

# Italy's indigenous grape varieties



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We take a look at the wealth of local grape varieties to be found in this ancient Mediterranean wine-producing country.



Italy is one of the world's foremost and oldest producers of wine. Like Portugal, Italy grows among the largest number of grape varieties, some of which have been neglected elsewhere. Italian vineyards cover 800,000 hectares and can be found everywhere in the country, including the islands. There are more than 400 different grape varieties grown on the Italian peninsula, apart from the international varieties of Chardonnay, Cabernet, Pinot Noir and Merlot. In Italy and other Mediterranean countries, local grapes are referred to as "native" varieties, so let's take a look at Italy's natives.

In the days of ancient Greece (800-146 BCE), the Greeks called Italy *Oenotria*, which means "the land of wines." Winegrowing and winemaking is a tradition that dates back thousands of years and is found across the country; wine has been an integral part of daily life in Italy for millennia. Until the end of the Second World War, most Italian wines, apart



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from those from Tuscany and Piedmont, were sold mainly in bulk. Imported wines were long considered primarily for the elite.

Understanding Italian wines and their diversity involves delving into the country's history of regional cultivation and winemaking. Although Italian wines made from international varieties can be interesting, they don't reflect the *terroir* in the same way, and they lack a strong regional oenological "fingerprint". Take the Super Tuscans, made from a "Bordeaux" blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot - although they are excellent examples of territorial expression, equal to certain Grand Cru Classé French wines, they don't have the distinctive style of Tuscan wines made from local varieties.

There are around 5,000 grape varieties currently cultivated around the world, adding up to some 40,000 different names in all their translations. In Italy, local varieties have always been deeply embedded in the local agrarian system. The cultivation of different grape varieties remains connected to the environment and the local agricultural customs, as well as to local drinking habits and needs. Does that mean that certain varieties introduced to a region more than 50 years ago are "local" varieties? For example, in Lazio, Cabernet Sauvignon was introduced by Venetian families during Mussolini's regime in the framework of a programme to reclaim the region's swamps.

When looking at the characteristics of local grape varieties, it is important to make certain distinctions. "Native" varieties come from wild grapes that have been "domesticated" (such as Lambrusco Viadanese and Gropello Ruberti), as opposed to ancient or modern varieties, the most recent of which are essentially Cabernets, Pinots and Chardonnay.

From north to south, each Italian winegrowing region (there are 21, including more than 360 DOC and DOCG *appellations*) is identified with a predominant local variety that is a true expression of the *terroir*. These include Sangiovese, a red grape native to Tuscany and the most cultivated variety in Italy (86,000 hectares), followed by the white grape Catarratto in Sicily, Tuscan Trebbiano in central Italy, Barbera in Piedmont (a qualitatively inferior variety compared to Nebbiolo), Negroamaro in Puglia, the red varieties of central and southern Italy, Montepulciano, Trebbiano Romagnolo and Primitivo in the south, as well as the white grape Malvasia. The cultivation of international varieties has followed trends: Pinots in the 1970s, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet in the 1980s, and Syrah in the 1990s. Central Italy in particular, which previously mainly grew relatively mediocre Sangiovese and Trebbiano, has invested heavily in planting international varieties. These are potentially profitable due to the large volumes produced, but costly. This has unfortunately led

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## Nino Negri estate

Since 1897, Nino Negri, the leading producer of Valtellina wines, has won an impressive array of prizes. In addition to 13 years of superb wines, in 2003 it was awarded best Italian red for its 2001 vintage.

**T**his year, it was awarded 92 points by Wine Spectator and 94 points by Parker. The 5 Stelle Nino Negri has long been synonymous with the highest quality of the nebbiolo variety in Valtellina and is one of the top 30 wines to represent Italian viticulture on the world stage. Wine Spectator also gave 90 points to the Inferno Mazèr 2001. Adjudicated a Three Glass champion by the Gambero Rosso guide for three years in a row, the traditional Sforzato has earned a place in the ranks of major prize winners. It is testimony to the fact the quality of the house of Nino Negri is not just limited to its selections but starts with its basic lines. Over the last few years, the estate has collected a series of 5 bunch trophies from the AIS for its world-famous 5 stelle and its Vigneto Fracia. In 2008, Casimiro Maule (above) was voted best oenologist in Italy.

The production of great wines requires great commitment and continuous investment. Nino Negri is the proud holder of two certifications: ISO 9000 and ISO 14000. The first of these monitors the way the estate is managed. Its objective is to ensure that the regulations governing all the vinification processes are in place to enhance the final product for the consumer. The second certification is environmental and ensures that the estate respects its natural surroundings and abides by strict regulations designed to limit any pollution not only in the cellar's production processes but also on the farm. The aim is to improve the quality of the wines but above all the quality of the working environment and the territory.

