

# Grape Vine

*A monthly Internet newsletter about wine, wine buying, wine tasting, and wine collecting – V.Pina, Publisher – Vol. 1 Issue 3*

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This month in **Grape** Vine we'll introduce you to four new subjects related to wine. The first is a discussion of how wines are made as well as a bit on rosé wines (what are they?). The second subject is the issue of natural corks and why there has been a debate recently about their reliability. The third subject is a discussion about the "three-tiered" system of wine distribution in the U.S. Lastly, we will wrap up this month with a discussion of summer wines and food (what goes best with what?). As usual, we will start by introducing one of the most exciting and long-established wine-producing countries, Italy.

## Wine 101 – Where grapes are grown and wines are made

### Italy

Who doesn't know Italy is synonymous with wine? But how many of us know the wine regions of Italy and the importance of knowing them when buying wine? There are a lot of them so stay with me! Don't forget that Italian wines, like many European wines, are labeled by where the wine is made and not by the grape that makes the wine. For example, wines labeled **Barolo** (region) are made from the red grape, **Nebbiolo**.

### Italy's main grape wine-growing regions:

#### Northwest Italy - Regions

##### √ **Piedmont – one of the top regions, in quality, variety, and price**

- Wines labeled **Barolo** – known for red wines made from the **Nebbiolo** grape.
- Wines labeled **Barbaresco** – also known for red wines made from the **Nebbiolo** grape.
- Wines labeled **Barbera** – known for red wines made from the **Barbera** grape.
- Wines labeled **Asti** – known for white wines made from the **Muscat** grape ("Moscato" in Italian).
- Wines labeled **Dolcetto** – known for red wines made from the **Dolcetto** grape.
- Wines labeled **Gavi** – known for white wines made from the **Cortese** grape.

Other notable regions in the Northwest are **Valle d'Acosta**, **Liguria**, and **Lombardy**. They feature wines made from local grapes like **Donnaz**, **Petit Rouge**, **Vermentino**, **Pigato**, and **Trebbiano**.

### Northeast Italy - Regions

- √ Wines labeled **Trentino** or **Alto Adige** – known for red and rosé wines made from local grapes like **Lagrein** and **Schiava**, and red wines from more common red grapes like **Merlot** and **Cabernet Sauvignon**. White wines from this region are made from **Pinot Grigio**, **Pinot Bianco**, **Riesling**, **Sauvignon Blanc**, and **Chardonnay** grapes. Also sparkling wine is made in the Trentino region using the same method used in the Champagne region of France.
- √ Wines labeled **Friuli-Venezia Giulia** – known for white wines made from grapes like **Pinot Grigio**, **Pinot Bianco**, **Sauvignon Blanc**, and the local grape **Tocai**. Red wines are also made from **Merlot** and the local grape **Refosco**.
- √ Wines labeled **Emilia-Romagna** – known for red wines made from the **Sangiovese** or **Trebbiano** or **Lambrusco** grapes and white wines from the **Albana** grape.
- √ The Veneto wine region includes wines labeled **Soave**, **Valpolicella**, and **Bardolino**.
  - Wines labeled **Soave** – known for white wines made from the **Garganega** or **Trebbiano de Soave** grapes.
  - Wines labeled **Valpolicella** include red wines named **Amarone** and **Recioto** made from the **Corvina** grape.
  - Wines labeled **Bardolino** – known for light red/rosé wines made from the **Corvina** grape.

### Central Italy - Regions

- √ **Tuscany** – known for red wines labeled **Brunello di Montalcino**, **Chianti Classico**, and **Vino Nobile de Montepulciano**, all made from the Sangiovese grape.
- √ **Umbria** – known for white wines labeled **Orvieto** or **Torgiano** made from the **Trebbiano** grape. Red wines labeled **Torgiano** are made from the **Sangiovese** and **Canaiolo** grapes.
- √ **Abruzzo** – known for red wines named **Montepulciano d’Abruzzo** made from the **Montepulciano** grape. The **Trebbiano** grape is the main grape in white wines labeled **Trebbiano d’Abruzzo**.

### Southern Italy/Sicily – Regions

- √ **Puglia** – known for red wines named **San Severo** and **Castel del Monte** made from the **Uva di Troia**, **Aglianico**, and **Montepulciano** grapes. Also wines labeled **Salice Salentino** are made from the **Negroamaro** and **Malvasia Nera** grapes.
- √ **Campania** – known for wines named **Mastroberardino**. They can be red wines named **Taurasi** made from the **Aglianico** grape or white wines named **Greco di Tufo** and **Fiano di Avelino** made from the **Greco** and **Fiano** grapes.
- √ **Sicily** – known for white wines labeled **Pantelleria** made from the **Muscat** grape. Also fortified sweet wines labeled **Marsala** are made from a blend of local grapes. White wines from Sicily labeled **Alcamo** are made principally from the **Catarratto** grape.

