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Italy’s Wine Laws  
(And Why We Care About Them)

As Americans, we tend not to think too much about the laws that affect our wines. We buy a wine because we enjoy it or want to try it. The laws that prescribe what can go into the bottle do not cause us to think very much about them. Perhaps we are fortunate.

In Italy and many other wine producing countries, however, wine laws have a bit more of an impact on the product. The laws establish controls that should, in theory, give us some indication as to the quality of the wine in the bottle. At the same time, there are a few winemakers in Italy who have decided to work outside the wine laws (which, oddly, is perfectly legal).

The Italian wine laws establish four “levels” of quality. The basic level is Vino da Tavola, or literally “table wine.” In theory, this is your everyday drinking wine. If you think of the wine levels as a pyramid, Vino da Tavola would be the ground level of the structure. And, like a pyramid, this level has more wines in it than higher levels.

The next level is the Indicazione Geografica Tipica, or IGT. This would be the second level of the pyramid. There are slightly fewer wines in this category.

The third level is where significant quality appears, the Denominazione di Origine Controllata, or DOC. The wines in this category must be made from grapes within a specific DOC area. For example, if a wine is labeled as a Chianti, all of the grapes must come from the Chianti region. In addition, the DOC regulations dictate what kind of grapes must be used for the wine to carry the DOC designation.

The fourth and final level is the Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita, or DOCG. This level is somewhat poorly named since it suggests a guarantee of quality. In fact, a DOCG wine is no more guaranteed to be a great wine than any other bottle of wine. The DOCG wines, however, must be made from grapes grown within the specific DOCG region, and like the DOC wines, only certain grape varietals can be used.

So, what does all of this really mean? Most of the wines we will find in our wine shops are DOC wines, made from grapes within a specific appellation. The Italian authorities have given some of these appellations the DOCG designation based upon controls and, to some degree, merit.

Some winemakers have opted to work outside the Italian wine laws, finding them to be too restrictive. In the second half of the twentieth century, Italian winemakers visited France and the U.S. and found wines being made that defied conventional definitions. The Italians wanted to do this as well, but couldn’t release the wines with the DOC or DOCG designation on the bottle. So, they decided to not worry about it.

The most notable example of these wines is what we call Super Tuscans. Most wines made in Tuscany must come from the Sangiovese or other native grapes. The renegade winemakers wanted to make wines using the classic Bordeaux grapes like Cabernet Sauvignon or Merlot. So, they planted these grapes and made them into stunning wines. Because they do not fall within the DOC or DOCG definitions, they carry the humble designation IGT Toscana, but they command hefty prices.
Now that we understand a little bit more about Italian wine laws, let’s move on to the good stuff.

**Italy’s Important Wine Regions**

The Italians have been making wine for over 4,000 years. This predates the founding of Athens in 1235 BC and even the beginnings of Judaism around 1200 BC. Humans began developing the alphabet during this time and domesticated the horse. Italian wine making even predated the reign of Hammurabi, the Babylonian king and law maker (1792-1745 BC) and Pharaoh Tutankhamun (1334-1325 BC). (You might know him better as King Tut.) It’s little wonder that Greeks called Italy “Oenotria”—the “land of wine.”

Generally, we divide Italy into four major regions and then subdivide each region further. The four big regions are the Northwest, the Northeast, Central Italy, and South/Islands. We’ll explore each region further and learn about the important appellations in each major region.

**The Northwest**

If you look at the map of Italy on the cover, you can see the regions that make up the Northwest: Aosta Valley, Piedmont, Liguria, Lombardy and Emilia-Romagna. Even though Emilia-Romagna runs all the way to the east coast of Italy, it is probably included in this major region since it stretches into Northwest Italy.

The most important appellation in this region is Piedmont. Home of Turin, the Piedmontese produce some of Italy’s great wines. Piedmont has more DOC-DOCG regions than any other part of Italy.

Within Piedmont are several DOCGs: Barolo, Barbaresco, Gattinara and Ghemme, which grow the Nebbiolo grape. Another DOCG is Brachetto d’Acqui, which is a sweet and fragrant sparkling red wine.

Besides the Nebbiolo and Brachetto grapes, Piedmont also grows Barbera (the most popular red wine grape in Piedmont) and Dolcetto.

Among white wines, which make up roughly one-third of Piedmont’s production, the Asti appellation dominates. This DOCG is given to both the sparkling Asti Spumante (which means “foaming”) and the softer Moscato d’Asti. The other star is Gavi, recently added to the DOCG list, which is a dry white wine made from the Cortese grape.
The Wine Regions of Piedmont
The Northeast

The three wine regions of the Italian Northeast are often called the Tre Venezia given their proximity to Venice. The regions themselves are Veneto, Trentino-Alto Adige, and Friuli-Venezia Giulia. Of the three, Veneto is the most important.

