



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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To all who have helped and supported us with this educational initiative, our heartfelt thanks.

To you, Italian Wine Essentials candidate, good luck and good reading.



Welcome to Italian Wine Essentials!

The Wine Scholar Guild is thrilled that you have chosen to begin your Italian wine education journey with us!

This course has been designed to provide students with a fundamental understanding of the Italian wines most often seen on a retail shelf and restaurant wine list. This is not an exhaustive compilation. Instead, wine styles and regions have been carefully chosen from Northern, Central and Southern Italy to reflect their commercial and historical significance.

Information has been judiciously curated. Icons help to signpost your learning. Information on “the place,” “grape varieties,” “wine profiles” and “production notes” has been included for each wine. We have also included a “notable producers” section, and let us just say that creating this list was no easy task! Each of the appellations has dozens, if not hundreds, of excellent producers that could merit a mention. Instead, we have chosen a cross-section of producers that represent the diversity of their particular appellation. We have included large producers (whose wines will be widely available), boutique producers, historically significant wineries and up-and-coming entities. Peppared with information on cultural attractions, regional cuisines and points of interest, the program allows students to learn about wine within a cultural framework.

We see Italian Wine Essentials as a springboard toward a comprehensive understanding of the wines of Italy. The modules are designed to support and enhance your learning, be it classroom-based or independent study.

Upon completion, you will be ideally positioned to further your studies with the internationally acclaimed Italian Wine Scholar® (IWS) Certification Program! (Learn more on the last page.)

We trust you will enjoy your excursion through Italy, glass by glass!

Salute!

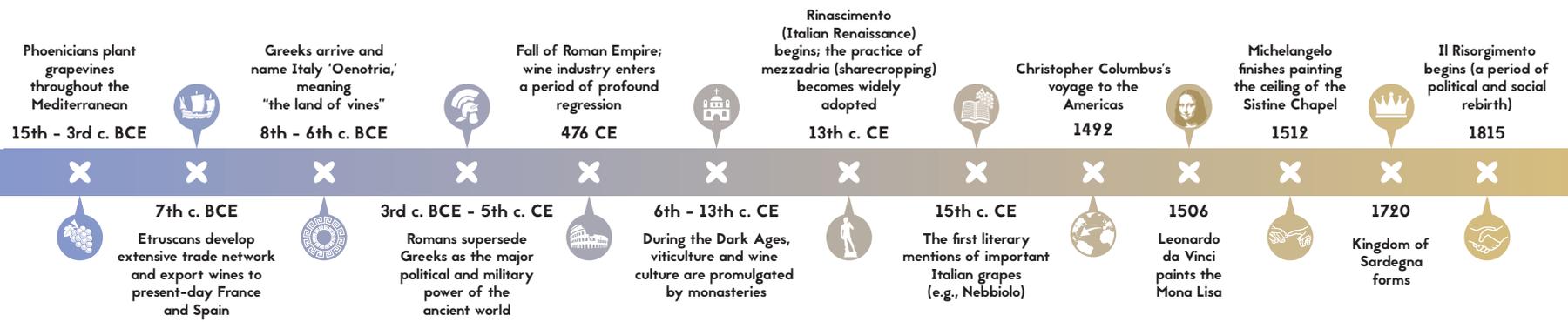


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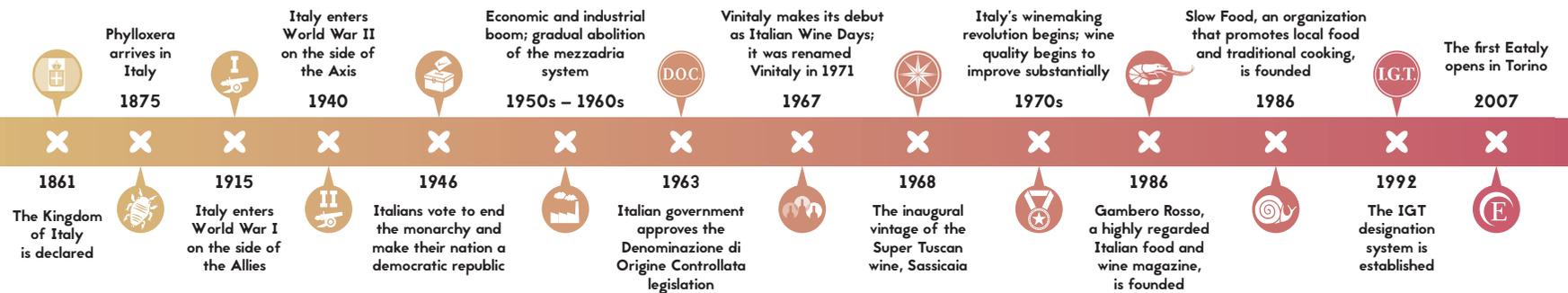


