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HARPERS WINE & SPIRIT

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FEATURE Italian wines

Capturing the cornucopia

Italy has never been more attractive as a source of highly individual wines. **Andrew Catchpole** talks to producers about delivering the message

"We need to promote and protect our own unique varieties and work hard to get them recognised on the market"
Stefano Girelli,
TWP Wines

We are in a lucky spot and hope to remain there. Sales have been strong before and during the crisis – our biggest challenge has been in supplying the increasing demand for our wines," says Niccolò Marzichi Lenzi, MD of Bolgheri-based Tenuta di Biserno.

Given the near-global shutdown of hospitality, with reopening still struggling to gain full momentum, such a positive report is good to hear. Lenzi, though, as with rival producers, still admits there is much to be done to widen engagement with Italy's diverse offer.

"The coming months and years will be challenging because the pandemic has changed everyone's habits. The uncertainty of what the 'new normal' will be like makes us particularly attentive to the consumer's reactions and purchasing habits," he adds.

What Lenzi also reports is that the much-touted 'drink less but better' trend has continued through the pandemic – not least as people shifted to in-home drinking, flipping spend from on-trade-iced wines – with a prediction that this will continue and benefit Italy's more premium wines.

As does Francesco Vitulli, export director at Famiglia Cecchi, who adds: "In the UK for example, our wines sit mostly in the more premium end of

mainstream sales, and this section seems to be holding up well."

ADAPTING TO CONSUMERS

Even so, adapting to the consumer for a country that has more indigenous varieties than any other is no mean feat. With Italy it's fair to say that obscurity and complexity are part of the appeal for the wine geek, but far less so for an often bewildered public. And this cuts to the heart of the challenge for a country with sales rooted firmly in the likes of Pinot Grigio and Prosecco, also with consumer interest in both categories showing signs





of flagging.
How, then, to expand the Italian drinking repertoire of casual wine drinkers?

"Italy is a leading wine producer in the world, with more indigenous grape varieties than any other country. We need to promote and protect our own unique varieties and work hard to get them recognised on the market, but this takes time and dedication," says Stefano Girelli, MD of TWP Wines, which has a pan-Italian portfolio.

"Too often in the past we have run after the 'wine that is selling now', without investing in wines that could create a future market."

For Vitulli, part of the problem lies in the nature of the Italian industry, its very diversity also being its Achilles Heel. But, he says, the answer could lie within that



THE UK WINE MARKET VIEW

Liberty Wines MD David Gleave MW explains the dynamics of the Italian category and why a more adventurous list is a plus.

"We're seeing lots of interest across the board with Italy and it's been happening for a while. All want to get a Pinot Grigio, Prosecco and Gavi di Gavi listing, because they know it will sell. But if you put on Aglianico, Negroamaro, Vermentino, Fiano, it can surprise you, and Soave Classico is also going well.

"People are responding to these wines and sometimes more obscure wines can work better. If you are going in for Gavi di Gavi in a restaurant or wine shop, there is [price visible] competition, but if you go in for a good Inzolia or Fiano from the south, then there's less competition for the really good wines and, when you put them on, the consumer likes them.

"These are wines that are recognisable enough for the more adventurous consumer, but the less knowledgeable also feel comfortable with Italy in general. Once people are 'in' Italy they have already taken a big step and said: 'I'm going to let go of my inhibitions.' And once they've got their head around some styles, and the fact that Italy has more native grape varieties than anywhere else in the world, they are then open and willing to go on a journey of experimentation and discovery.

"Italy is very competitive, although it's nowhere near the cheapest [producing country] any more, but the wine disappearing the most in Europe is the really cheap wine, so why grow cheap grapes? Italy stacks up well, with a good, competitive number of wines in that mid-price bracket of £7-10."

conundrum. "Italy's strengths historically are its heritage, culture and lifestyle; its challenges are the fragmented nature of the industry without strong central links," he says.

"We will, as a country, need to show more organisation in order to come back strongly versus our competitors in the world of wine. It's a fantastic industry to be in, but its competitiveness will be greater than ever in the near future."



COMMON LANGUAGE

Danilo Drocco, head winemaker at Nino Negri in Valtellina, picks up the theme. He charges that Italian producers have typically been inward looking and "need to work on a common language to face the challenges of a changing world".

He adds: "The incredible variety of appellations we have must be put over as an opportunity for the choice of the consumer, not an impediment."

Like Vitulli, Drocco believes that much more emphasis should also be placed on linking Italy's heritage, stunning regions and gastronomy to wine, with eno-tourism to the fore.

"We need to make that vital connection between our magnificent territory and our products, building awareness of the huge potential of such original and unique [wine] production."

Girelli also reports a strengthening of sales at mid-price levels against diminishing entry level sales (and see David Gleave MW boxout). He says that the consumer is trading up and this, in turn, is necessarily leading to more adventurous purchasing in terms of varieties, regions and styles.

Perhaps fortuitously for the rest of Italy's producers, Pinot Grigio, Prosecco and their ilk have done little by way of offering a premium price ladder for consumers to climb, leaving an opening for others to do so.

"It may sound silly, but I strongly believe we've been penalised and categorised for years because our entry-level wines are so good," says Lenzi.

"Overall people are slowly realising that Italian wines are not only great value for money but can be among the best and are extremely diverse from region to region, and drinkers nowadays have fewer preconceptions and know what they like or dislike."

Lenzi argues that this is the reason Italian wines are gaining ground in the more premium arena. "The road ahead of us is still long, but it's much more promising than it was 15 or 20 years ago," he concludes.