Veneto is home to three DOCGs (Bardolino Superiore, Recioto di Soave and Soave Superiore) and many DOCs, including the well-known Valpolicella.

Soave is the most popular of the Italian dry white wines, and ranks third after Chianti and Asti in terms of production (more than 50 million liters per year). Valpolicella is made from a blend of three grapes—Corvina, Rondinella and Molinara) and ranks fourth (more than 30 million liters annually). Valpolicella is a great red wine to drink when it is relatively young.

One of Italy’s greatest red wines comes from Veneto: Amarone. This wine is always well structured and complex, with great potential for aging. Amarones are not inexpensive, but they are almost always delicious.
Central Italy

Central Italy is the home of Tuscany, perhaps the most famous Italian wine region in the world. Here you will also find Umbria, Marches, Latium, Abruzzi and Molise. In Tuscany there are several DOCGs: Brunello di Montalcino, Carmignano, Chianti, Chianti Classico, Vernaccia di San Gimignano, and Vino Nobile di Montepulciano.

Chianti, of course, is made from the Sangiovese grape. While one can occasionally still find Chiantis in straw-covered bulbous bottles, today’s Chiantis are real stars. A subregion, Chianti Classico, is well known for producing some of the most enjoyable red wines Italy has to offer. Many of the producers participate in a consortium with a black rooster on the logo. This is not, as some think, a sign of extra quality. It is purely a marketing group.

In the 1970s, some winemakers began growing Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot and blending them with Sangiovese, producing the cult wines known as Super Tuscans. Some of the Super Tuscans are made purely from Cabernet Sauvignon, such as Sassicaia. Others are blends including Syrah and Pinot Nerot. Regardless of which grapes are in the wine, Super Tuscans continue to demand a high price.
South and Islands

Within this major region we can find the appellations of Campania, Apulia, Basilicata, Calabria, Sicily and Sardinia. These regions produce quite a bit of wine, but most of it remains unknown to the rest of the world’s wine drinkers. Of particular note are the Sicilian wines made from the Nero d’Avola grape. These wines are rustic, flavorful, and tend to be great values. Sicily is also the source for Marsala.

While the wines of the South and Islands of Italy are not well known, wine drinkers in the know are watching these regions carefully as they appear to be catching up with their neighbors to the north.
Wines Worth Knowing

Piedmont

**Barolo** is a powerful, huge red wine. Some might argue it's too powerful. Others bask in the power and match this wine with rich game meats. Perhaps a little too powerful for the American version of spaghetti and meatballs. This wine can definitely age—and probably should.

**Barbaresco** has many of the same qualities as Barolo, but is often a little softer and more approachable. But never think of this wine as being wimpy.

**Barbera** is not to be confused with Barbaresco. This is a juicy, easy drinking red wine.

**Dolcetto** is Piedmont’s simplest red wine, but it’s far from uninteresting.

**Gavi** is Piedmont’s star white wine, dry and crisp, with citrus and mineral characteristics. You can also buy a sparkling version of this wine, but most Piedmont sparkling wines are Astis.

**Asti** is a white wine that comes in a still and *Spumante* (foaming) version. Too much cheap Asti Spumante came to the US, and it carries the reputation of a jug wine. But if you search for it, you can find a real Asti Spumante that will present plenty of characteristics to sort through.

**Moscato d'Asti** is made from the white Moscato grape, and it is usually lightly sweet with plenty of fruit. It is usually slightly fizzy, but not like a *Spumante*.

Veneto

**Amarone** is a massive red wine. Let this one age for a while.

**Soave** is a well-known white wine, light, fresh and easy drinking.

**Valpolicella** is a straightforward, velvety red wine. Enjoy with richer Italian cuisine. Note that Valpolicella is made in a range of styles, from light and fruity to big and dense.

Tuscany

**Chianti**, a red wine, is the flagship wine of this region. Medium bodied, fruit-forward, a perfect match for Italian food and pizza. Chianti Classico is a somewhat more complex wine, but every bit as enjoyable. Chianti Classico Reserva is yet more complex, and probably too powerful for spaghetti sauce-based meals, but it would be great with steaks on the grill.

**Brunello di Montalcino** may not be as popular as Chianti, but it is the wine that the Tuscans are most proud of. This is a complex and elegant wine, with plenty of aging potential. This red will almost always produce fond memories.
Sicily

**Marsala** is a white wine that has been fortified, producing a sweet wine. It comes in three colors: oro (gold), ambra (amber) and rubino (ruby), the latter of which is extremely rare and quite expensive.

**Nero d’Avola** is not a wine per se, but is the red grape that produces Sicily’s red wines. They tend to be genuine bargains and straightforward drinking wines. They match well with Italian cuisine and grilled beef cuts.

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