

IN PRAISE OF ITALIAN REDS By Tim Teichgraeber

TASTING
NOTES

I manned Vannelli's Four Seasons, a respectable Grand Avenue St. Paul wine shop, through the 1990s. For a WASP kid from the south, it was a great experience. That place had a great neighborhood feel, from drop-in visits from firefighters, police, and other relatives to all of the great neighborhood wine aficionados. Folks from Mancini's Char House would stop in to pick up antipasti from the deli next door, and sometimes even the next-generation owners of Buon Giorno would stop by to shoot the breeze. I finally felt like I was part of a big, Catholic family. At the end of the day, Bob Vannelli would pop a bottle of chilled lambrusco, or something marginally fancier, and would sit down at the store's single laminate table with one or two of his brothers. At 8 p.m. we'd close the place down. Decent wine and first-class people, for sure.

I developed a genuine appreciation for Italian wines during those years. Italian reds intrigue me. As a California winemaker once explained to me, "Italian wines are weird. The reds are unusually high in acid, but the whites are fairly low in acid." Suddenly I understood why it took me a while to settle into a good chianti classico, but why I found it hard to put it down until the bottle was drained.

That, in a nutshell, is what's brilliant about Italian wines. They're genius with acidic or fatty food, for the same reason. They're naturally high in acidity, giving them a briskness that makes your mouth water, can cut through rich dishes, and never seems heavy.

RUFFINO 2007 CHIANTI CLASSICO RISERVA DUCALE (\$20): This Tuscan red isn't likely to blow you away, but you'll find yourself going back for more because of its terrific balance and piquant crispness. Not too heavy, with ripe black cherry and plum fruit and subtle anise, spice, and earth notes, classic chianti acidity and just a bit of peppery tannin.

VIETTI 2010 BARBERA D'ALBA TRE VIGNE (\$19): Luca Currado once confided to me that the price of this luscious, heart-melting red wine was kept intentionally low to expose new wine drinkers to his family's superb brand in the hope that enthusiasts would eventually be able to climb the ladder to Vietti's superlative barolos and barbarescos. First taste is free, as they say in crack-ridden neighborhoods.

MANINCOR 2009 LAGREIN ALTO ADIGE (\$25): Lagrein might not be for everyone, but it's an interesting red variety from the Alpine foothills of Alto Adige. It has a distinctive sweet-and-sour mulberry flavor that's a little less sophisticated than, say, a pinot noir. I'd call it generally medium-weight with some floral and herb notes. It can be very versatile with food.

NALS MARGREID 'GALEA' 2011 SCHIAVA, ALTO ADIGE (\$15): Think hard: When was the last time you actually drank a light-bodied red wine? It's easy to forget how lovely they can be. This remarkably simple, straightforward northern Italian red has pretty violet, strawberry, and red cherry notes that could fade fast, so enjoy it with a roast bird while it's still young.

MARZIANO ABBONA 2010 'PAPA CELSO' DOLCETTO DI DOGLIANI, PIEMONTE (\$22): The crème de la crème of Dolcetto comes from the town of Dogliani, where the Abbona family has been making wine for a long time. There's nothing I don't like about this old-vine Dolcetto, from the label to the tightly wound blueberry, blackberry, and licorice flavors.

