15. Introduction to Italy

Italy has a very long history of wine production. It goes back at least to the 8th century BCE with both Phoenician influence in central Italy in the Etruscan period and Greek influence in the Greek colonies, which covered much of southern Italy. It is likely that it was the Etruscans who exported wine culture to Mediterranean France from the 6th century BCE onwards.

By the time of Pliny the Elder (died 79 CE), wine culture was well established in Italy and Pliny even writes about the fame of individual vintages. The massive expansion of the city of Rome created a home market for wine and, with Roman expansion in the Mediterranean, the possibility of export in amphorae to Gaul (the area which today includes modern day France) and Spain. In this period, the most prestigious wines were from modern day Lazio and northern Campania, although wine was being made and consumed in the rest of the Italian peninsula. For example, wines from the north of the peninsula are commented on in writing from the time of Emperor Augustus (31 BCE to 14 CE).

After the end of the Roman Empire (5th century CE), wine production continued as a part of the standard Mediterranean diet of grain, olives and wine, but the market for fine wine and the export of wine came to a halt. The economy revived in the 11th to 14th centuries with the cities of Genoa and Venice becoming trading centres for Europe as a whole. As a result, they became centres for trading in wine. Florence became the banking capital of Europe with families such as Antinori making their money in banking and then investing in land and wine production. Similarly, the Frescobaldi family made money as traders and became important landowners and wine producers. Both families continue to be major players in wine production today.

From the 13th century on, wine became an important cash crop while much of Italy was farmed on a sharecropping basis; the landowners typically took half of the produce of the land with peasants keeping the other half to live on and, occasionally, to sell. Most wine was consumed locally with a proportion being exported by boat to other parts of Europe, as transport on land was very difficult.

The names of some Italian grape varieties (for example, Barbera and Trebbiano) are mentioned in books of the 14th century. The first full treatment of Italian grape varieties was written by the Renaissance botanist Andrea Bacci in the late 16th century. Little is known about the quality of wines produced in the following centuries, although exports appear to have reduced.

The modern period of Italian wine began in the 19th century when the styles known today were beginning to be established. For example, Chianti became a wine predominantly based on Sangiovese only at the end of that century. International varieties began to be planted in north-east Italy in the early 20th century after phylloxera.

The unification of Italy in 1861 and the economic boom after the Second World War set the scene for the contemporary period. In the decades after the war, the emphasis was on high yields and volume production. The last three decades of the 20th century saw the general standard of Italian wines develop from simple wine, for local, daily consumption or as inexpensive wine for export, to wines that can succeed in a competitive international market. The most important innovations were the use of stainless steel tanks and temperature control for white wines in Friuli in the 1960s (see Friuli, Winemaking) and the success of red Bordeaux blends in Tuscany (known as Super Tuscans, see Tuscany), from the 1970s, raising the ambition of all winemaking in Italy. The last two decades have seen a renewed emphasis on quality wines from Italy's abundance of local grape varieties, alongside the great commercial successes of Pinot Grigio and Prosecco.

THE GROWING ENVIRONMENT AND GRAPE GROWING

Climate

As Italy is a long, thin country (latitude ranges from 35–47°N), with the Apennines running down most of the country providing a wide range of sites, it is best to consider the climate under the individual regions. Many regions are influenced by the sea that surrounds the

country on three sides, but some inland areas have a continental climate (examples include Trentino-Alto Adige and Veneto).

Nonetheless, in general, many of the wine regions have a warm, Mediterranean climate, very suitable for viticulture.