INTRODUCTION TO ITALY

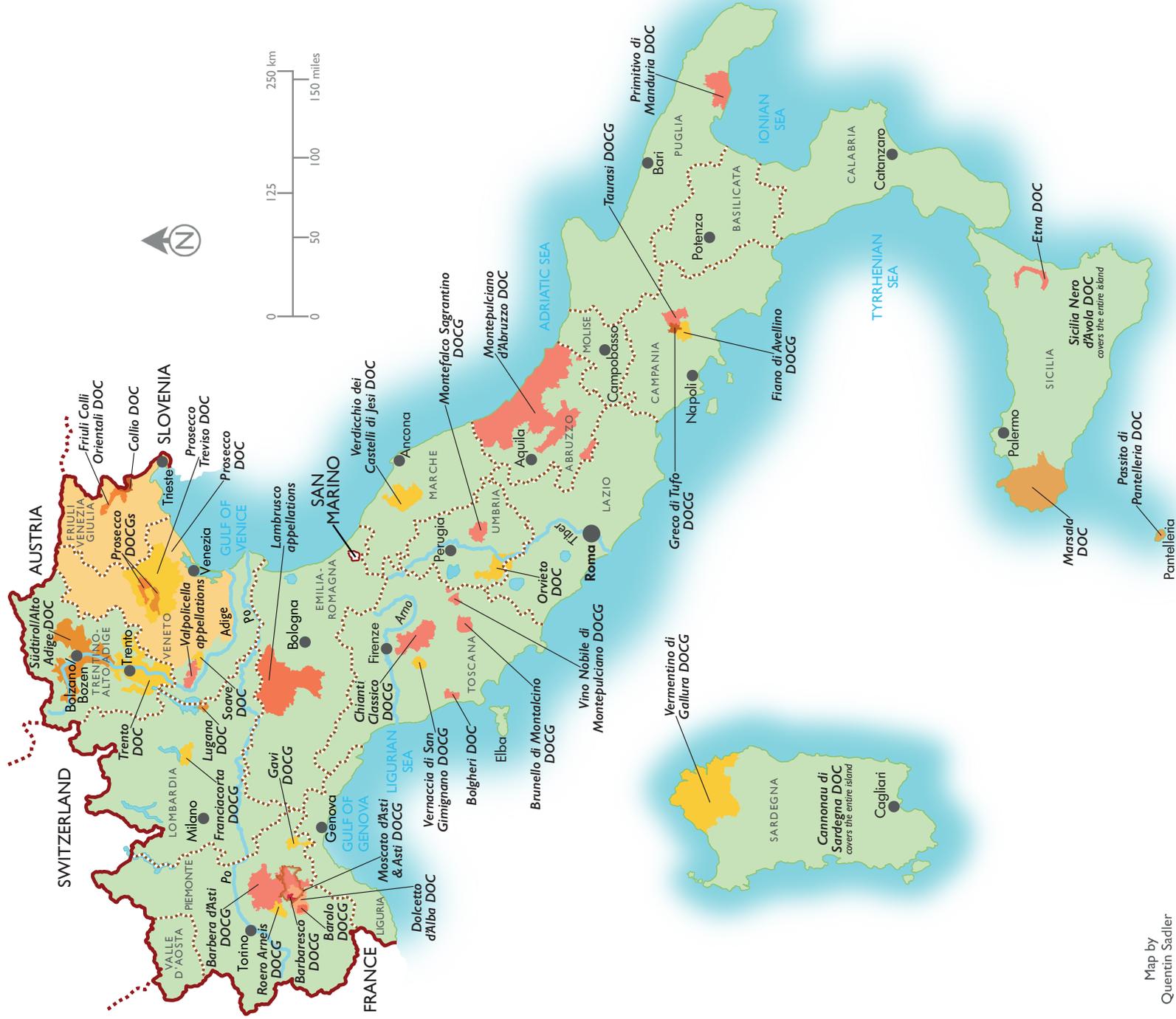
Italy... few countries are as closely linked to the history of wine! For well over 2,000 years, Italy has been growing grapes and making wine. When the ancient Greeks arrived on the shores of present-day Campania, they found a thriving viticultural scene and named the land “Oenotria,” or “land of the vine.” Italy has been blessed with a climate that vines adore. The country is a treasure trove of grape varieties—the number of native cultivars is estimated to be between 350 and 600! With hundreds of varieties in commercial production and what seems like a complicated system of wine categorization, learning about the world of Italian wine can seem overwhelming. However, with a few key pieces of information, anyone can learn to unlock the door to the wonderful world of Italian wine!

