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# Beyond Chianti

A tour of Italy's wine country.

TEXT BY MARLENE ROSSMAN

If you are as old as I am, you probably remember the days of dreadful Chianti in those chubby raffia-covered bottles. They did have some use, as we would put a candle in the empty bottle and think we were so clever! The wine, however, was awful and left me with a lifelong dislike of Chianti.

Today's Chianti is light years away from what it used to be, as are Italy's numerous awesome wines. In the latter part of the 20th century, Italy's winemakers began modernizing their techniques and transformed Italy into a major exporter of many different types of quality wine.

When I advise people on learning about and buying imported wine, I tell them to start with Italy. The wines of Italy are

more approachable than most other imported wines and a bit easier to understand.

One of the most important things to understand about Italian (and most European) wines is that they are made to be enjoyed with food. These wines are quite a bit higher in acid than the wines that we Americans are used to, which makes them less interesting to drink on their own. But, boy, do they pair beautifully with meals.

Italy has 20 wine-producing regions and more than 2,000 grape varieties. Red hot on the wine scene now are Sicily, Apulia, Basilicata and Trentino/Alto Adige, among others. These regions are as diverse as any can be in Europe.

For many years, the most highly prized and collected Italian wines were Barolos and Barbarescos, both made from the



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## Where to get Marlene's Italian picks:

**TreRose Vino Nobile di Montepulciano 2003**, about \$17, at Winerz.com, Orange, 714-633-9463.

**Valle Reale Vigne Nuove Montepulciano d'Abruzzo 2006**, about \$12, at Bacchus' Secret Cellar, Irvine, 949-502-4600.

**Tiefenbrunner Lagrein 2006**, about \$20, and **Tormaresca Aglianico Bocca Di Lupo 2003**, about \$32, at Hi-Time Wine Cellars, Costa Mesa, 949-650-8463.

**Mastroberardino Lacryma Christi del Vesuvio Rosso 2005**, about \$18, and **Mastroberardino Nova Serra Greco di Tufo 2006**, about \$20, at Amazing Grapes Wine Store, Rancho Santa Margarita, 888-299-9463.

**Tasca d'Almerita Lamuri Nero d'Avola 2004**, about \$20 at Wine Pavilion, Lake Forest, 949-206-9531, and Bacchus' Secret Cellar, Irvine, 949-502-4600.

**Donnafugata Passito di Pantelleria Ben Ryé 2005**, about \$35 for a half bottle, at Wine Exchange, Orange, 714-974-1454.

ian wine regions that it's almost its own country. It produces some amazing wines, many made from Negroamaro and Nero d'Avola. Nero d'Avola is the most important red wine grape in Sicily. It is named after Avola, in the far south of Sicily. Nero wines are compared to New World Shiraz, with sweet tannins and plum and peppery flavors. Tasca d'Almerita Lamuri Nero d'Avola 2004 is an unusual Nero. It has an earthiness that's almost like red Burgundy, and its rich cherry flavors with herb and licorice on the palate gives this "Lamuri" (which means "love" in the Sicilian dialect) an extra kick.

Donnafugata is a well-respected name in Sicily and its dessert wines are stunning. Try the Donnafugata Passito di Pantelleria Ben Ryé 2005, which has a rich, golden color and aroma of apricot jam. It has delicious, mouth-coating flavors of orange, apricot and honey. You do not need dessert with this; it IS dessert.

Oh, and if you still want to drink Chianti (there's nothing wrong with that!), look for a Chianti Classico, which is a special type of Chianti. Ask John Downing, Italian wine specialist at Hi-Time Wine Cellars in Costa Mesa to show you some great bottles. Salute!