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Wines Of The Week: Italy From North To South

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More and more often these days, consumers are buying, at retail and in restaurants, a remarkably broad selection of Italian wines. Indeed, an increasing number of wine lovers no longer simply associate the country with its most famous examples, like Barolo, Barbaresco, Chianti, Brunello di Montalcino, and the handful of others that have, over the years, earned widespread affection and attention. But the learning curve has been both steep and long, and our collective education is an ongoing project.

This makes sense: Even experts and professionals generally agree that Italy can be a more confusing wine-producing country than many others, what with its dizzying number of indigenous grape varieties (by some accounts there are thousands of them) and confusing tendency to use different names from one region to the next for what is essentially the same grape variety. (Italy is not alone in doing this, and while it can lead to confusion, it's also an important part of the distinctly regional nature of its wine culture.)

Still, word has been spreading for some time now among even casual consumers that there is an entire world of wine to be discovered in Italy. From north to south, the possibilities and charms of Italian wine are as close to infinite as is possible. My Wines of the Week today, then, aim to highlight this, and to do so with two bottles from opposite ends of the country and produced in styles as close to diametrically opposed as possible.

The Pacherhof Alte Reben Sylvaner 2015 carries a name that, at first glance, sounds more German than Italian. Which, of course, it is. The Valle Isarco, in the Alto Adige region of northern Italy, is as unique a part of the country as I have ever visited, and thoroughly different both oenologically and linguistically from, say, Tuscany or Sicily...which themselves are quite dissimilar. Several years ago, during a visit to Bolzano, which is located in Alto Adige, I walked down the stairs of my hotel and greeted the team at the front desk with a chipper, "Buongiorno!" The reply of one of the staff was most unexpected: "Guten morgen, Herr Freedman!"

This was Italy?

Indeed it was, and the unique identity it retains shines through in its often shimmeringly pure and bracingly idiosyncratic wines. This particular one is produced from old vines (that's the *alte reben* part of the name) of Sylvaner, one of the great white grape varieties of the region.

The Valle Isarco, where it's from, boasts glorious views of the Dolomites, world-class skiing, and an alpine character that comes through in this mineral, wildly food-friendly wine. The producer, Pacherhof, is perhaps less well known than some of Alto Adige's other bold-face names like Elena Walch, Alois Lageder, and Abbazia di Novacella (all three of which I love), but no less worthy of attention. And this bottle of Sylvaner is a great place to start.

My red Wine of the Week is not only from the opposite end of the country, but it's as different a wine from the Pacherhof Sylvaner as I could recommend. Produced by the highly respected Donnafugata, their Tancredi 2012 is a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Nero d'Avola, and Tannat, with other grape varieties as well. It's from Sicily, which has made a remarkable name for itself in general as a home for serious and age-worthy wines after having been associated for far too long with the kind of cheap and cheerful bottlings that defined Sicilian wine for generations.

These days, however, and indeed for some time now, the top producers in Sicily (names like Tasca d'Almerita, Planeta, Frank Cornelissen, and others) are changing perceptions not just about the wines of this gorgeous island but also about how diverse and delicious the wines of Sicily can be.

The excitement and allure of Sicilian wine is on glorious display in this bottle, whose richness and exuberance are matched by a structure that promises another 15 years or more of evolution.

Pacherhof Alte Reben Sylvaner 2015 Valle Isarco

Lots of minerality and lemon pith here, with an almost seashell note on the nose, and a generous palate with sweet spice, white plum, orange blossom, preserved orange rind, tarragon, and, on the finish, a haunting hint of clover honey. SRP: \$25.



The wines of Italy's Alto Adige, above, have been growing in popularity for years (Credit: Martin Zwick/REDA&CO/ UIG via Getty Images).

Donnafugata Tancredi 2012

Beautiful and complicated aromas of cured olives, blackberry and black cherry liqueur, fig pudding, and black raisins. On the palate, this is explosive, with black cherry liqueur, cassis, sachertorte, warm fig, hoisin sauce, a touch of iron, and those cured black olives again, lending a counterpoint of savoriness to the expressive fruit. SRP: \$40.



Beatrice Pilotto

Some of the most exciting wines in Italy are being crafted in Sicily, like this one, the Tancredi 2012, from Donnafugata (Credit: Beatrice Pilotto).