Italy's White Grape Varieties

Trebbiano

Trebbiano, known as Ugni Blanc in France, can make characterful white wines when it is grown carefully, but to a population that takes wine as casually as the Italians do, this variety is a cheap ticket to bland, neutral-tasting, light-bodied, crisp wines.

Trebbiano is the most common white variety in Italy, grown almost everywhere but particularly prevalent in the central regions. It has several sub-varieties, or clones, of which Trebbiano Toscano is probably the most planted; other clones include Trebbiano di Romagna, Trebbiano d'Abruzzo (which might actually be Bombino Bianco), Trebbiano Giallo, Trebbiano di Soave, and the relatively fine Procanico. In one manifestation or another, it's the backbone of numerous classic Italian white wines, such as Frascati.

The main aroma and flavor descriptor of Trebbiano-based wines is "vinous" — a fancy way of saying that they smell and taste winey. These wines are usually dry and high in acid, but in recent years many producers seem to be making them with some sweetness, which to our taste eliminates their one virtue — their crisp, refreshing, food-friendly style — without improving the wines' quality one iota.

Catarratto

Catarratto is a Sicilian white grape variety which is the second most planted single variety in Italy. Catarratto Bianco Lucido, which has a much smaller area under cultivation than Catarratto Bianco Comune, is superior in terms of quality. The variety is planted almost exclusively in the far western province of Trapani and has in the past been much used in the production of Marsala. Today, much of the vine's produce is considered surplus and is either distilled or transformed into grape concentrate.

Müller-Thurgau

German cross of Riesling and Sylvaner, at its best high in the Trentino Alps. A marvel of commercial engineering but never a high quality grape, this Germanic crossing of what is thought to be Silvaner with Riesling or Chasselas has Dr. Hermann Müller to thank for its dubious notoriety, which plumbs the depths in today's Liebfraumilch. It is an early-ripening grape favoured in cool, northern climates, where it can produce floral, sweet-pea like aromas. It can produce decent wine in Italy's Alto-Adige, Eastern Europe and in England and it formed the basis for the modern New Zealand table wine industry back in the 1970s.

Pinot Grigio

Is the Italian name for the French variety Pinot Gris. Like other varieties of French origin, Pinot Gris immigrated to Northeastern Italy more than a century ago; its production has increased since the late 1970's, however, because its wines have found such commercial success.

Because of high crop levels and popular taste in Italy, Pinot Grigio most often makes light-bodied, pale, high-acid wines; some producers make more characterful styles, with concentrated flavors of peach or mineral, but none as rich as Alsace Pinot Gris wines. The best Pinot Grigios come from Friuli-Venezia Giulia.

Verdicchio

Verdicchio excels in the Marche region, on the Adriatic coast. It has far more potential for flavor and character than Trebbiano does, making wines with medium body, crisp acidity, and aromas of lemon and sea air. It's used mainly for un-oaked wines that are variedly labeled.

Produced in eastern Italy, near the Adriatic coast, Verdicchio is a light, dry wine with good acidity made from grapes of the same name. Verdicchio, unlike most Italian white wines, is capable of aging, but it has a fruity freshness when drunk young. Verdicchio is totally dry with hints of fresh apple and lemon. Relatively inexpensive, this wine has a very good affinity with seafood and fish.

Vernaccia

Two distinct white Italian varieties go by the name Vernaccia, one in Tuscany and the other in Sardinia. (There's also a red Vernaccia from Marche!) The Tuscan Vernaccia is the finer of the two whites. Although its wines have the trademark Italian high acidity and light to medium body, the best examples show depth and character, with mineral nuances. Vernaccia usually makes un-oaked wines, but can sometimes age quite nicely in oak barrels.

Tocai Friulano

While Pinot Grigio gets the lion's share of attention, many fans of Friulian wines favor the Tocai Friulano (toh KYE free oo LAH no) grape — and this variety is the most widely planted white variety in Friuli. Tocai makes light- to medium-bodied wines with crisp acidity; the best of them have a rich, viscous texture and are more flavorful than the Italian norm.

Some experts believe Tocai to be Sauvignon Vert, a variety that often passes for Sauvignon Blanc in Chile, although Italy's Tocais are quite different from Chile's Sauvignons. Whatever the variety actually is, it will soon go under a different name, yet to be determined: The European Union has required producers to desist from using the name Tocai by 2007, to avoid confusion with Hungary's classic wine zone, Tokaji.

Arneis

This old, Piedmontese variety is newly popular in the wine zones around the city of Alba. It is low in acidity and fairly flavorful, making soft and round wines with notes of melon, almonds, and flowers.
Arneis, the name means "rascal" in local dialect, is a product of Piedmont. Light and easy to drink, Arneis is great with summer fare: salads, prosciutto and melon, or perhaps, a light pasta primavera.
Arneis is also refreshing as an "apperitivo," a small glass at the start of the meal. Named after the grape from which the wine is made, Arneis is a medium dry wine with a rich texture and hints of peaches, apricots, and pears. It is best consumed when it is young.

