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Leil Cardoza: Red and white wines of northern Italy have European influences

BY LEIL CARDOZA

I recently attended a tasting of wine from Italy's Piedmont and Trentino-Alto Adige regions.

When we think of Italy, we think of the history dating back to Ancient Rome, and assume that the whole country has the same long history. But modern Italy as we know it has existed for only about 150 years.

Piedmont and Trentino-Alto Adige both border other European nations, and one can clearly see the influence of Austrian culture in northeastern Trentino-Alto Adige, and of French culture in northwestern Piedmont.

Trentino-Alto Adige, best-known for white wines, was one of the biggest sources of the relatively uninteresting bulk Pinot Grigios that you may have been subjected to if you were of drinking age in the 1960s and '70s.

Alois Lageder was a leader in changing the status quo in this region, by reducing vine yields and producing wines of more finesse and complexity. We tasted two wines from this winery.

The 2010 Alois Lageder Pinot Grigio (\$16) showed mostly bright citrus fruit in the nose, with a little crisp green apple and minerality. In the mouth, it's bright and crisp, with pleasantly surprising richness. It might be more than you're used to spending on Pinot Grigio, but it is well worth the price.

As much as I liked the Pinot Grigio, I liked the 2010 Alois Lageder Pinot Blanc even more, which is great for me, because it costs about a buck less.

The nose was a bit richer, with a combination of fresh and baked apple, pear, more pronounced minerality and a very pretty floral character. The palate was similar, with juicy richness.

Moving west to Piedmont, we tasted through the wines of Vietti, located in Barolo, where, in the middle of the 20th century, with most of Italy still recovering from Fascist rule, Alfredo Currado wed Luciana Vietti and took over as winemaker for the Vietti family estate.

Currado championed the production of the local white variety Arneis, which had been largely overlooked by winemakers. As it turned out, this had more to do with overproduction than an inherent inferiority of the grape. When yields are kept respectably low, Arneis can produce beautiful wines.

We tasted the 2010 Vietti Roero Arneis (just under \$25). It was compelling, with more mineral and salinity up front on the nose, giving way to character of orange marmalade and tarragon.

I didn't taste all the Barolos at this tasting but did taste four outstanding reds.

First were the 2008 Dolcetto and 2008 Barbera, which retail at about \$20. I preferred the Dolcetto, which showed impressive complexity and structure.

The 2008 Vietti Perbacco Nebbiolo Langhe retails for about \$23. Though the grapes for this wine are all from the Barolo region, it's more affordable and more approachable: savory herbs, black pepper and ripe plum on the nose, nice balance in the mouth.

This was followed by the 2007 Vietti Barolo Castiglione. This is a wine I'd be more likely to cellar for several years. The nose was full of molasses, licorice, plum, blackberry and floral aromas. You could drink this now, but I expect it will become more integrated and elegant in the next decade.

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