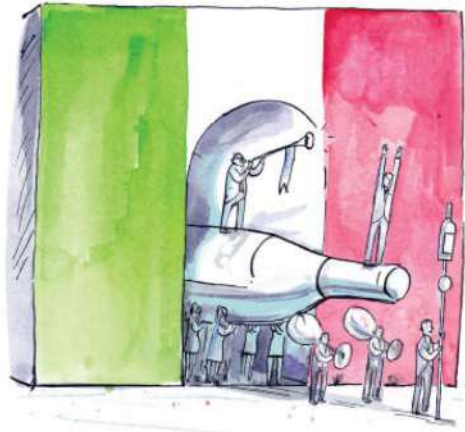


Wine

Italian renaissance

Jancis Robinson



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The mainstream press love a wine spat. When Italy's prime minister [Matteo Renzi](#) recently boasted that Italian wine was now superior to France's (a claim supposedly dismissed by French president François Hollande), probably more was made of it than was strictly necessary. But what is the truth?

If the measure is sheer volume, then France and Italy annually vie for who produces more wine from their remarkably similar total areas of vineyards. Frost, poor weather during flowering in early June and grape-swelling rainfall can all play a significant part in determining the size of the final crop in the northern hemisphere.

But if quality is the measure, as I suspect it is for most Financial Times readers, then that is another thing altogether. Though I am adamant that price is no direct measure of quality, it is worth taking a look at relative prices of top French and top Italian wines — if only to spot

where the value lies.

On the list of the world's 50 most expensive wines compiled by Wine-searcher.com, the dominant wine price comparison site, 11 are German sweet rarities, one (Screaming Eagle) is from Napa Valley and the rest are French. Italy is notable by its absence.

But this charts only what people are prepared to pay, doubtless influenced by the fact that Bordeaux has long been the standard wine investment commodity and top burgundies are made in such small quantities — and have a history that spans centuries. While fine wine was being made on the Côte d'Or in the Middle Ages, Italy has existed as a nation for barely a century and a half. It is a fact that Italian wine, admittedly from a standing start in the mid-20th century, has been catching up fast. So fast that one of the leading London-based fine wine traders (with operations in Hong Kong, Singapore and Los Angeles) has recently changed its name from Bordeaux Index to the geographically neutral BI.

Berry Bros & Rudd, an all-round wine merchant that is also in fine wine trading in both London and Asia, has seen a 60 per cent growth in the value of its sales of Italian wine over the past five years, while the value of the Italian wine sold on its inter-customer broking exchange rose by a third last year.

Ten years ago Justerini & Brooks, its rival across St James's Street, was already buying Barolo from some of the finest producers in Piemonte but customers were so apathetic that its stock list was an embarrassment of marked-down mature vintages. How things have changed. J&B's sales of Piemonte wines alone have overtaken those of their Rhône wines, with Tuscany not far behind.



Not all wines from the hauntingly perfumed Nebbiolo grape have to be expensive

So British wine collectors have at long last been distracted from their Bordeaux-or-nothing path to a much more varied diet, in which Burgundy features as never before but fine Italian wine is also increasingly valued. It is also notable that of the 15 fine wine events currently hosted in London by various members of the Wine Advocate staff (not including its founder, the American wine critic Robert Parker), the sellout was the Barolo tasting.

Barolo or Barbaresco. This Eugenio Bocchino, Roccabella 2013 Langhe Nebbiolo retails at less than £20

(thesalusburywinestore.com, 0207 372 6664; Noble & Wild Hereford, 01432 507490).

At JancisRobinson.com we have been so convinced that Barolo needed more exposure in Britain (especially compared with the US, where fine Italian wine has long occupied a much more central position) that we will be holding our fourth annual Barolo night later this year, presenting about 40 examples of the 2012 vintage picked by our Italian specialist Walter Speller. These events, and the similar

one we held to showcase Brunello 2010 last year, are instant sellouts.

So how does top-quality Italian wine compare in terms of value with top-quality French wine? Even among Italy's most celebrated wines of Barolo, Barbaresco and Brunello, it is a struggle to find a wine that costs more than £100 a bottle — something that, alas, is not true of France's grandest wines, the most sought-after classed growths of [Bordeaux](#) and grands crus of Burgundy.

This is surely something to be celebrated, and suggests that now is the time to take advantage of Italy's best wines, whose prices seem, unfortunately, highly likely to rise. This is particularly true of Italian wines that are not quite as internationally celebrated as the famous Bs: Barolo, Barbaresco, Brunello di Montalcino and the most famous Bordeaux blends of Bolgheri such as Sassicaia and Ornellaia. I'm thinking particularly of the wines based, like Barolo and Barbaresco, on the Nebbiolo grape grown in the dramatic countryside of Alto Piemonte to the north carrying appellations such as Gattinara, Lessona, Boca, Ghemme and Bramaterra.

In Tuscany the price of Brunello di Montalcino seems disproportionately high compared with the hundreds of other great wines based on the Sangiovese grape, most obviously the finest Chianti Classico and the many pockets of fine wine production in the Tuscan hills. They could be said to have an increasing advantage in this era of global warming over the sunbaked vineyards of Montalcino and Montepulciano in southern Tuscany.

Not that all of southern Italy is too hot for fine wine production. As I have written previously, Sicily is a new and exciting source of a range of great wines heavily stamped with intensely local character. But in central and southern Italy there is a host of other vernacular wines made from indigenous grape varieties (Sagrantino, Aglianico and Gaglioppo spring most

immediately to mind).

Nor are Italian white wines to be sniffed at these days. Again, the varietal diversity of Italy is something Renzi could use to good effect when comparing Italian and French wines as Italy has far more local grape varieties to choose from than the French.

But I think Italian wine producers' biggest problem is that they are still constantly measuring themselves against France. This is a mistake. They have quite enough to be proud of to stand on their own two feet nowadays.

Stockists from wineseacher.com

Some really Italian Italian wines

Whites

- Inama, Vigneti di Foscari 2014 Soave (£17.99 Waitrose)
- Walter Massa, Derthona Timorasso 2013 Colli Tortonesi (£18.99 Harrogate Fine Wine)
- Nino Barraco Catarratto 2014 (£24 Noble Fine Liquor of London)

Reds

- Santa Venere Gaglioppo 2013 Cirò (£7.95 The Wine Society)
- Tenuta Santa Caterina, Arlandino 2013 Grignolino d'Asti (£11.50 The Wine Society)
- Eugenio Bocchino, Rocabella 2013 Langhe Nebbiolo (£19.99 Hook & Ford of London W5)
- Travaglini, Tre Vigne 2009 Gattinara (Oregon, £29.99 Field & Fawcett of Yorkshire)
- Giuseppe Mascarello, Villero 2011 Barolo (£68.70 Berry Bros & Rudd)

Illustration by Graham Roumieu

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