Chardonnay

In the late 1970s, winemakers in northeastern Italy "discovered" that they had Chardonnay in their vineyards (misidentified as Pinot Blanc) and began making Chardonnay wines. In more recent times, Chardonnay has become popular all over Italy, from Piedmont to Sicily, as winemakers try their hand at making world-class white wine with a world-class grape. In general, the Italian versions are leaner and crisper than the Chardonnay norm, and many don't have enough fruit character to sustain their oak aging.

Cortese

Grown in various parts of northern Italy, but a specialty of Piedmont's Gavi zone, Cortese makes crisp, light-bodied wines with citrus and appley flavors; the best have mineral character and even notes of honey.
Little known in The United States, Gavi is very dry, delicate wine with pronounced acidity. It has delicate and complex aromas of grapefruit, honey, flowers, and minerals. Gavi is named after the town of Gavi in Northwest Italy’s Piedmont region. Produced from native Cortese grapes, Gavi is a perfect accompaniment to fish. It is best drunk within three to four years of the vintage.

Fiano

A perfumed and flavorful variety that's probably the finest white variety of Southern Italy, grown mainly in Campania. Its wines are medium-bodied and capable of aging, developing aromatic richness as they do.

Garganega

The main variety of Soave, this is one of Italy's unsung native white grapes that's finally earning respect. Producers such as Pieropan have proved that it's capable of making rich, unctuous wines with character and class.

Greco

Grown throughout Italy's South, this fine variety makes crisp, fairly aromatic (citrusy,

floral) wines that have good weight, viscosity, and character.
Greco di Tufo, both a grape and a wine, was introduced to Italy by the Greeks over 2000 years ago. It thrives in the volcanic soil just outside the small village of Tufo. This wine is crisp and intensely fruity. Greco di Tufo is usually ready to drink in three to five years and can age up to about twelve years.

Grillo

Sicilian variety which has traditionally been used as the basis for the fortified wines of Marsala but also used to make a honeyed, still dry white with good acidity.

Inzolia

Grown mainly in Sicily and in Tuscany a little. Used commonly in white table wines, it has an acidic, nutty flavour.

Malvasia

This variety grows throughout Italy. Several white sub-varieties exist, including the better Malvasia Toscana, the ancient and flavorful Malvasia Istriana, and the weaker Malvasia di Candia. It's often paired with Trebbiano, to lend wines a bit of richness, but it has the downside of oxidizing easily. Malvasia produces innocuous whites as well as the rich Vin Santo.
Ancient and of Greek origin, it produces wines high in alcohol, and often, with residual sugar. Most are deeply colored whites but some are, usually light, reds. Malvasia is the Italian corruption of Monemvasia, the southern Greek port which, in the middle ages, was famous for its dessert wines. So important was Malvasia during the time of the Venetian Republic that wine shops in Venice were called "Malvasie".
A red Malvasia, called Malvasia Nera, also exists.

Moscato

The Muscat Blanc a Petits Grains grows all over Italy, making all sorts of wines, from delicate Moscato d'Asti to rich dessert styles; its most famous version is the sparkling wine, Asti. The floral, perfumed notes that Moscato attains in the North are among the most finesseful expressions of this variety anywhere in the world. The golden and red

types of Moscato are also used to make certain Italian wines. Another Muscat, Muscat of Alexandria or "Zibibbo," makes some of Southern Italy's dessert wines.

Pinot Bianco

Known as Pinot Blanc in France, this variety has grown in Northeastern Italy for more than a century.
In Alto Adige, its wines attain a character and richness unknown from this variety elsewhere in the world. A classic Alsatian and Italian varietal.
Also grown in Germany and Austria as Klevner or Weiss Burgunder, Pinot Blanc is a somewhat vigorous grape that can produce fruity whites that range from crisp and fresh to flabby and oily. The better examples from low yields retain a higher natural acidity. Often used in the production of sparkling wine in the U.S. Notes of apples, stone fruits and sometimes almonds, are common.
In Alsace Pinot Blanc is often blended with its country-cousin the Auxerrois blanc and sold as Pinot Blanc.

Riesling Renano

"Renano" means "Rhine," and this name represents the classic Riesling grape, which grows throughout Northeastern Italy. (Riesling Italico is Welschriesling, a different variety.)

Riesling

Italic Riesling in our case, has a very controversial origin. Some experts dates the origin back to the Roman Empire and a grape called Aminea Gemella and the ancient wines of Amineo and maybe the white Falerno.

This hypothesis is confirmed by the considerable similarities that today reconnect the Italic Riesling with the Greco of Tufo (cultivated today in the Campania region) that is a direct descendant of these two ancient wines.
This vine likes the fresh grounds of the plains, it has a good productivity and it can also adapt itself to different climates.
The wine is bright straw yellow with greenish tones. It is a lightly aromatic and fruity wine with scents that sometimes remember of apple, peach or apricot.

Sauvignon

Italians call the Sauvignon Blanc variety only by its first name; it grows throughout the Northeast, where it makes herbal, intensely flavorful wines; some growers are cultivating it in less traditional areas, such as Piedmont and Tuscany, to make internationally styled wines.

Vermentino

This variety is at home in Sardinia, Liguria, and coastal Tuscany, where it makes crisp, light- or medium-bodied wines. It has solid potential for fine wines.