Modern techniques combined with absolute respect for tradition allow us to obtain the very best from our nebbiolo grapes, resulting in wines that are extremely pleasing, elegant and excellent in quality. Between 1997 and 2005 Nino Negri replanted 11 of its 34

hectares with new clonal selections of nebbiolo (chiavennasca) and new planting systems. Our wines are available in restaurants in 23 countries, a tribute to the quality we offer.

### CASIMIRO MAULE, OENOLOGIST

36 growing years amount to a life of sacrifice for a man. They also amount to a lifetime of invaluable experience; a life lived among the vineyards in contact with nature, its aromas and the moods of the earth.

36 years leave their mark on the eyes, the mind, the heart and the hands. They form a man's character, the evolution of a wine and a territory. Here, they are the steps in the existential journey of a gentleman, an oenologist, a dominant figure in the world of wine: Casimiro Maule.

Today Maule runs and manages Nino Negri. He headed the Consortium for the Protection of Valtellina Wines for 13 years, where he changed the way wine is made the valley. All credit goes to Maule for the success of Valtellina wines in Italy and overseas and for the Valley's DOCG designation. His wines, his Sforzato 5 Stelle, have achieved cult status, recognised and commended worldwide.

"..to maintain these standards ... we must study and know the nebbiolo variety in Valtellina inside out, starting with the soil in which it grows ... in the past, we would allow the earth to rest for a certain time, now ... we work these terrains continuously. The soil ... needs turning and nourishing. We must start to plan targeted and programmed interventions that will ensure the earth is constantly nourished." ■

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**CASIMIRO MAULE, NINO NEGRI'S  
OENOLOGIST FOR THE PAST 40 YEARS**

winegrowers to neglect local but less well-known varieties with good yields such as Montepulciano d'Abruzzo, Colorino and the white grape Grechetto.

Three regions dominate national wine production: Veneto, Tuscany and Piedmont. Tuscany, with 3 million hectolitres of wine per year, produces fine wines mainly from Sangiovese, which is sometimes blended with Canaiolo and Colorino for colour. Piedmont, the home of Nebbiolo, also produces well-known wines. However, Veneto (particularly Verona and Vicenza) is Italy's top producer of grapes and wine, making up around 20% of total national production. The main grapes in this region are local varieties, such as Corvina (the majority), Molinara and Rondinella, which are blended in Veneto's most famous wine, Amarone. Nonetheless, 60% of the wines produced in Veneto are Indicazione Geografica Tipica (IGT) table wines, as opposed to 40% from DOC or DOCG *appellations*.

But it would be misleading to suggest that Italian wine can be summed up by this trio of regions. As the country's many local varieties attest, there are a wealth of small *appellations* to be discovered, where *auteurs* delight wine lovers with rare vintages characteristic of the *terroir*. Some true oenological treasures are produced by 'undiscovered' estates, like those, for example, near the Swiss-Italian border in the region of Valtellina, which were founded by wealthy Swiss families originally from Grison. Here, the Piedmont variety Nebbiolo is king, and it receives the careful attention of growers who cultivate it on steep mountain terraces.

## VALTELLINA WINES

Vineyards appeared in Valtellina, located in northern Italy in the mountainous area of Lombardy, from the 9th century. Unusually, they are planted at 800 - 1300 metres altitude and face south, southeast and southwest. There is little information about the grape varieties that were cultivated here before the end of the 16th century. That period brought the emergence of tenant farming contracts, in which we can begin to identify certain white and red grape varieties such as Chiavennasca, Pignola, Rossola Dura, Berzemina or Bressana. The development in the quality and quantity of Valtellina wines was directly linked to the development of its sales to the neighbouring Swiss canton of Grison. Today Valtellina (which includes *appellations* such as DOC Valtellina or the prestigious DOCG Sfursat) produces fine red wines from Nebbiolo grapes (locally still called Chiavennasca), a variety originally from Piedmont (more specifically the hilly area of Langhe) and used in the

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### NINO NEGRI SEEKS OUT THE BEST EXPRESSION OF NEBBIOLO, THE LOCAL VARIETY PAR EXCELLENCE

famous Barolo and Barbaresco wines. Nebbiolo offers a good balance of alcohol and acidity, which, along with its bouquet and delicate yet characteristic taste, often results in wines with great ageing potential. In Valtellina, Nebbiolo makes up 90% of the vines; here the grape is more authentic and older than its Piedmont cousin because it has been less subjected to cloning, and as a result has undergone less transformation.