## Wine 102 – How wine is made

One of the most common questions asked when I conduct a wine-tasting is “**How is wine made?**” As you probably know, it all starts with the soil/land (“terroir” as the French call it), as well as the vines, the grapes, and the climate. Once the grapes are harvested (by hand or by machine) they are crushed (and de-stemmed, particularly for white wines) and the juice is fermented with extended contact with the skins for red wine and without the skins for white wines. Fermentation relies heavily on **yeast** (natural or cultured), which turns grape juice (at this point it is usually called “must”) into alcohol (wine). The fermentation temperature is also very important, as cooler fermentation temperatures generally allow for wines to retain their natural bouquet and individuality. For red wines, the juice and skins undergo “maceration,” where they are left in contact with each other to add extra color and tannin. After this, the red wine is then drained from the skins. Meanwhile, the skins are pressed to extract all remaining liquid.

With white wines, after fermentation, the new wine can be filtered or unfiltered. This process may take place either in large stainless steel tanks or large wood barrels. It’s worth mentioning that sulfur is used as an antiseptic and anti-oxidant, particularly with white wines, which explains why there is the common smell of sulfur associated with opening a bottle.

It’s important to know that the juice from red grapes (and of course white grapes) can be made into white wine. It is the skins from red grapes that give red wines their color. Rosé wines (or blush wines) are usually made by allowing the juice from red grapes to have **limited** contact with their skins. The most infamous rosé wine (I hate to even call it rosé) is “White Zinfandel.” It’s generally the cheapest and sweetest of rosé wines. If you want high-quality rosé wines, some of the finest examples are made from the Gamay and Grenache grapes.

## Wine 103 – Corks and Wine. What’s All the Fuss About?

The average person associates a good bottle of wine with having to use a corkscrew to remove a natural cork from the bottle. It seems lately there has been a great deal of discussion of problems related to natural corks. Cork problems can be revealed several ways: if the cork is defective it can allow oxygen to seep into the bottle or wine to seep out of the bottle, either way spoiling the rest of the bottle. Also, one result of a defective natural cork can be its disintegration when you are removing it from the bottle. You will hear that fewer than 10% of all wines that use natural cork will be “tainted.” Many wine people claim that the figure is closer to 20%. Regardless, you as the consumer should not have to pay for a bottle of wine that is tainted. Honest wine people are aware of this and are looking for answers. Synthetic corks are one alternative. Screw caps are another. Both of these do not have as long a track record as natural corks but many wineries are turning to them because they believe these alternatives are more reliable. However, the wine industry is concerned that you, as the consumer, will perceive screw caps and synthetic corks as being associated with “cheap” wine. The bottom line is that the liquid in the bottle determines whether a bottle of wine is good or bad. The cork alone will not necessarily tell you the quality of the wine. What you need to know is that you will be seeing more synthetic corks and screw caps in quality wines particularly from Australia, New Zealand, and California. White wines seem to be the wines these alternatives are being used on first.

However, some very high-quality red wines are using them as well. Don't be put off. You might be pleasantly surprised.

One last point on cork and wines. When you open a bottle of wine or one is opened for you, there is no need to smell the cork. What you should be sure to do is look at the wine for things like color or defects like cork bits. You should also stick your nose in your glass of wine and sniff. Smelling a wine will help you develop a sense of what wine should and should not smell like. If it smells or tastes poor to you, ask that it be checked out or replaced. Reputable restaurateurs, sommeliers, and wine merchants will usually oblige. They want your wine experience to be positive.

## Wine 104~ The Three-Tiered System of Wine Distribution in the USA

Did you know in some states it is a felony (as in you will be arrested) to order and receive wine directly from out-of-state wineries? Internet sales of wine are growing but in most states you must buy wine through your retailer. I am only telling this to you because if you really want to become a wine lover you have to understand why your local wine store does not carry everything you like. Understanding this system will allow you to approach your local wine merchant more intelligently regarding wines he or she does not stock but may have access to. This is it how the system works.

**FIRST TIER** - The **wine producer**, as you know, is where the wines are made. If the winery is a U.S. winery and is seeking to sell its wines within the country, it would work with a **wholesaler** or distributor. (If the winery is outside of the U.S. it will work with an importer also.) The wholesaler negotiates with the winery and is paid to market and distribute the wines to retailers and restaurants. The point is that the winery often deals with a middle man, like a wholesaler, to get its wines from the winery to the retailer. Therefore the **first tier is where the wine producer works with the wholesaler.**

**SECOND TIER** - The **wholesaler** (who is sometimes also an importer) works directly with the **retailer**. The wholesaler is instrumental in introducing wines into a state and the local retailer. Wholesalers work on a state or regional basis. Wholesalers compete for the attention of the retailer and restaurants who sell wine to the public. **Basically the second tier is where the wholesaler works with the retailer.**

**THIRD TIER** - **The third tier is where the wine retailer sells wine to you.** The wine **retailer** works with wholesalers because they represent thousands of wines. The balance between the supply provided by the wholesaler, space in the store, and consumer demand is a precarious one. The typical retailer often ends up carrying a select number of wines from each of the distributors. Your favorite wine may not be one of them.