Although an old-world country, Italy itself is younger than most people would imagine. In the centuries prior to unification, Italy was divided into a plethora of small kingdoms and city-states. Each of these political entities shaped the history, people and culture of what would become a “region” of Italy. Almost 160 years after the *Risorgimento* (Unification of Italy, 1861), many Italians remain fiercely loyal to their region or even their village vs. their country. Extreme neighborhood pride is referred to as *campanilismo*. The term is taken from the word *campanile* meaning “bell tower,” i.e., every Italian supports their own church’s bell tower.

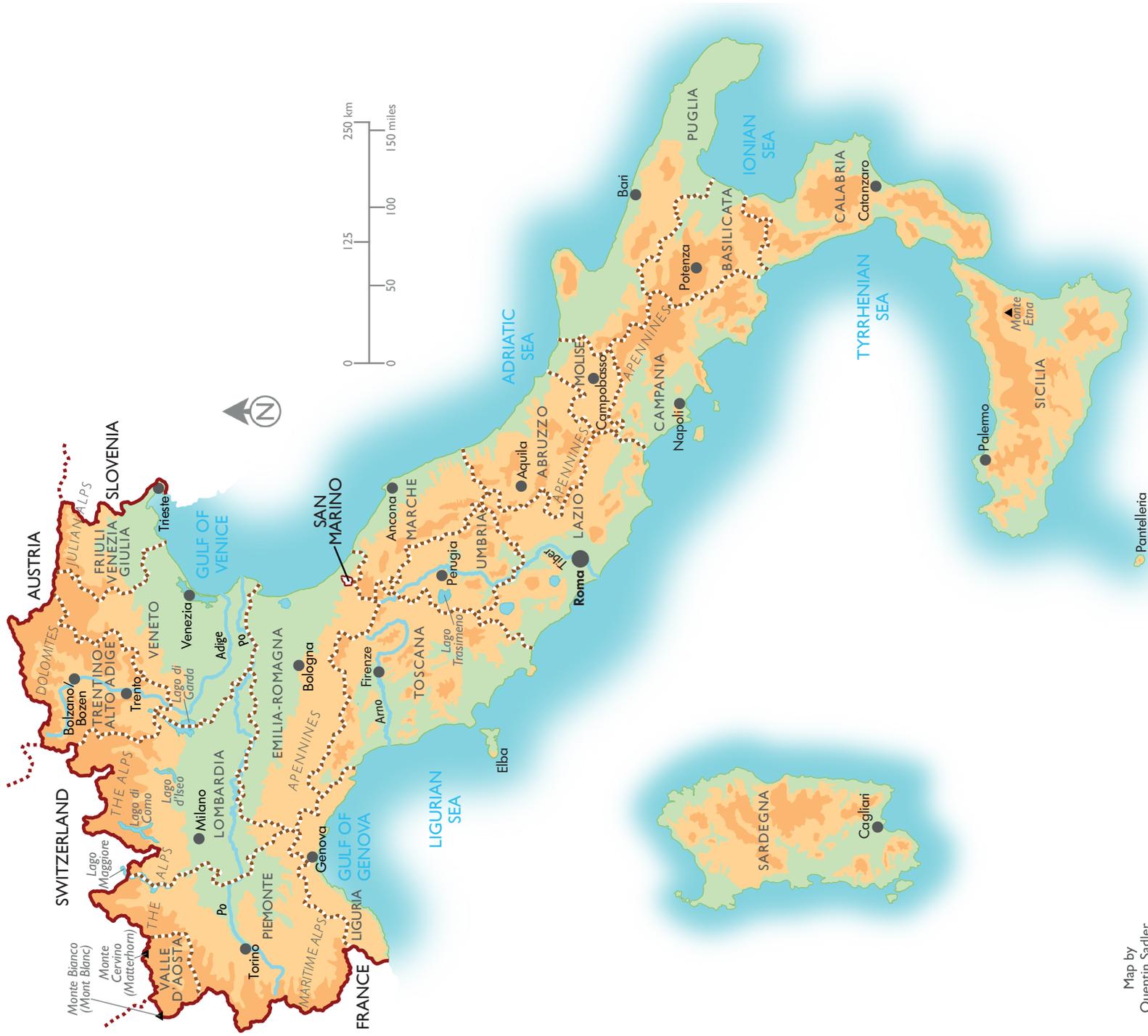
Regions also have their rivalries, but there is no greater division within the country than that of north and south. Some northerners think southerners take an inordinate amount of joy out of life’s little pleasures, while many southerners think northerners put too much focus on their work life vs. their personal life. Of course, central Italy lies between these polar opposites, offering a unique amalgamation of both. A journey across the country is really more like a trek across three cultures, twenty countries and thousands of self-proclaimed, independent city-states.



