

## Italian Whites to Silence the Snickers



Argiolas S.P.A.

CAN BE CRISP, CAN BE RICH Vermentino grapes are grown by the Argiolas family in Sardinia.

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ITALY, long portrayed as a veritable ocean of red wine, is turning out to be just as awash in whites.

A blog on the pleasure, culture and business of wine, beer and spirits.

### Tasting Report

The wine panel confirmed that vermentino has much to offer, whether as a crisp, tangy accompaniment to seafood — fritto misto would be ideal — or as a richer, more complex wine with a distinctively oily sort of texture.

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Tasting Coordinator: Bernard Kirsch

This is indeed a good thing. By white wine I don't mean the anemic, bland pinot grigio that is so often a synonym for white wine in bars across the land, but wines of character and allure.

Just about anywhere you look in Italy nowadays, from Alto Adige in the north all the way down to Sicily, you can find white wines of distinction.

For the most part, this is a result of a surge in quality in the last 15 years or so, as many winemakers came to understand that the global market has become too competitive to survive by producing plonk.

Yes, it remains a fact that plenty of uninteresting Italian white wine is sold every year. The same is true with a lot of boring white wine made all over the world. No matter where a wine comes from, consumers must be selective.

The bottom line: Italian white wines, including pinot grigios, are no longer to be sneered at. Instead, embrace the possibility that a great deal of pleasure can be found in them.

Take vermentino, for example. It's a grape that can easily be overlooked in the profusion of other, similar-sounding names, like verdejo, verdicchio, verduzzo and vernaccia.

Yet as the wine panel confirmed in a recent tasting of 18 bottles of vermentino, it has much to offer, whether as a crisp, tangy accompaniment to seafood — fritto misto would be ideal — or as a richer, more complex wine with a distinctively oily sort of texture.

For the tasting, Florence Fabricant and I were joined by Troy Weissmann, the sommelier at South Gate restaurant on Central Park South, and Scott Mayger, general manager of Telepan on the Upper West Side.

As much as the wine has an affinity for seafood, the grape seems to thrive close to the sea. Most of the wines in the tasting came from the three top sites in Italy for vermentino: Sardinia, the Tuscan coast and the Ligurian coast. We also had some bottles from Corsica, Provence and Carneros, of all places, which indeed is not all that far from the San Francisco Bay.

Sardinia, above all, has made a specialty of vermentino, which is the leading white grape on the island. Yet Sardinian vermentinos can be inconsistent, too.

Of the six bottles from Sardinia in the tasting, only three made our top 10, though the 2008 Costamolino from Argiolas was not only the No. 1 wine in the tasting but, at \$14, our best value as well. It had the rich, full-bodied texture characteristic of the Sardinian vermentinos, yet was well balanced with flavors of lemon, ginger and nuts.

By contrast the vermentinos from Tuscany tended not to be as distinctively textured.

Our No. 2 bottle, the 2008 Guado al Tasso, an estate owned by the Antinori family in the coastal region of Bolgheri, was lighter-bodied, but perhaps more elegant, with pretty, floral, citrus and mineral aromas.

The Tuscan vermentinos also seemed more consistent as all five bottles in the tasting made our list of the top 10 wines.

The only bottle from Liguria in the tasting, the 2007 Altavia with the curious proprietary name "Noname," was lighter-bodied still, crisp, lively and fresh but perhaps less distinctive than the others. Nonetheless, it was well made and was No. 6 on our list.

Incidentally, the origin of Noname is straightforward. "Noname means that it does not have a name," Gianni Arlotti, the proprietor of Altavia, said in an e-mail message. Nocomment.

Vermentinos are generally made to be consumed while they still retain their youthful vitality, that is, in the year or two after the vintage. Yet, interesting things can happen with a couple of years of bottle age.

I recently had a 2005 Funtanaliras from the Cantina del Vermentino on Sardinia, and the wine was extraordinary, with a piney, almost resinous aroma that I found strange but not unpleasant. Yet two other people with me at the time detested the aroma. In the mouth, though, the wine was clean and dry, with complex, lingering flavors. On the whole it was fascinating, and I wondered whether this was typical of an older vermentino.

