

drinks.

of much of the Italian wine industry. Improving quality took the hitherto unknown grapes of Italy to a new audience across the globe.

Slowly but surely, Italian wines' points of difference made them desirable, especially as more sophisticated Italian cuisine started to appear on Australian tables. Spaghetti bolognese and veal parmigiana made way for carpaccio and porcini risotto, and cassata became tiramisu. The subtlety, textural quality and restraint found in the wines, as well as the sometimes half-bitter characters, earthiness and minerality, matched these new-style dishes perfectly.

ONWARDS AND UPWARDS

Good Italian wine really "arrived" in Australia during the late 1980s and '90s. Our better wine merchants started importing the best new Italian drops, bottle shops stocked them, and restaurants started offering an interesting collections of labels. More importantly, Australian wineries started planting these Italian grape varieties. Our own Mediterranean climate has proven to suit them well, and the quality of these new Italian-Australians is improving all the time.

The best performer so far in Australia is the Tuscan red grape sangiovese, but don't ignore barbera, dolcetto, pinot grigio, nebbiolo and all the others. Grown in Australia, these types benefit from local wine technology, winery hygiene, screw caps and general know-how, thus avoiding the potentially infuriating inconsistency of similar wines from their native Italy. And in an era of environmental awareness, it also makes sense to sometimes drink wines that haven't had to travel halfway across the world.

When approaching Italian wines or their local cousins, remember that they tend to be made with food in mind. It's easy to sip a glass of chardonnay or sauvignon blanc sans food at a party or in a bar, but Italian table wines don't really belong in that setting. They can sometimes taste unimpressively neutral on their own, or unpleasantly harsh, but pop them next to the right dish and it all works beautifully. Buon appetito.

bottleshop

Fox Gordon "Princess" Fiano 2009, \$20

Fiano comes from Italy's sunny south. In keeping with the Mediterranean feel, this white wine has exuberant floral, grapey, muscatel aromas, and hints of pear on the nose. A succulent, fresh palate is still quite dry and appetising. A wine with great outdoorsy appeal with picnics and the like.

Charles Melton Sotto di Ferro (375ml), \$53

An unusual Barossa sweet wine that resembles Italy's famed vin santo. Loosely based on the Italian methods of part-drying muscadelle and pedro grapes to concentrate flavour and sweetness, it's amber in colour with dried apricot, honey and almond aromas. The unctuous palate is deliciously complex, but not heavy, finishing with a bracing tang of acidity.

Yalumba Vermentino 2009, \$15

You find the white vermentino grape growing in many corners of Italy, and its wine is mostly of ho-hum everyday quality. Good examples are great all-rounders with food though, and this well-made South Australian number shows how. It has light pear, citrus and herbal notes with a dry, crisp palate that's clean and easy.

S.C. Pannell Nebbiolo 2007, \$60

Stephen Pannell's Adelaide Hills nebbiolo attempts to tame this butch red grape from Piedmont in Northern Italy. It has typically pale colour, and a fascinating nose reminiscent of licorice, flowering heather and cherries. It tastes fairly tough and unyielding, with dry berry flavour surrounded by rugged tannins. Keep it for five years to soften and evolve complexity.

Ninth Island Pinot Grigio 2009, \$22

A very attractive pinot grigio from northern Tasmania, Ninth Island is better than most. Copybook green pear, spice, musk and mineral characters give it real varietal distinction, and the palate balances ripeness, tangy acidity and firm palate feel very well.

Hollick Hollaia 2006, \$21

The new wave of Italian reds sometimes blend native grapes with French varieties like cabernet and merlot. This wine from SA's Limestone Coast emulates the type very successfully, combining sangiovese's cherry, spice and leather with cabernet sauvignon's blackcurrant and leafy traits to make a very satisfying, savoury, medium-weight red that's firm and dry. **d.**