The Essential Appellations of Italy



The Topography of Italy



TOPOGRAPHY, CLIMATE & SOILS

TOPOGRAPHY

Italy is considered a southern European country. It is bordered by Switzerland and Austria to the north, France to the northwest and Slovenia to the northeast. The mainland boasts an impressive 4,598 mi/7,400 km of coastline and is surrounded on three sides by the Mediterranean Sea. The islands of Sardegna and Sicilia, plus a multitude of archipelagos, extend Italy's reach beyond the mainland.

Over three-quarters of Italy is covered by mountains and hills, and the hills that radiate out from the Alps and the Apennines are where the vast majority of vineyards are located. Since Roman times, vineyard plantings have been concentrated on the slopes, and with few exceptions, that is where the majority of them remain today.

Plains account for the smallest proportion of the Italian landscape, and the flat and fertile Padan Plain accounts for more than two-thirds of that area. It is Italy's largest plain and is crossed by Italy's longest river, the Po.

The Mediterranean Sea surrounding the Italian Peninsula is sub-divided into four major basins:

the Adriatic, Ionian, Tyrrhenian and Ligurian. Each of these plays a significant role in moderating the climate of the land it borders.

Italy is blessed with many rivers, but due to the topography, most are shorter and volumetrically smaller than rivers found in other parts of Europe. As a result, their impact on local climate tends to be less pronounced. Lakes, on the other hand, play a significant role wherever they are present. Famous lakes such as Lake Garda, Lake Como and Lake Iseo all impact the surrounding areas by moderating the cooling influence of the Alps.

CLIMATE

Despite the fact that Italy stretches over 10 degrees of latitude, it is elevation that is key to determining the climate of its winegrowing areas. Growing seasons are extended with elevation, allowing grapes to maintain acidity and develop aromatic complexity. Because many of Italy's vineyards are planted at significant elevation, the country has some of the latest harvests in Europe, despite being surrounded on three sides by the Mediterranean. It is the interplay between mountains and sea that is the unifying and fundamental feature of Italy's climate.

SOILS

The soils of Italy are diverse. Within a single region there might be several soil types resulting from complex and different geological evolution. However, the soils of Italy can be broadly categorized based on their origin and formation.

Sedimentary - Most of Italy's vineyards are found on soils derived from bedrock of alluvial or marine origin, or deposited from glaciers (such as the glacial moraines of northern Piemonte, Franciacorta, Valtellina and the area around Lake Garda).

Metamorphic - The heat, pressure and chemical processes that occurred during the creation of Italy's mountain ranges resulted in the formation of many metamorphic rocks. Soils derived from foliated metamorphic rocks such as gneiss, schist and slate can be found in Italian vineyards, particularly in parts of Sardegna, Calabria, northeastern Sicilia and the Alps.

Volcanic - Italy's geological evolution has been strongly shaped by volcanic activity, and a considerable number of vineyards are sited on the slopes of extinct or active volcanoes. Due to the presence of volcanic ash, the soils are often nutrient rich and water retentive.



UNDERSTANDING ITALIAN WINE LAW

The European Union (EU) regulates the wine industry in all of its member states. In 2009, new regulations designed to standardize the nomenclature of quality levels and labeling terms were introduced. The EU divided wine into two major groups and created new categories that roughly corresponded to the quality pyramids already in place in member countries:

WINES WITH GEOGRAPHICAL INDICATION

- Protected Designation of Origin (PDO)/Denominazione di Origine Protetta (DOP)
- Protected Geographical Indication (PGI)/Indicazione Geografica Protetta (IGP)

Many countries, including Italy, chose to continue to use their traditional designations for each of these categories, as they generally fit neatly into the EU structure. The majority of Italian wines are labeled using the traditional designations (DOCG, DOC and IGT), which continue to be the most common quality designations found on labels today.

DOCG – Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita

- Wines at the very top of the wine quality pyramid
- Wines of high reputation showing intrinsic qualities inherent to their specific delimited area of production; these production zones are usually smaller than most DOCs.

