



Written by
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Italians, forget the French!



A slightly shorter version of this article is published by the Financial Times.

The mainstream press love a wine spat and probably made more than was necessary about the Italian premier Matteo Renzi's recent boast, supposedly countered by François Hollande, that Italian wine is now superior to France's, but what is the truth?

If the measure is sheer volume then France and Italy annually vie for who produced more wine from their remarkably similar total area 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 - so much so that the Portuguese cork industry is in a state of high alert during the vine-growing season - particularly during the flowering.

But if quality is the measure, as I suspect it is for most visitors to this site, then that is another thing altogether. Although 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.

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

But of course 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 twentieth century, has been catching up fast.

So fast in fact 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 60% growth in the value of its sales of Italian wine over the last 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 their arch-rivals across St James's Street, Justerini & Brooks, were already buying Barolo from some of the finest producers in Piemonte but their customers were so apathetic that their stock list was an embarrassment of marked-down mature vintages. My, how things have changed. J&B's sales of Piemonte wines alone have overtaken those of their Rhône wines with Tuscany not far behind. (See Walter's review of J&B's current Piemontese offer.)

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 (though not its founder, the American wine critic Robert Parker), the sell-out was the Barolo tasting.

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 than in the UK) that we will be holding our fourth annual Barolo Night on November 20, presenting about 40 examples of the 2012 vintage hand-picked by our Italian specialist Walter Speller. These events, and the similar one we held to showcase Brunello 2010 last year, are instant sell-outs.

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 quite 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 that are 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 already written [here](#), Sicily is a new and exciting source of a range of great wines heavily stamped with intensely local character - very much in the current *Weinzeitgeist* (which the Bordeaux blends of Bolgheri are not). But throughout 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 nowadays. Again, the varietal diversity of Italy is something Matteo Renzi could use to good effect when comparing his country's wines with those of France. Italy has far more local grape varieties to choose from than France has been left with after decades of more centralised and commercially disciplined viticulture.

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

SOME REALLY ITALIAN ITALIAN WINES

WHITES

Inama, Vigneti di Foscari 2014 Soave
(\$22.99 Wine House of Los Angeles, £17.99 Waitrose)

Walta Massa, Derthona Timorasso 2013 Colli Tortonesi
(\$24.99 Wine House of Los Angeles, £18.99 Harrogate Fine Wine)

Nino Barraco Catarratto 2014
(£24 Noble Fine Liquor of London)

REDS

Santa Venere Gaglioppo 2013 Cirò
(€6.95 Deutter of Bavaria, £7.95 The Wine Society)

Tenuta Santa Caterina, Arlandino 2013 Grignolino d'Asti
(£11.50 The Wine Society)

Eugenio Bocchino, Roccabella 2013 Langhe Nebbiolo
(\$17.99 Corx of New York, £19.49 Salusbury Wine Store of London NW6, also Noble & Wild of Hereford)

Travaglini, Tre Vigne 2009 Gattinara
(\$41.88 Atlas of Portland, OR; £29.99 Field & Fawcett of Yorkshire)

Giuseppe Mascarello, Villero 2011 Barolo
(\$97.99 Flatiron Wines of New York, £68.70 Berry Bros & Rudd)

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