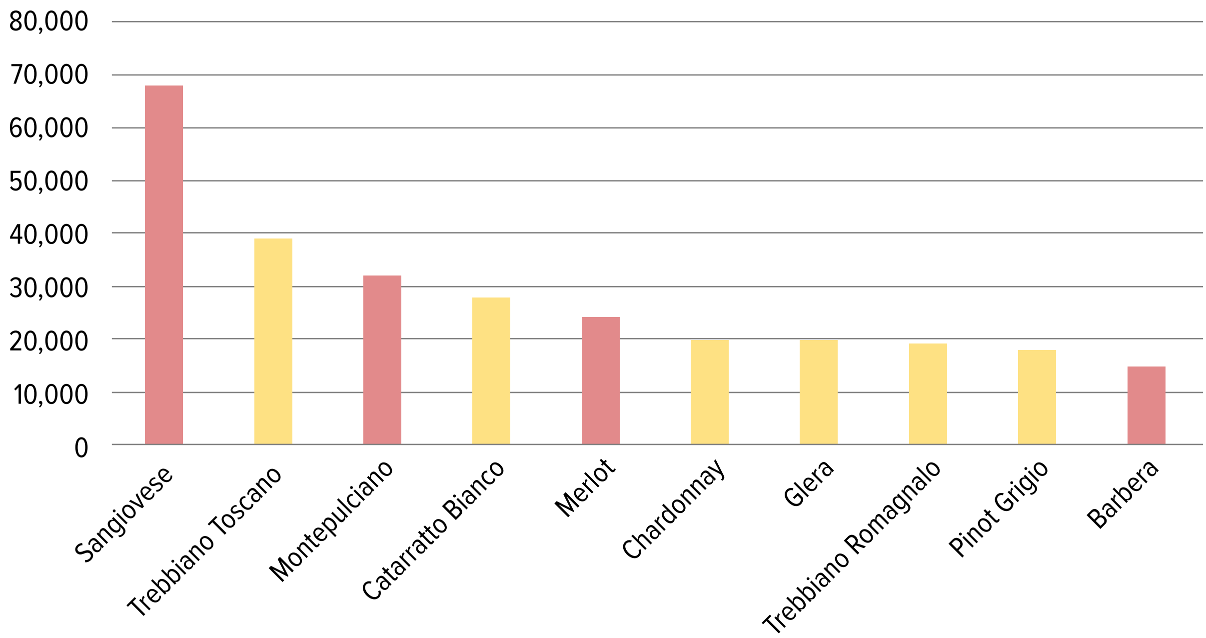
Vineyard management

Since the Second World War, there has been a nearly complete change from traditional forms of grape growing to modern, specialised vineyards with vines on trellises. Pergola training had been common in high volume production areas in the north, mixed planting was common in Tuscany (vines in the same field with olive trees, vegetables and grain) and bush vines were common in the south. Pergola training and bush vines are still in use in some places; for example, the shade provided by the pergola system can be helpful in some circumstances and bush vines are highly adapted to hot dry climates in the south where producers are willing to continue to do much of the work by hand. The preferences of producers for the various training systems will be noted in the individual regions. In 2019, 19 per cent of hectares under vine in Italy were certified organic or were in conversion, a growth of nearly 110 per cent over the preceding decade. Sicily, Tuscany and Puglia accounted for over half of the organic vineyard.[1]

Grape varieties

Italy is noted for its large number of local varieties, to which the common international varieties have been added. Conservative estimates vary between 375 and 500 identified varieties, far more than any other country. Some varieties, both black and white, are widely planted in a number of regions. For example, the three most planted varieties in Italy, Sangiovese, Pinot Grigio and Trebbiano are planted in a number of regions. Others are strongly assoicated with one or two regions, for example, Glera in the Veneto and Friuli.

Italy: top ten varieties, hectares, 2016



Source: Anderson 2020[2]

WINEMAKING

As noted, Italian winemaking has developed as a result of influences in white winemaking from Germany (fermentation in stainless steel, temperature control) and in red winemaking from France (maturation in small, new French oak barrels). Traditionally, red wines were matured in large casks (e.g. 1,000–5,000 L) often made from Slavonian oak and used for many years, enabling slow controlled oxidation but not adding new oak flavours. In the 1980s and 1990s, ambitious winemakers increasingly used new French oak barriques both with Bordeaux varieties and with some Italian varieties such as Nebbiolo and Sangiovese. In the main, the last two decades have seen reversal of this trend in favour of old oak, larger vessels or alternatives such as concrete. Thus, while new French oak continues to be used for high quality Bordeaux blends and some wines made from local varieties (e.g. top quality Barbera), most wines made from Italian varieties (e.g. Nebbiolo and Sangiovese) no longer have pronounced new oak flavour.

WINE LAW AND REGULATIONS

Central Tuscany saw the very first attempt to define a wine production area legally, by Grand Duke Cosimo III de'Medici in 1716. The geographical limits of Chianti, Pomino (modern Chianti Rufina), Carmignano and Val d'Arno di Sopra were outlined and criminal penalties on any merchant selling or customer buying wines falsely claiming to be from these areas were introduced. It appears that these laws were never used, although the intention was to protect the good reputations of these wines and to prevent fraud.

DOC and DOCG

In modern times, Italy has developed a system of wine law on the model of the French appellations system, as later incorporated into European Union law. The first version of this was the introduction of the DOC system (*Denominazione di Origine Controllata*), similar to the French AOC, with effect from the 1967 vintage. The alternative was *vino da tavola*. This was used overwhelming for simple, everyday wines but also occasionally for outstanding quality wines that did not qualify for a DOC, including:

- Wines made in areas that were not at that time covered by a DOC; for example, the Super Tuscan Sassicaia grown on the coast at Bolgheri, which is not a traditional area for high quality wine. The Bolgheri DOC was later introduced in 1994 to accommodate the Super Tuscans.
- Wines that did not conform to the rules of a DOC as they were then written. For example, Le Pergole Torte from the Montevertine estate. This estate is within the Chianti Classico defined region. However, the wine was made with 100 per cent Sangiovese at a time when the DOC required Chianti Classico to be a blend including white grapes. Montevertine took the decision to make this 100 per cent Sangiovese wine, leave the Chianti Classico consortium and sell the wine as *vino da tavola* and later, when the category was introduced, as IGT (see IGT).