DOC – Denominazione di Origine Controllata

- One step in quality beneath the DOCG level
- The wines come from delimited geographical areas that are usually larger in size than that of the DOCGs

IGT – Indicazione Geografica Tipica

- Wines are primarily defined by an indication of the geographical area where they are made
- Growing areas are generally quite large, ranging from an entire province or region to multiple regions or provinces

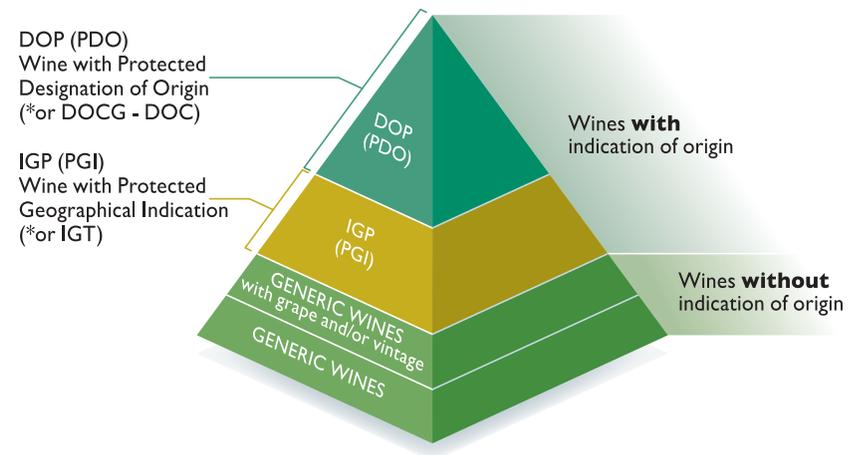
WINES WITHOUT GEOGRAPHICAL INDICATION (generic wine)

Vino – Generic Wine

- Wines that do not have an indication of origin other than the country in which they were made
- Generally produced from grapes grown outside appellation boundaries or a blend of grapes from multiple appellations

SOME TERMS TO KNOW

Classico	A wine produced from the original historic winegrowing area of a DOCG or DOC
Superiore	A wine with a higher minimum actual alcohol content compared to the non- <i>superiore</i> version of the same wine; often <i>superiore</i> wines also have stricter production criteria than non- <i>superiore</i> wines
Riserva	A wine that went through an extended period of aging before release compared to the non- <i>riserva</i> version; a <i>riserva</i> wine usually has stricter production requirements as well
Rosso	A red wine
Bianco	A white wine
Rosato	A rosé wine
Spumante	A fully sparkling wine
Frizzante	A semi-sparkling wine
Passito	A wine made from semi-dried grapes
Terroir	A French concept that integrates site, soil, aspect, climate and (arguably) the hand of man as contributing factors to a wine's signature of place





UNDERSTANDING LABELS

At first glance, many Italian wine labels appear daunting. The names of grape varieties, wine regions, stylistic terms and fantasy names can all be included on a label; determining the meaning of all this information can be challenging. There are three different ways in which information is organized in order to let you know what is in the bottle:

- By place/region e.g., Barolo DOCG
- By grape + place e.g., Barbera d'Alba DOC (Note that in Italian, *d'* or *di* means “of” or “from”—i.e., Barbera from Alba).
- By fantasy name + place/region e.g. Montevertine Le Pergole Torte Toscana IGT



- 1: Name of producer
- 2: Country of Origin
- 3: Appellation (name of the winegrowing zone)
- 4: Quality designation e.g., DOC, DOCG (DOP) or IGT (IGP)
- 5: Vintage
- 6: Indication of the batch
- 7: Volume of wine
- 8: Alcoholic strength
- 9: Name and location of bottler

NATIVE AND TRADITIONAL GRAPE VARIETIES

No other country has quite the abundance of native grape varieties as does Italy. The historical isolation of many of Italy's winegrowing areas allowed native grapes to survive into the modern age. The plethora of indigenous grape varieties is a major advantage for Italian producers because they are able to offer unique and distinctive wines that cannot be replicated elsewhere. Descriptions have been provided for a select few of the most commercially and culturally significant varieties.

RED GRAPES

Aglianico is considered one of Italy's noble grapes. Its wines are dark, powerful, full-bodied and high in alcohol and tannin, yet this muscular profile is lifted by notably high acidity.

Barbera is Piemonte's most widely planted variety. The grape is hallmarked by high acidity, deep color, bright red cherry fruit and low to moderate tannin.

Cannonau is genetically identical to Spain's Garnacha. It produces full-bodied wines with high levels of alcohol and both floral and red fruit aromas.

Corvina is one of the primary grapes of the Valpolicella region. Wines are moderate in tannin with aromas of sour cherry, violet, herb and almond.

Dolcetto makes deeply colored, moderately low-acid wines with fragrant black fruit aromas. Its tannins are ample but soft and round; they deliver a pleasantly bitter finish.

