

UNCORKED

Bold and affordable

Italy's lesser-known winemaking regions offer wines bold in flavor, well-made and affordable

May 02, 2012 | By Bill St. John, Special to Tribune Newspapers

Whenever folks ask me where they might find the better values in wine coming from Italy, I pull a sort of "Horacio" Greeley on them and say, "Go south, go south."

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Though Southern Italian place names and wine grape varieties are unfamiliar to us (which goes a long way toward explaining why the wines are overlooked or unknown), they are Italy's best combination of skilled winemaking, big flavor and low price.

For this column, I sampled about 40 southern Italian reds and whites. Along with some simple descriptions of their homelands and grapes, here are the most delicious and engaging that I found.

Sicily and Sardinia

If Sicily were a freestanding country (which on occasion it appears to believe it is), it would rank seventh in worldwide wine production. During the past 20 years or so, no area of Italy has developed its vineyard work or winemaking to as fine a pitch as Sicily.

Its most prestigious wine comes from its western coastal region of Marsala. Though in significant decline as recently as the 1960s, Marsala is now one of the finest aged, fortified wines of its type. Its main grape, grillo, often turns out a terrific dry white table wine. Among reds, an indigenous Sicilian grape, nero d'Avola, haunts with its deep flavors of black cherry and its tangy acidity and spicy, mildly tannic finish.

Sardinia is as idiosyncratic as its location, out in the middle of the Mediterranean, a 200-mile flight from Rome. Conquests by Romans and Spaniards influenced both the island's culture and winemaking. The main and most prestigious red wine grape is cannonau, brought from Spain and very well known there as garnacha.

2009 Di Giovanna Grillo Sicily: The color of hay in the sun, with nervy tastes of lemon, pineapple and honeydew, all tightened 'round with zesty, briny acidity; super with fish or tuna salad. \$18

2008 Cusumano Red Blend "Noa" Sicily: Mostly nero d'Avola; fleshy, deeply pigmented and concentrated, but plush with chalky tannin and buckets of black fruit flavor and aromas; New World Old World. \$30-\$35

Calabria, Apulia and Basilicata

The ancient Greeks held sway over southern Italy beginning in the eighth century B.C. and the region was favored for wine over their own islands and peninsulas — especially that from Calabria. So prized were Calabrian wines that, at the quadrennial Olympic Games in Athens, the Greeks awarded to victorious athletes a wine from there then called Krimisa, made today under the name Ciro with the grape gaglioppo.

As Calabria is Italy's "toe," Apulia is its "heel." Puglian wines tend to be hearty and robust, although some of its most refreshing wines are dry rosés. The negroamaro grape is a standby for delicious dark fruit flavors, with hints of black licorice and earth.

The primitivo grape is a kissing cousin (if not, in fact, the same) grape as American zinfandel and makes for some of the region's most powerful reds, black-red in color and with telltale scents of tar and smoke. Finally, the aromatic uva di Troia grape, Greek-born (of course), is a heady red, perfect for the foods of the south.

Basilicata's best wine comes from the Greek grape aglianico (a corruption of "Hellenic"), grown on the volcanic soils of Mount Vulture, the high altitude of which shields vines from the region's searing heat.

2008 Torre Quarto Uva di Troia "Bottaccia" Apulia: The kind of red where I hate that my nose is not my mouth, so heady are its wafting perfumes; juicy, so juicy and rich of red fruit and smooth tannin; just delicious. \$20

2010 Cantine Statti Gaglioppo Calabria: Snag a bottle or two of this ripe, aromatic red for drinking with pizza during this summer's Olympic Games. \$20

2009 Bisceglia Aglianico del Vulture "Terre di Vulcano" Basilicata: Now here's a price on super dark, brooding, concentrated yet smooth and mildly tannic red with haunting whispers of dark toast, tobacco and black fruit compote. \$15

Abruzzo and Campania

Abruzzo should be well-recognized by Americans because from it, more than from any other region in Italy, the greatest number of Italian-Americans came to the United States during the last decade of the 1800s.

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