with citrus notes and an intensity of aroma and flavor. In Italy it is often called, simply, "sauvignon."

2010 Tiefenbrunner Sauvignon Kirchleiten Alto Adige: From exceedingly lofty and cool vineyards; nearly like freshly squeezed grapefruit juice; taut, lively acidity; have with asparagus (always difficult for wine) or any goat cheese. \$30

Gewurztraminer: Although commonly associated with France's Alsace, it actually originated in Italy's north (from around the town of Tramin, hence the name, the "aromatic grape of Tramin"). Here, it is less fulsome than in Alsace, but certainly with its distinctive varietal character.

2009 Tramin Cellars Gewurztraminer Nussbaumer Alto Adige: A wow of a wine for its whispering aromas and juicy tastes of litchi, orange peel and rosewater; good length and viscosity, closing zestily; would be delicious with Asian cooking. \$40

Chardonnay: Like pinot grigio, many examples of chardonnay from the north fail to measure up to the grape's potential for raw deliciousness (and for the same reason: overcropping with the aim of mass production). But, again, from skillful and conscientious producers, it can shine.

2009 Sant'Elena Chardonnay Venezia-Giulia: A Macon-Villages style but from Italy's north, for its white peach and pear aromas and flavors, lack of oak intrusion, and snappy acidity; seafood, here we come. \$20

Moscato: Piedmont's most widely planted wine grape isn't red; it's white. The moscato grown in the north generally goes into sparkling or frizzante (slightly sparkling), off-dry or sometimes sweet wine. It's on all-fours delicious, a perfect aperitif.

2010 Cascinetta Vietti Moscato d'Asti Piedmont: Liquid candy, with chin-dripping tastes of orange sorbet, litchi, lemon rind and a hint of ginger; enjoy with cakes, other pastries or as a start to any meal. \$15

Garganega: You won't see this grape variety on a label of wine from Italy's northern region of the Veneto, second only to Alto Adige in DOC wines. But it is the mainstay of the very familiar Soave, a crisp white also much abused by quick-buck winemakers. Happily, not by all.

2009 Inama Soave Classico Veneto: Really nice job in crisp, minerally, dry white; open flavors of nectarine and lemon curd; a round, almost chewy texture; enjoy with white meats or soft cheeses. \$18

If your wine store does not carry these wines, ask for one similar in style and price.

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