Lambrusco is actually a family of grape varieties, and all members share certain genetic similarities. As grape families go, Lambrusco is believed to be one of Italy's oldest. The most notable members of this large family are Lambrusco Sorbara, Lambrusco Grasparossa and Lambrusco Salamino.

Montepulciano has thick skins which produce wines that are deep ruby in color. The wines tend to be robust, full-bodied and high in alcohol with dense, ripe tannins and overt red cherry and plum fruit.

Nebbiolo is one of Italy's most noble red grape varieties. In youth, the wines show aromas of red cherry, rose, violet, licorice and underbrush; with age, nuances of dried red fruit, rose petals, sweet spice, leather and truffles develop. The wines possess high levels of acid, tannin, alcohol and extract.

Nerello Mascalese is native to Etna. The wines are pale to moderately saturated in color with aromas of red fruit, herbs and spice. Tannins are perceptible but smooth; the alcohol is high, and the acidity is lively. It is often compared to Nebbiolo and Pinot Nero.



Nero d'Avola is Sicilia's predominant red grape. Wines can have deep intensity of color, fine smooth tannins, soft texture, full body and high alcohol—all balanced by fresh acidity. Aromas and flavors include cherry, plum, blackberry and Mediterranean brush and herbs.

Primitivo is rich in anthocyanins. It produces big, alcoholic wines laced with aromas of cherry, raspberry, tobacco and herbs.

Sagrantino is Umbria's most distinctive red grape. Its wines are notably tannic, deep in color, full-bodied and powerful with lively acidity and high levels of extract and alcohol.

Sangiovese is Italy's most widely planted grape variety. It produces wines that tend to be lighter in color with high acidity, a noticeable tannic grip and violet, sour cherry, plum and tea leaf aromas.

WHITE GRAPES

Arneis produces medium- to full-bodied wines that boast subtle aromas and flavors of white flowers, stone fruit and ripe pear.

Catarratto Bianco yields abundantly and is considered one of Sicilia's workhorse varieties. Historically, the variety has formed the base of Marsala production; however, it can produce high-quality table wines when planted in an ideal location.

Cortese is one of Piemonte's principal white grapes. The wines are delicately aromatic with refreshing acidity, minerality and a fresh lemon zest character.

Fiano is listed among Italy's finest white varieties. The wines display aromas of acacia, citrus, apple, herb, hazelnut, balsam, honey and mineral. The wines age particularly well, developing complexity and intense flinty, smoky notes.

Garganega is one of the most ancient grape varieties in Italy. The wines possess a steely acidity marked by aromas of white flowers, citrus, ripe yellow fruit, almonds and minerals.

Glera is the principal grape of Prosecco. It produces wines that are light and refreshing with aromas of white flowers, lemon, pear, apple and peach.

Grechetto di Orvieto is considered the traditional Grechetto grape of Umbria. (There is another!) This Grechetto produces light citrusy wines with refreshing acidity.

Greco stands among the most ancient and finest white grapes of Campania. Greco wines are well structured with marked acidity and a round, full-bodied texture. Often, they demonstrate an almost tannic mouthfeel.

Grillo is a Catarratto Bianco x Zibibbo cross. The variety is a key component of many high-quality Marsalas but is also capable of crafting distinctive dry wines without fortification.

Malvasia is the umbrella name given to a largely unrelated group of grape varieties. Malvasia Bianca Lunga is widely planted in Toscana and plays an important role in the production of Vin Santo.

Moscato Bianco, also known as Muscat à Petits Grains Blanc, is the most widely planted white grape in Piemonte. The wines show the full aromatic profile of Moscato with pronounced floral and fruity aromas (orange blossom, stone fruit, citrus) combined with notes of honey, musk and spice.

Ribolla Gialla is an ancient variety native to Collio. It is high in acidity and can produce wines with delicate aromas of flowers, citrus, apple and honey. Traditionally, the grape was fermented on its skins and aged, producing wines with strong phenolic and oxidative character.

Trebbiano Toscano is Italy's most widely planted white variety. It is known as Ugni Blanc in France. The variety yields generously, boasts high acidity and plays a key role in the production of Vin Santo.

Turbiana is the principal variety of the Lugana DOC. It has been grown in that area since the 17th century. The grape is closely related to Verdicchio and produces perfumed, rich wines with high acidity. Look for aromas of white flowers, citrus, apples and stone fruit.

Verdicchio is one of Italy's noble varieties; the wines have attractive floral and citrusy aromas with a mineral core and almond finish. They are well structured with bracing acidity and high levels of extract and alcohol.



Vernaccia di San Gimignano is an ancient Tuscan variety grown around the town of San Gimignano. It produces zesty, mineral wines with a nut-skin finish.

