

The white icons of our times



Ian D'Agata draws together his top 20 white wines from Italy's treasure chest of varieties, terroirs and talented producers. A stellar array, many offer incredible value

ASK ANY WINE lover which might be the world's greatest dry white wines and Burgundy inevitably monopolises the conversation. But what about Italy, you ask? While the country's reds have recently become a matter of interest for collectors, its white-wine production has never really resonated with wine experts or collectors. Plus it's rare to taste older Italian whites unless you've purchased them on release and cellared them yourself.

This is a shame, since almost every Italian region now boasts at least one truly world-class dry white,

'Almost every Italian region has at least one world-class dry white, many of which age well'

many of which age well. What also appeals about Italian wines is that they offer aromas and flavours that are, for the most part, easy to grasp and not found in wines made elsewhere.

What follows is my introduction to Italy's greatest white wines, presented by estate and in alphabetical order. They have been chosen based on each wine's track record, its historical significance and its trueness to type – if a wine label reads 'Falanghina' or 'Pecorino', then the wine will be reminiscent of that variety, not of Chardonnay or Sauvignon Blanc.

Admittedly, other wines might have featured, especially one of Italy's world-class Sauvignon Blancs (for example, San Michele Appiano's Sanct Valentin, Terlano's Quarz or Venica & Venica's Ronco delle Mele), but they are not dissimilar to other Sauvignons made elsewhere. There's no such worry with Italian Chardonnays, most of which (with few exceptions) are overoaked or replicants of a New World style that doesn't speak of Italy at all.



Benanti, PietraMarina, Etna Bianco Superiore, Sicily

MANY EXPERTS CONSIDER Pietra Marina (the name was changed from Pietramarina to Pietra Marina in 2009) to be Italy's best white wine. It was the first to showcase the merits of the forgotten Carricante variety, an aloof sort of grape that grows best on the highest slopes of the Etna volcano (at a dizzying 900m above sea level). Imitation being the highest form of flattery, Sicilian heavyweights such as Planeta and Firriato are now also making Carricante wines, and Tuscans have bought into the action too. Not unlike a dry Riesling, Pietra Marina offers more in the way of yellow flowers, flinty minerals, dried herbs, fresh citrus and diesel fuel, but less of Riesling's juicy sweetness and tropical fruit notes. Lack of oak ensures the aromatic bonanza reaches your tastebuds blessedly unadulterated.

First vintage 1991 (first sold in 1995); the 1991, 1992, 1993 and 1994 vintages were sold under the estate's old name, Tenuta di Castiglione, later changed to Benanti

Production 9,000 bottles/year

Best recent vintages 2009 (by far); if you can find them, 1997, 1999, 2001, 2005

Current release 2010, £30.18, Exel Wines

Other wines of note Tenuta delle Terre Nere, Cuvée delle Vigne Niche, Etna Bianco, Sicily