

Portland a fine place in U.S. to find Italian vinos



KATHERINE COLE

WINE NOTES

Ever since I began covering wine for The Oregonian in 2002, I've heard the same statement over and over: "Portland may be a smallish town, but it's a huge Italian wine market."

Though it's difficult to prove the truth of such a statement — there's no single repository of statistics on what sorts of wines people drink here — anecdotal evidence has affirmed for me, over the years, that this is fact. We may be the 29th most populous metropolis in the U.S., but when I visit other cities, I'm generally disappointed to find fewer Italian

offerings, from older vintages, on store shelves.

Here, in restaurants and bottle shops, there is always something new and obscure from Italy. Whether it's a simple, juicy red made from the indigenous Sicilian grape pericono or a ponderous fumin from the Valle d'Aoste, drinking in Portland is like a passport to the proverbial boot.

"When you travel around the USA and visit the most important wine shops in our major cities, even in New York City, no one outdoes Portland for a bright, dynamic and impressive selection," affirms Ed Paladino, co-owner of E&R Wine Shop. "This observation has been made over and over by dozens of visiting Italian winemakers at our shop. Short of visiting Italy for a four- or five-month wine tour, shopping for Italian wine in Portland is about as good as it gets."

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But why should this be? We don't, after all, boast a notably large Italian American population. There is no Little Italy in Stumptown.

Wine authority Matt

Kramer attributes the phenomenon to an "ecology of factors," from our weather (Piedmont-like) to our frugality (legendary — and Italian wines have always offered tremendous bang-for-the-buck) to a tradition of Italo-crazy importers, restaurateurs and retailers, all converting the uninitiated to the merits of Italian wine.

I decided to sit down and map out all the contributing factors to our wealth of Italian vino. With apologies to the many boosters whose stories didn't fit in my limited space, here's a quick historical overview of just how the City of Roses came to be the City of Barolo.



The Italian wine scene in Portland, 1920-present

1920: Lorenzo Giusti, born in Lucca, Italy, founds the New Italian Importing Co. With the end of Prohibition in 1933, Giusti gets into the wholesale beverage business.

1929: Jim Wizer opens the first Wizer's Fine Foods, surviving the Depression by carrying a variety of domestic canned foods in addition to exotic imports like olive oil. In a later incarnation as Wizer's Oswego Foods, the store's ample wine cellar will become a nationally recognized repository of Barolo and Barbaresco; its Portland counterpart, Strohecker's, will build an equally impressive wine cellar.

1952: The Oregonian reports that the "first tank truckload of wine transported to Oregon" arrives at New Italian Importing Co. "Large shipments of the beverage hitherto have all been by rail tank car." Manager Al Giusti, Lorenzo's son, transfers the bulk wine to 50-gallon oak barrels, where they age at his warehouse before hitting the market.

1968: Noted horticulturist John Henry of Brooks changes careers at age 60 after 35 years of traveling Europe in search of rhododendrons (and bringing in some wines on the side, with the help of Portland's Spear Beverage Co.). Building upon relationships forged with prominent garden-and-vineyard-owning families like the Rothschilds, he opens a new European wine import business called The John Henry Wine Co.

1969: A Portland restaurateur named Guss Dussin



Dussin

launches the first Old Spaghetti Factory, introducing Italian cuisine to value-conscious families. The concept later becomes a national chain.

1971: Genoa opens on Southeast Belmont Street. Portlandians learn that Italian cuisine can be serious — seven courses, two-plus hours, stumble-out-the-door serious.

1972: Karen and Howard Hinsdale buy their friend John Henry's business, building Henry-Hinsdale into a statewide wholesaler of fine wines and working with a new generation of Italian exporters to bring boutique producers — like Jermann, Marcarini and Monteverdine — into the United States.

1973: Twenty-seven-year-old Greg Lemma, grandson of a pre-Prohibition Portland winemaker, opens Lemma Wine Co., a wholesaler and importer with an emphasis on Italian wines and direct imports from Europe. Today, Lemma remains the only U.S. wholesaler to direct-import the sought-after Barolos of Poderi Aldo Conterno, bringing these wines to Portland at an unparalleled price.

1976: Willamette Week food editor Matt Kramer begins writing wine columns, discovering a love of Italian wines thanks to the selection available in Portland. He goes on to write numerous books, including "Making Sense of Italian Wine" and "A Passion for Piedmont," becomes a



Kramer

radio commentator, pens a popular Wine Spectator column, and reviews wine for The Oregonian from 1984 to 2011.