The DOCG category (*Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita*) with stricter rules (e.g. requiring a lower yield) had been included in the legislation that introduced the DOC. This category was eventually used in practice in 1980. In general, the more prestigious wine regions have become DOCGs.

Some prestigious regions have undertaken studies of the particular characteristics of zones within a DOC or DOCG. Denominations such as Barolo and Barbaresco have introduced formal zoning schemes in which the name of a zone can be used on the label of the wine. For example, the grapes for Barolo DOCG Bussia must be grown within the defined Bussia zone of Barolo DOCG.

For DOC and DOCG wines, there are also certain legally defined labelling terms. These include:

- **Classico** – Wines made exclusively from grapes grown within a defined historical area of a DOC or DOCG.
- **Superiore** – Wines with a higher minimum alcohol level, typically an additional 0.5% abv.
- **Riserva** – Wines submitted to a certain ageing period, at least two years for red wines and one year for white wines. Some individual DOC/DOCGs specify that this ageing or part of it must be in wood.

IGT

In 1992, Italy introduced the category of IGT (*Indicazione Geografica Tipica*), corresponding to the French Vin de Pays, now protected geographical indication (PGI). This is for wines from a defined but larger geographical area, with a wider choice of grape variety and styles and typically allowing higher yields than DOC or DOCG wines. Examples include IGT Toscana. Like other IGTs, this includes provision for a range of wine styles – white, red, rosé, dry, *abboccato* (*demi-sec*), *frizzante* (lightly sparkling), *novello* (wine made and intended to be drunk soon after the harvest), sweet wines made from dried grapes (*passito*) or late harvested grapes (*vendemmia tardiva*). The grapes can be grown in any suitable place in the whole of Tuscany and growers may use any registered variety.

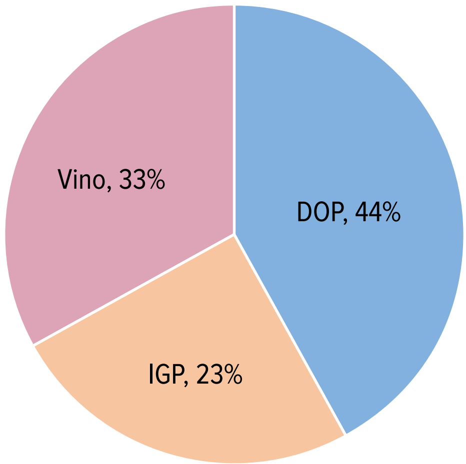
The Italian system was incorporated into the EU-wide introduction of the categories of protected designation of origin (PDO) and PGI in 2008. This allows producers either to use the new categories (*Denominazione di Origine Protetta,* DOP, and *Indicazione Geografica Protetta*, IGP, in Italian) or the traditional DOC/DOCG categories for PDO wines. DOC and DOCG wines fall within the PDO category; IGT wines can be labelled either IGT or IGP. The most basic category, *vino*, replaces the older *vino da tavola*.

WINE BUSINESS

Over the last five years to 2021 Italy has regularly been the largest producer of wine in the world. In that period it averaged a production of 48 million hL, roughly 15 per cent more than France.[3]

The average size of vineyard holdings is small (roughly 2.3 ha)[4] with many growers taking their fruit to co-operatives, merchants or large companies. The top five companies by turnover in 2020 were Cantine Riunite & Civ, Caviro, Botter Carlo, Marchesi Antinori (with estates mainly in Italy), Cavit.[5] Botter (merchant house) and Antinori are private companies, the other three are co-operatives with multiple brands. Co-operatives are responsible for 55 per cent of wine production.[6] Wine consumption per capita has been in long-term decline in Italy, with consumption now at one-third the level of a century ago. The consumption of spirits and, especially, beer has grown in the same period.[7] The decade to 2021 has seen a stabilisation and even a modest rise in consumption. In recent decades, as domestic consumption dropped, producers increasingly looked to export markets.

Volume of Italian wine produced by quality category



Source: ISTAT data for 2020[8]

Of wine produced 44 per cent was exported in 2021. By volume this was divided between still wine (70 per cent) and sparkling (30 per cent; for more details, see the chapter on Sparkling Wine in Italy in D4: Sparkling Wines). By total value, exports from Italy were below France but above Spain. The most important export markets by value were the USA, Germany, UK and (24, 16 and 10 per cent respectively in 2021), followed by Switzerland and Canada.[9]

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