Vermentino wines display intense floral and fruity aromas along with aromatic herbs and stone/mineral notes. Often high in alcohol, the wines are balanced by a refreshing acidity and a saline finish.

INTERNATIONAL GRAPE VARIETIES

Although Italy is home to many unique varieties, few are widely planted outside of its borders. In comparison, many French and German varieties have found a home in nearly every world wine region. These widely traveled grapes are collectively referred to as “international varieties” and they have played an important role in Italy’s viticultural development. Although the fashion for these foreign varieties has waned considerably in recent years, they remain integral to the production of some of Italy’s most iconic wines such as Franciacorta and Bolgheri.

Chardonnay is a variety indigenous to France. It displays primary fruit aromas of apple and citrus and is often accompanied by notes of butter, nuts, vanilla and spice as a result of winemaking decisions. The grape’s rather malleable character makes it a favorite of sparkling wine producers that

capitalize on the variety’s capability to contribute alcohol, acidity and the nuances of lees aging.

Friulano is one of Friuli Venezia Giulia’s most important grapes. It is genetically identical to France’s Sauvignonasse and is also called Tai, or Tai Bianco in Veneto. It can produce densely textured wines with subtle aromas of grass, white flowers, apple, almond and stone fruit.

Pinot Bianco (Pinot Blanc) is a French variety that crafts fairly neutral wines that are often of moderate acidity and accented by notes of apple and almond. In Italy, this variety is most closely associated with the appellations of Franciacorta and Alto Adige.

Pinot Grigio (Pinot Gris) is another French variety that has found a place in Italy. When picked early it can create crisp, light-bodied wines with fresh acidity. When allowed to fully ripen, the wine develops opulent notes of beeswax and pear that is sometimes accented by a light touch of smoke.

Riesling In Italy, Germany’s most famous variety is known as Riesling Renano (not to be confused with the similarly named Riesling Italico, aka Welschriesling). The grape performs particularly well in Treviso (Veneto), Friuli Venezia Giulia, Trentino – Alto Adige (Valle Isarco), Langhe (Piemonte) and increasingly, Oltrepò Pavese (Lombardia). The wines have high levels of acidity and feature flavors of citrus, mineral and orange blossom.

Sauvignon Blanc is native to France’s Loire Valley and prefers cool, sunny climates. It produces aromatic wines with bright acidity. Look for notes of gunflint, herbs, hay, gooseberry and grapefruit. Sauvignon Blanc plays a significant role in the wines of Friuli Venezia Giulia, Trentino-Alto Adige .

Cabernet Sauvignon is a natural cross between Cabernet Franc and Sauvignon Blanc; it is native to Bordeaux, France. In sufficiently warm soils, it produces high-acid, high-pigment, high-tannin wines with flavors of black fruit, lilac, tobacco and herbs. The variety has a long history in Italy and is today most closely associated with Toscana and parts of Veneto and Trentino.

Merlot is native to Bordeaux, France; it is an early-ripening variety that performs well in cooler soils. It crafts moderately tannic, moderate- to low-acid wines with generous alcohol. Flavors of blueberry, cherry and plum are common. The variety has found a second home in Italy, and some of the world’s best examples are thought to come from Toscana.

Pinot Nero (Pinot Noir) is a French grape that is challenging to grow. Early budding and early ripening, the variety prefers cool climates and produces wines with good acidity and moderate tannins. In Italy, it is a key component to many traditional method sparkling wines.



WINE STYLES

Both nature and nurture contribute to wine style. Nature plays its part via grape variety, soil, weather and climate; nurture through the hand of man. It is the grape grower and winemaker who decide what to plant, how to train each vine, when to pick the fruit, how to ferment it, how long to age the wine and what to age it in. All of these factors, and many more, will have an impact on what the consumer tastes in the glass. While a grape variety may be harvested with an innate set of unique properties, grape growers and winemakers can vastly alter those characteristics, should they choose to do so. Grapes with naturally high acid levels can create wines that are soft and mellow if the vines are forced to grow in hotter-than-ideal conditions and/or grapes are left on the vine long after acid levels have begun to decline. Varieties that are best known for crafting deep, dark, and powerful reds can be bottled as pale, juicy thirst quenchers by minimizing the maceration period (the amount of time the juice and skin are in contact with each other).