Let's look at an example of why it's useful for you to know this. Let's say while at a Vin de Vin wine tasting you have a great glass of wine. You jot down the name of the wine and when you return home you can't find it anywhere. If you knew the wholesaler's name you could contact him or her and ask whether that wine is available in your state. If so, you should be able to buy or order it from your local wine retailer. Some liquor stores may not be interested in ordering wine for you so as an alternative you could ask the wholesaler what retailer in your state is best positioned to order or carry this wine. **Violá! Problem solved!** I've done this many times. As a rule I always note on the label the name of the wholesaler or importer on a good bottle of wine. Knowing this can be a real help.

## Wine 105- Summer Wines and Food

The first thing about wine and food is knowing their relationship. In Europe, Latin America, and many parts of Asia, wine is considered food. Wine is a normal part of a meal. Wine is viewed as a natural accompaniment to food. I am not saying you have to have wine with breakfast but having it with dinner should be a normal occurrence. Wine with lunch is common virtually everywhere but in the U.S. I guess that in the U.S. we are paranoid of getting drunk at lunch and having to go back to the office tipsy. A glass of wine with a properly matched lunch meal should not make you drunk! That is unless your usual lunch is an air sandwich.

In the summertime, our thoughts turn away from work to outdoor activities like barbecuing burgers, ribs, chicken, etc. Wines that go well with summer food are more fruit-forward and generally are lower in alcohol.

If you've read previous issues of the **Grape** Vine you will know that I usually recommend a particular food to go with a wine. These are not set in stone. Experiment for yourself. The ones I like include:

### *Summer Foods That Go With Red Wines*

#### **Grilled Fish with red wines made from or labeled Pinot Noir**

**Grilled fish**, like swordfish, is a summery meal that requires a versatile red wine like Pinot Noir. This wine is not too heavy to overshadow the tenderness of fish but not too light that it won't add a bit of complexity to its taste. Who says you can't have red wine with fish! Try it with **pizza** as well as holiday **ham** and **turkey**.

#### **Raw vegetables with red wines labeled Beaujolais (Gamay grape)**

This red wine from the Burgundy, Beaujolais region of France, goes best with **raw vegetables**, antipasto or mixed grill.

#### **Hamburger/Steak with hearty red wines made from or labeled Merlot, Syrah/Shiraz, or Zinfandel**

**Grilled meat dishes** demand equally bold wines, like flavorful red ones made from Merlot, Syrah/Shiraz, or Zinfandel.

#### **Chocolate desserts with sweet Muscat or Port**

Summer is dessert time. A sweet dessert, believe it or not, requires a sweeter wine. A glass of Muscat from Australia or a Port from Portugal would stand up to the strong flavor of **chocolate**. Bring on the cigars!

### *Summer Foods That Go With White Wines*

#### **Saltwater Fish with wines made from or labeled Sauvignon Blanc**

Seasoned saltwater fish like **smoked salmon**, **flounder**, and **cod** can taste even more complex with a chilled bottle of New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc or French Sancerre.

#### **Grilled Shellfish with wines made labeled Gewürztraminer**

The flavor imparted from grilling **shellfish** complements the spice and pepper taste of chilled Gewürztraminer.

#### **Mustard Chicken with wines made from or labeled Chardonnay**

A personal favorite. The mustard flavoring in this dish matches well with the nutty/buttery flavor of many oaked Chardonnays. Chardonnay can also be matched with **goat cheese salads** and **bruschetta**.

#### **Asian/Chinese/Thai food with white wines labeled Riesling**

The distinctive flavors of **Asian** food match well with the fruity taste of these white wines. Try **sesame chicken** or **pad thai** with German Riesling. A great Friday after-work take-out meal.

## August's Vine Cuttings (recommended wines)

### *White Wine*

**2001 Jackson Estate Sauvignon Blanc –  
Marlborough, New Zealand**

*What a nose! Take a sniff of this wine and you will find citrus fruit and grass notes. Smooth and dry, it emits dried apple and pear flavors. A very good wine at a fair price (\$14), from a very reliable winery.*

### *Red Wine*

**1997 Catena Cabernet Sauvignon Agrelo  
Vineyards – Mendoza, Argentina**

*One of the best, if not the best, winemaker in Argentina (some would say in all of South America) is Nicolás Catena. The color of this wine is dense black/purple and the bouquet offers toasty oak and spice. The taste brings forth rich, bold flavors of blackberries and dried fruit. This craves steak or grilled meat. Worth the investment at \$18.*

What a month! Vin de Vin was in Boston conducting another fun and enjoyable wine tasting. This was followed by a vacation to Ireland and Wales, where the wines and the Guinness were a pourin'. This caused a delay in getting **Grape** Vine to the printing press on time. Back to normalcy, at least for now. See you next month.

*Next month: The wines of Spain. Olé!*