



**RUMASINGH**

comments on the huge number of indigenous grapes produced in Italy, and focuses on some of the better known varieties

## Indigenous in Italy

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This is one for wine quiz enthusiasts. Which country boasts the greatest number of native or indigenous grapes among the world's great wine regions?

The answer is Italy. It has over 2000 varieties listed by ampelographers. However, barely 300 varieties are in commercial production, of which just another handful are well-known, states Ian D'Agata in his book, "Native Wine Grapes of Italy". If asked to list Italian native grapes, most wine aficionados would likely have problems going past a dozen.

This became the topic of conversation during a recent Zoom chat I had with Italian sommelier, Mattia Antonio Cianca. Beyond the Sangiovese and the Nebbiolos, which grapes have the greatest potential for becoming future stars? A tough one, he replied, frowning. Then, "Primitivo, a black grape that the world identifies better as Zinfandel."

So, what makes it a worthy modern star? In its traditional home in lesser-known Puglia, **Primitivo di Manduria DOC** is regarded as a deeply tannic grape with a high alcohol content. But how does this translate into success in an era looking for freshness and approachability?

Mattia explains. There has been a distinct shift towards making Primitivo lighter, more fruit-driven and approachable. "Primitivo di Manduria is often known as the Amarone of the south – structured, full-bodied, and high in alcohol,

given to heavy oak vinification. But now Puglia producers are harnessing the potential of the grape to make a whole different profile of wine – easily drinkable, lighter, made in stainless steel or neutral oak, fresher, fruitier which makes it way more versatile." A thoroughly modern, wholly likable avatar, in other words.

The advantage Primitivo has over other native black grapes is that it is already well known, thanks to Californian Zinfandel, its famous sibling from another continent. "People are more open to trying it; it doesn't confuse them with difficult-to-recall names and pronunciations."

The modern Primitivo features both red and black fruit. It's juicy but not over-ripe or jammy, with hints of spice and herbal aromas. Always with juicy, smooth tannins. Therefore, a perfect please-all, for those who want a serious wine, or for those seeking more easy-drinking options. Look for wines from sub-regions Bari and Brindisi labelled Puglia IGP, Mattia advises. These won't break the bank and offer good value. His picks were two organic producers – **Tenuta Viglione and Tenute Lu Spada**.

What about whites, I asked Mattia. I feel Italian white grapes do not get the focus they deserve, especially those from middle and southern Italy. Italy's native white grapes tend to get overshadowed by its majestic world-famous reds.

Mattia agreed, "The problem with the whites is that when they are vinified commercially their unique characteristics are obscured, take Pinot Grigio, for example."

But the world is waking up to the unique potential of Italian whites. Recent articles have proclaimed the virtues of Friuli-Venezia-Giulia, in Italy's northeast, a region dominated by indigenous white grapes. "A region whose wines explain place better than any words or pictures can," tom-tommed CNN, the media company. "A little-known region producing Italy's best-kept secrets – white wines," proclaimed National Geographic magazine.

As wine drinkers seek authenticity, a grape that emerges with the potential to be both different yet universally appealing is **Friulano**. The flagship native grape of Friuli-Venezia-Giulia, arguably Italy's most under-valued wine region, Friulano's official name is Sauvignonasse, meaning Sauvignon-like and was historically confused with Sauvignon Blanc. If that isn't befuddling, it used to be called Tocai Friulano until the Hungarians put their foot down. Now, as Friulano, it is far easier to identify by name, and in the hands of a good producer, expresses rare character.

I sought greater clarity from Matteo Bellotto, brand ambassador for the regional body Consorzio Friuli Colli Orientali, who waxed lyrical about Friulano. "How to describe it? Intense, deep, and balanced with lingering aromas that persist on the palate. It can read the soil and the place where it is planted beautifully. Every vintage gives a unique version of the grape. It also makes a wine capable of great food pairing potential."

During a tasting with Michele Ciani, owner-agronomist of Friuli's Aquila del Torre, a few months ago, I was bowled over by the complexity and freshness that his Friulano offered. His pristine organic vineyards in Savorgnano del Torre date back to the 1960s. "Yes, there has been a surge of consumer interest in native white Italian grapes like Friulano," he admits, "Discerning wine lovers are looking for more indigenous varieties and Friulano is a phenomenal tool that

exposes the different nuances of the region, from the flatter vineyards by the Adriatic to the steeper Alpine landscapes."

Italy has so many native grape varieties that it is easy to get confused. Friuli-Venezia-Giulia is far better known for its white wine grapes than its reds. The region has been working to identify native cultivars that best express the terroir and that reflect the unique character of the grape. (There are over 20 popular white varieties grown in lesser quantities, including Picolit, Sauvignon Blanc and Riesling.) But Friulano is the grape considered most terroir-specific and unique, and is therefore the region's flagship grape.

Ciani adds a word of warning about the confusion between Friulano (aka Sauvignonasse) and Sauvignon Blanc. "The only point of confusion is potentially their names," he says. "In no other way are they alike, not in flavour profile, acidity, or structure. So it is very hard to confuse the two." Savorgnano is slated as the next premium sub-appellation for expressive Friulano.

Ciani adds, "We aim to produce terroir-driven wines, and that starts in the vineyards. Our vinification is simple and artisanal. We use indigenous yeasts to start fermentation after hand-harvesting grapes in small crates. We ferment to dryness, and then the Friulano stays on lees for 12 months in concrete egg-shaped vats, and is bottled 14 months later."

Do not get led astray with the erstwhile name of Tocai Friulano, he warns. "In 2007 Tocai Friulano became Friulano on labels in Friuli-Venezia-Giulia because the Hungarian 'Tokaji' sounds similar. But Tocai Friulano is a dry white wine made from an indigenous variety and Hungarian Tokaji is a sweet wine made primarily from the Furmint grape variety – no similarities!"

But the days of confusion could well be over. With Friulano and Friuli-Venezia-Giulia finding their places on star wine lists, the spotlight is shifting in Italy. Puglia and Primitivo are following suit. And more indigenous grapes are bound to follow. ♦

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