Younger vermentinos from Sardinia, especially those from the Gallura zone in the northeastern part of the island, can have a distinctly herbal component, though not nearly as amplified as the '05 Funtanaliras.

Our No. 7 bottle, the 2007 from Piero Mancini, had aromas reminiscent of wild thyme. Meanwhile, the 2006 Albithia from Feudi della Medusa on the southern end of Sardinia lacked that herbal component, but offered a pronounced minerality along with its rich, full texture.

What of the other vermentinos in the tasting?

In Corsica, where the grape is often called *rolle*, as it is also called in France, or *malvoisie de Corse*, vermentino is the most widely planted white grape.

Yet neither of the two Corsican wines made our top 10. One bottle was flawed. The other, from the excellent producer Antoine Arena, had a beautiful aroma of almonds and citrus, but the wine tasted too much of alcohol heat. The Arena was the most expensive bottle in our tasting at \$50.

And Carneros? California has precious little vermentino planted, not even enough to rise out of the “other white wine” category on the official California survey of grape acreage.

But apparently enough vermentino vines are grown in Las Brisas Vineyard in Carneros for Mahoney Vineyards to produce a crisp, tangy version with floral and herbal aromas. The Mahoney is No. 10 on our list and is well worth drinking.

It’s not likely that bars will soon replace their banal pinot grigios with some of the better vermentinos. Frankly, it’s just as well. While these wines can be enjoyed on their own, they will really shine with food, seafood in particular.

I don’t happen to have a beach handy, nor even a terrace. I’m not getting a salty sea breeze. I can’t even manage whitewashed walls and blue skies. But put me in a little trattoria in downtown New York, with a plate of *fritto misto* in front of me and a bottle of vermentino, and my imagination will do the rest.

## **Tasting Report: One Grape, Four Sources**

### **BEST VALUE**

Argiolas Vermentino di Sardegna

\$14

□□□ (Three Stars)

Costamolino 2008

Rich, almost oily texture with flavors of lemon, ginger and nuts. (Importer: Winebow/Leonardo LoCascio Selections, New York)

Guado al Tasso Bolgheri

\$20

□□□ (Three Stars)

Vermentino 2008

Fresh and fragrant with aromas of flowers, lemons and almonds.

(Ste. Michelle Wine Estates, Woodinville, Wash.)

Poggio al Tesoro Tuscany

\$25

□□ 1/2 (Two and a Half Stars)

Vermentino Solosole 2007

Zesty and inviting with flavors of oranges, lemons and flowers.

(Winebow/Leonardo LoCascio Selections)

Cantina Bruni Tuscany Vermentino

\$13

□□ 1/2 (Two and a Half Stars)

Plinio 2007

Crisp and balanced with citrus, nut and mineral flavors.

(Vias Imports, New York)

Feudi della Medusa

\$27

□□ 1/2 (Two and a Half Stars)

Vermentino di Sardegna Albithia 2006

Crisp, with inviting oily texture. (The Sorting Table, Napa, Calif.)

Altavia Liguria Noname 2007

\$23

□□ (Two Stars)

Refreshing with light, lingering flavors of nuts and citrus.

(Martin Scott Wines, Lake Success, N.Y.)

Piero Mancini Sardinia

\$15

□□ (Two Stars)

Vermentino di Gallura 2007

Light-bodied with flavors of citrus, minerals and herbs.

(Oliver McCrum Wines, Oakland, Calif.)

Rocca Della Macie Tuscany

\$13

□□ (Two Stars)

Occhio a Vento Vermentino 2007

Light and crisp with aromas of flowers, lemon and herbs.

(Palm Bay Imports, Boca Raton, Fla.)

Teruzzi & Puthod Tuscany

\$18

□□ (Two Stars)

Vermentino 2007

Light, straightforward, nutlike and pleasing. (Palm Bay Imports)

Mahoney Vineyards Carneros

\$19

□□ (Two Stars)

Las Brisas Vineyard Vermentino 2007

Fresh and tangy with flavors of herbs, flowers and preserved lemon.