In light of the range of wine styles out there, it only stands to reason that an entire vocabulary has developed around how to best describe them. Standardized approaches to tasting can be very helpful if you need to quantify a wine within a very defined set of parameters. However, those same descriptors do little to reflect what most people enjoy about wine—the fact that it tastes good! Italian Wine Essentials tries to provide you with not only a wine’s structural framework, but those evocative descriptors of aroma, flavor, and mouthfeel as well. This will help you understand and communicate about the wines you have studied. By way of example, imagine you are dining in a restaurant and your waiter tries to tempt you with a glass (or bottle) of wine. Would you choose a wine that was described strictly by its structural parameters, (medium body, medium acidity, with medium plus tannins) or a wine described as “smooth and silky with a hint of spice?” Most diners would probably be more intrigued by the second depiction. The moral of the story: do not get too caught up in the components; wine can be more than the sum of its parts.

TRADITIONAL VS. MODERN

Better winery hygiene and modern innovations such as stainless steel fermentation tanks and temperature control have led to improvements in wine quality. While new machines, technologies, and previously avant-garde philosophies are now commonplace, many wineries are still described in terms of “traditional” and “modern.”

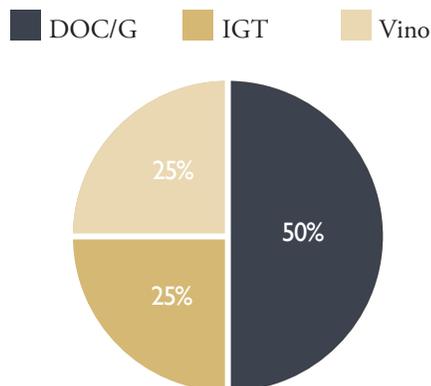
These descriptors reference the overall style of wine being produced and focus on a winemaker’s approach to maceration, aging and oak. Compared to one another, “modern-style” wines are often considered fruitier and less tannic, with obvious notes of oak, while “traditional” examples are described as earthy, savory and more tannic, with little oak flavor.

What we refer to as the “modern” wine style began to emerge in the early 1980s. A new generation of Italian winemakers traveled abroad and discovered winemaking practices that embraced scientific advances, focused on riper fruit, extracted less tannin and incorporated French oak barriques. These young winemakers returned home determined to incorporate what they had learned into traditional winemaking practices.

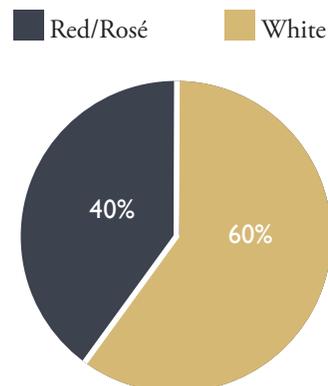
Some facets of “modern” winemaking were adopted with little resistance, while others, such as the use of French oak barriques, were met with massive opposition, especially from older generations. In regions such as Barolo, the battle over barriques caused feuds between friends and families that, in some cases, lasted years.

Today, the anger has subsided, and both “traditionalist” and “modernist” coexist without conflict. Many Italian wines on the market are a product of a blended approach. However, there are winemakers that do plant their flag firmly in one camp vs. the other. For this reason, the terms “traditional” and “modern” remain useful indicators of style.

ITALIAN WINE PRODUCTION BY CATEGORY (2023)



ITALIAN WINE PRODUCTION BY COLOR (2023)



(Data Source: ISTAT 2022)



THE CUISINE OF ITALY

The cuisine of Italy has been shaped by its history. Ancient Rome developed the Mediterranean diet of wine, olive oil and bread. Exotic items such as butter and beer were introduced by the invading barbarian hordes; pasta, spices, sugar and dried fruit were introduced by the Arabs. With the “discovery” of America in 1492, novelties from the New World began to be incorporated into Italian cuisine. Turkey, sweet corn, potatoes and, of course, the tomato were all adopted. During the 17th century, the idea of “Italian” food was somewhat solidified as chefs tried to create a national cuisine.

Pizza, pesto, pasta *alla carbonara* were conceived during the 19th century and remain some of the country’s most iconic foods. It was also at this time that Pellegrino Artusi published his *Manuale dell’Artusi: La Scienza in Cucina e l’Arte di Mangiar Bene* (The Artusi Manual: Science in the Kitchen and the Art of Eating Well). This landmark publication included traditional recipes from different regions of the country. For the first time, the dishes of the average Italian were documented, not just those of Italy’s rich and famous.

Two world wars, the emergence of women in the workplace and industrialization have all had a significant impact on Italy’s cuisine—fast food restaurants and processed foods made their appearance. But while these options do have a presence in Italy, many Italians have worked hard to counteract their influence. Cultural movements, such as Slow Food, aim to preserve Italy’s culinary traditions, but more importantly, Italy’s fierce pride in its culinary traditions tucks regional treasures under the umbrella of a national cuisine and keeps them well protected.

Photo courtesy of Pasta Grannies