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Let bar owner share memories of flavor-rich Italian regions

By Jack Berninger

Julia Battaglini recently took a trip back to her fraternal family's native land, Italy, the world's largest producer of wine.

Battaglini, owner of River City Cellars and Secco Wine Bar in Richmond's Carytown, didn't need a refresher course on wine. She's on top of her game in that area. But the visit did reinforce a thought.

"I cannot stress the significance of meeting the families who grow the grapes and make the wine I've sold for 15 years and pour into a glass every day, of walking around the vines, seeing the hillsides and cellars in person rather than on a map or a website," she said. "Nothing reaffirms my decision to sell small-production ... wines of integrity like this kind of a personal visit."

Battaglini's nine-day trip took her to three of Italy's 20 wine regions: Piedmont in the northwest, and Umbria and Tuscany in central Italy.

So how about a primer on the three regions?

"Piedmont is most famous for its glorious, big, age-worthy reds: Barolo and Barbaresco, made from the noble nebbiolo grape. But delightful whites like arneis and erbaluce, along with lighter or at least readier-drinking reds such as dolcetto and barbera, round out the picture. The food here is rich, often featuring meat/game, mushrooms and truffles, chestnuts when in season, aged cow's milk cheeses, heavy sauces and long, slow preparations," Battaglini says.

"Tuscany, land of the Etruscans and specifically Chianti, is all about the ancient red sangiovese. Sangiovese can be innocuous or sublime, fruity or serious, young and stainless steel finished or aged in wood. Higher in acid and softer in tannins than wines of the north, it is a perfect match for the region's traditional fare of pastas, tomato and olive oil based sauces, grilled vegetables, semi-cured sheep's milk cheeses and addictive cinghiale (wild boar salami).

"Umbria is best known for its olive oil, and when driving through the region, it seems olive trees outnumber vines. The food is simple with an emphasis on green vegetables and cured meats, with mild sheep's milk cheeses served alongside unsalted bread. While many delicious wines are produced here,

most notably the whites of Orvieto, the most distinguished is the sagrantino of Montefalco. It's not a wine one readily finds in the States. This powerful, long-aging red from notoriously low-yielding vines is not inexpensive but worth seeking out. Only in the past few decades has sagrantino gone from being primarily grown for passito (semi-dried grapes, vinified sweet) dessert wines to the dry, rich, tannic, oak-aged red made today."

To that we say, salute!

Five wines to try

River City Cellars' Julia Battaglini recommends five wines from Italy. Prices are by the glass at Secco Wine Bar, retail at adjacent River City Cellars.

Vietti 2010 Roero Arneis (Piedmont), \$9 glass/\$25 retail: (Winemaker's notes) Pale sunshine yellow color with fresh floral, citrus and melon aromas with hints of almonds.

Roagna 2009 Dolcetto d'Alba (Piedmont), \$8 glass/\$22 retail: (Secco notes) Organic. Sour cherry and licorice notes dominate in this bright, complex, fragrant red aged in Slovenian oak.

Vietti 2009 Barbera d'Asti "Tre Vigne" (Piedmont), \$7 glass/\$20 retail: (Winemaker's notes) Ruby purple color with ripe red cherry aromas with hints of mineral and vanilla. A dry, medium-bodied red wine with refreshing acidity, making it perfect to pair with food.

Bea 2005 Montefalco Rosso "San Valentino" (Umbria), \$55 retail/\$65 by the bottle at Secco: (Secco notes) 70 percent sangiovese, 15 percent montepulciano d'abruzzo, 15 percent sagrantino. Notes of dried fruits, pit fruits, smoke, coffee, leather and violets. Powerful but full of grace and nuance.

2003 Poppiano Vin Santo della Torre Grande (Tuscany), \$7 glass/\$21 retail: (Winemaker's notes) Grapes are dried until they reach optimal sugar concentration, then aged in traditional small chestnut and oak barrels in the main tower of the castle. Nose is ample and aromatic, with notes of hazelnuts, almonds and dried figs.

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