Yet not all wines made from Nebbiolo are unconditionally exceptional. For a successful vintage, it is crucial that the grapes ripen gradually, ideally during hot days and cool nights. They contain limited amounts of anthocyanins, the majority of which are "cianinas", which tend to cause insoluble precipitation during the first hours of fermentation. Nebbiolo often has an orangey colour; in order to stabilise it, it is necessary to promote the polymerisation of the tannins with the anthocyanins at a fermentation temperature near 35°C and frequently aerate the wine using *remontage* (there are certain exceptions, for example, at the Nino Negri winery). The resulting wines are obviously different from those of the past, and generally have a shorter maturing time. On the other hand, they are very successful on the international market.

Crisscrossing Valtellina, one cannot help but be awed by the amazing sight of vineyards cultivated on terraces dug into dolomite rock at altitudes of 260 - 900 metres. This has been described as "extreme" viticulture, the harvests carried out exclusively by hand on each small terrace, and the grapes transported to the wineries by helicopter. The famous Sforzato, or *sfursat* in the local dialect, is one of the rare wines, along with Veneto's Amarone, to be made from dried grapes. The grapes are harvested a bit earlier for this wine in order to ensure they are in good condition. They are then placed in small wooden crates with a capacity of 4-5 kg and dried in naturally ventilated rooms until December 10th of the harvest year. This process of dehydration leads to a relatively high concentration of sugar in the wine, while preserving the substances that supply its aromas and colour. The resulting wine is generally powerful, with olfactory and taste complexity, and pairs well with rich foods or desserts.

The Nino Negri winery was the first to open its doors in Valtellina in 1897, and itself bears witness to the development of winemaking in region. Casimiro Maule, the estate's oenologist for the past 40 years, has a very territorial approach to wine.



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**IN NINO NEGRI WINES, NEBBIOLO IS NOT  
BLENDED WITH OTHER VARIETIES**

As opposed to "modern" wineries such as Fay or Mamete Prevostini, Nino Negri seeks out the best expression of Nebbiolo, the local variety *par excellence*. The wines produced here are often distinguished by their origin from one of the four regional DOC and DOCG appellations (Sassella, Grumello, Valgella and Inferno) and are a reflection of the vine and the exposition of the vineyard. This is enhanced further in Nino Negri wines, as Nebbiolo is not blended with other varieties and *remontage* is avoided by the use of tanks equipped with oxygenating systems. The maceration of the grapes is brief; the maturation in barrels is rapid and is carried out in new French oak barrels made from aged wood that has been exposed to the open air for at least 30 months, so the wood flavour is less invasive. This retains the natural characteristics of the Nebbiolo grape, ensuring that the fruit is not dominated by the oak. The original bite of this grape variety offers a sensation on the palate that is both powerful and smooth. The wines are not filtered and do not undergo cold stabilisation. Apart from 2009 Ca' Brione, a blend of Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc, Nino Negri wines are monovarietal reds, made exclusively from Nebbiolo.

In our tasting at the Nino Negri winery, the 2005 and 2007 vintages came out best, particularly for the middle-range wines: for example, 2007 Vigneto Fracia and 2007 Inferno Valtellina Superiore. In the top range, we liked 2005 Riserva Valtellina Superiore DOCG 2007 and 1999 Sassorosso Valtellina Superiore. We also enjoyed the excellent and very elegant 2007 Sfursat 5 Stelle - powerful, fruity and concentrated, worthy of certain Burgundy Pinot Noirs. Apart from the presence of red fruit (cherry) or black fruit (blackberry), whose level of ripeness depends on the wine, the unifying threads running through Nino Negri wines are their mineral aromas and flavours alongside liquorice, hints of menthol and balsamic, good concentration and powerful and smooth tannins. Added to this in the case of Sfursat are the olfactory and taste sensations obtained by using dried grapes, which results in a higher level of alcohol and an impressive complexity.

The Swiss Triacca winery also produces different types and qualities of Nebbiolo red wines, including the interesting 2005 Sfursat Valtellina Superiore and the surprising dessert wine 2009 Moscato del Presidente, so called because it was the favourite of the former President of Italy, Carlo Azeglio Ciampi. It is a lightly fortified red wine made from Moscato Rosa (which is also cultivated in the regions of Friuli and Trentino) and has a fruity and fresh bouquet and palate, with the scent and taste of rose. It is available in limited quantities.

*By Delphine Veissière*