1978: An Italian specialty foods store and delicatessen called Martinotti's opens downtown. The store stocks not just San Marzano tomatoes, but also wines, including greats from Barolo and Barbaresco. Also in '78, Al Giusti imports the first Brunello di Montalcino, from Argiano, to Portland.

1980: Riccardo and Georgette Spaccarelli open Riccardo's Ristorante in Lake Oswego, where Riccardo introduces diners to unheard-of wines like Fontodi "Flaccianello" and Bruno Giacosa arneis.

1983: Peter de Garmo and Don Oman open a store on Southeast Hawthorne Boulevard called Pasta-works, where the pasta is made fresh, the cheeses and salumi are sliced before your eyes, and the Italian wine selection is unparalleled. Frequent Italian wine tastings and classes enlighten the public.



De Garmo

1990: A trio of brash young restaurateurs named Bruce Carey, Chris Israel and Monique Siu open Zefiro, a bastion of seasonal produce and Mediterranean fare. This stylish Nob Hill bistro brings the concrete floor and the chilled glass of Soave to the forefront of the Portland dining consciousness. And, two blocks from Zefiro, a new kind of wine shop called Liner & Elsen opens, offering temperature-controlled

wine lockers, introducing the concept of buying wine in futures, and inviting Italian vintners like Angelo Gaja and Alfredo Currado of Vietti into the store to pour their wines.

1993: Frustrated by a dearth of good Italian pastas, olive oils and cheeses in the Northwest, Zefiro sous chef Joe Guth and his wife, Karen, open Provvista Specialty Foods, a wholesale purveyor of truffles, capers, spices and other goodies imported from Italy and beyond to local restaurants and gourmet stores in Oregon, Washington and Alaska. Also in '93, Todd Bacon, who had been selling Italian wines at Wizer's throughout college, joins the Admiralty Beverage import-and-distribution firm (now part of Columbia Distributing). Bacon becomes the city's go-to guy for brunello from Caprili and Canalicchio di Sopra and chianti from Savignola Paolina.

1996: Caffè Mingo (famous for its frustrating no-reservations policy) opens its doors to long lines of customers on Northwest 21st Avenue. The same year, Marc and Debby Accuardi open Gino's Restaurant & Bar, bringing authentic Italian food and wine to denizens of Sellwood.

1998: Don Oman leaves Pastaworks to open an Italian-focused wine importer

and wholesaler called Casa Bruno. Today, restaurateurs and merchants turn to Casa Bruno for essential labels like Fèlsina, Podere Ruggeri Corsini and Ca del Bàio.

1999: E&R Wine Shop opens; two years later, Food & Wine magazine declares it one of the top five shops for Italian wine in the United States. Owners Ed Paladino and Richard Elden travel to Italy annually, visiting 30 to 35 wineries at a time. Also in 1999, Bob Liner and Matt Elsen sell their eponymous store and get into the import-and-wholesale business with Galaxy Wine Co., bringing in exciting wines from undiscovered regions like Sardinia and Le Marche. And Monique Siu and Kevin Gibson open Castagna, a restaurant on Hawthorne serving modern Italo-French fare and a killer list of imported wines.

2000: After more than three decades in the wine business, introducing Italian gems to the portfolios of large Seattle-and-Portland-based distributors, Gregory Zancanella, nephew of Al Giusti, starts his own import and wholesale firm, Zancanella Importing Co., focusing his catalog on Italian wines.

2000-12: I could devote a whole second column to the number of Italian-focused wine importers, restaurants and shops that have opened for business since the turn

of the century, and the continued demand for Italian wines which has allowed most of the businesses mentioned in this timeline to prosper and thrive for decades.

So there you have it: Our Italian roots go deep. Tonight, I'll be toasting Greg Zancanella's grand-uncle as I open a bottle of rare, interesting and fabulously priced Italian wine.

Follow Oregon's wine scene with Katherine Cole on Twitter at twitter.com/kcoleuncorked and on YouTube at youtube.com/kcoleuncorked. Email her at katherine@katherinecole.com.



BEN BRINK/THE OREGONIAN/1991

Chris Israel (left), Monique Sui and Bruce Carey helped boost the prominence of Italian cooking and wine appreciation with their acclaimed Northwest Portland restaurant Zefiro in the 1990s. All three continue to have tremendous influence on Portland's dining scene.



ROSS WILLIAM HAMILTON/THE OREGONIAN/1999

Frank Martinotti behind the deli counter at Martinotti's in downtown Portland in 1999. Martinotti's has been around since 1978, specializing in great Italian wines like Barbaresco.