



The world's best wine magazine

Decanter

Italy 2019

Your guide to what's new
and exciting in Italian wine

Top high street Italian reds

There's no shortage of options on UK retailers' lower shelves, but spend a little more on an Italian wine and you'll be rewarded by a leap in quality. Andy Howard MW picks 30 of the best, all priced at £10-£15

IT COULD BE argued that wine consumers today have a much better choice in terms of quality, value and diversity than they did five or 10 years ago. The range of countries, regions, grape varieties and styles is mind-boggling.

Italian wines are at the forefront of diversity, so this tasting was an ideal way to look at a range of red wines between the £10 and £15 price points. Quality is generally very good at this level – more than 50% of wines submitted achieved 90 points or more (Highly Recommended), with one wine rated Outstanding (95 points).

Italy has come a long way in wine terms in the past 30 years. Once associated with leafy and astringent Chianti, thin and simple Valpolicella, or rugged, tannic Barolo, today's Italian wines are as diverse as the country itself. Regions are developing, winemaking practices have leapt forward, and quality is higher now than ever before. But why should consumers spend their hard-earned cash on Italian red wines, as opposed to equally worthy choices at similar prices from Spain, France or Australia?

For me, the answer lies in the strength of Italy's native grapes. In his book *Native Grape Varieties of Italy*, Ian D'Agata suggests there are 377 genetically different varieties in commercial use in Italy – almost a third of the worldwide total, according to *Wine Grapes* (Robinson, Harding & Vouillamoz, 2012), which cites a figure of 1,368 varieties. Italy has more native grape types than France, Spain and Greece (the next three countries) combined. And this is just those in commercial production and scientifically identified – the overall number of Italian native grapes is probably in the thousands.

As mentioned, our tasting focused on wines at £10-£15. Consumers should expect good to very good quality, with distinct grape and terroir characters on show. In nearly every case,

wines are ready to drink, but can be kept for a few years if stored well. Better-known varieties (Sangiovese, Nebbiolo, Corvina, Barbera, Nero d'Avola, Primitivo, Aglianico) dominated the tasting, as expected. In addition, there was a welcome number of less common grapes, with Lacrima and Dolcetto (Piedmont), Corvinone (Veneto), Canaiolo (Tuscany), Gaglioppo (Calabria) and Tai (Grenache from Veneto) showing promise.

One third of the wines were produced in the Veneto (not surprising given this region's influence in Italian wine production), with 25% of Tuscan origin. Sicily was somewhat under-represented, with only one Etna wine submitted – a pity as there are many good examples in this mid-tier price bracket. There was a strong showing for Valpolicella Ripasso – five out of seven wines being Highly Recommended. This is currently a high-performing DOCG and consumers can be confident that most Ripasso wines will deliver lots of interest and enjoyment.

It was also encouraging to see how well some cheaper Aglianicos performed. This tannic variety, which thrives in Campania and Basilicata, can be very aggressive if not handled well. It seems winemakers are really starting to master this fragrant, long-lived variety – known as the 'Nebbiolo of the south' for good reason.

On this showing, consumers can be confident in finding many high-quality, good-value Italian reds on the UK high street. The best combine diversity with a dash of Italian style: lots of drinking pleasure ahead.



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'At £10-£15, consumers should expect good to very good quality, with distinct grape and terroir characters on show'

1 Gianni Tessari, Tai Rosso, Colli Berici, Veneto 2016 95

£13.95 Jeroboams

An interesting alternative take on Grenache, this shows some soft, luscious red fruit notes on the palate, combined with firm tannins and underpinned with attractive bright acidity. Subtle oak ageing adds an extra dimension with a rich mix of spices evident. Very good, with freshness and complexity. Tai from the Veneto is one of Italy's best kept secrets. **Drink** 2019-2023 **Alc** 13%

2 Domini Veneti, La Casetta, Valpolicella Ripasso Classico Superiore, Veneto 2016 94

£14.99 Majestic

Profound, inky dark plum hue. Complex, dusky aromas of black cherry fruits with some leafy notes. Complex and rich on the palate, there is lots of structure here – with some hints of new wood and firm yet ripe tannins. Although drinking well now, this has the potential to age extremely well for a number of years. An excellent Classico Superiore. **Drink** 2020-2024 **Alc** 14%

3 Nero Oro, Rosso Riserva, Sicily 2015 94

£12.99 Majestic, North South Wines

Generous and mouthfilling, with oodles of fragrant, sweet fruit. The Frappato element in this Nero d'Avola-dominated blend shines through, adding extra levels of flavour. Good density, fresh and clean on the palate with some good length to finish. Great fun – not hugely complex but plenty going on and chock-full of individuality. **Drink** 2019-2023 **Alc** 14%

4 Cantina Valpantena, Marks & Spencer, Valpolicella Ripasso, Veneto 2016 93

£11 Marks & Spencer

Deep colours in the glass, lots of concentration here with ripe black fruits and attractive fruit sweetness adding extra layers of interest. A very good example of Ripasso with spicy notes, ripe fruit, crisp acidity, elegant oak and lots of Italian warmth. Has further ageing potential. **Drink** 2019-2022 **Alc** 13.5%

5 Firriato, Le Sabbie dell'Etna, Etna Rosso, Sicily 2016 93

£12.99 Waitrose

A lightly fragrant Etna wine with pale colour, this surprises as one anticipates a light wine, but it actually has good concentration and depth. Typically perfumed, there are some enticing floral notes, mineral flavours on the palate, spice and lingering acidity. A southern Italian red that is more intellectual than many. Will keep. **Drink** 2019-2023 **Alc** 14%

6 La Biòca, Stèrmà, Nebbiolo d'Alba Superiore, Piedmont 2016 93

£14.95 Jeroboams

A Nebbiolo with serious intent: plenty of oak, with a concentrated palate and lots of depth. Misses out at the moment on some of the ethereal, lifted notes that characterise Nebbiolo, but will improve with another year or two in bottle. Acidity and tannins are evident, as you would expect, combined with dark fruit, spice and mineral notes on the finish. **Drink** 2020-2024 **Alc** 13% ➤

