

Enoteca Exotica

Our resident wine wonk GERRIE LIM tries to dispel the confusion caused by the sheer multitude of Italian grape varieties

MANY AN ASPIRATIONAL wine drinker has been perplexed by the surfeit of Italian grape varieties. There are an estimated 3,000 (though nobody knows the exact number), many of them relatively unknown and creating enticingly mysterious wines. I encountered this challenge a few years ago when I asked Italian-American celebrity chef Mario Batali a question I usually reserve for winemakers: "If you could be a wine, one that best reflects who you are, what would you be?"

He paused for a mere two seconds before uttering the magic word. "Sciacchetrà," he replied, completely serious and unfazed by my puzzled look when I confessed I had never heard of it.

"Not many people have," he said. "It's a delicious dessert wine from Liguria. A white dessert wine that's exotic, delicious and hard to find. Because I like to think of myself as exotic, delicious and hard to find." When I asked how one might procure some, he shrugged. "They might ship some to the States but I can't even get hold of it. I've love to, but we can't find it."

I researched Sciacchetrà and, according to Hugh Johnson, it's

the name given to the sweet version of Cinque Terre, a dry white wine made, as he wrote, "from obscure grapes grown in the steep, rocky paradise on the Riviera coast," that area known as Liguria. The region just north of there, Piedmont, is better known to people familiar with Italian wine because of the production of Barolo and Barbaresco, which features the Nebbiolo grape – arguably the second-most famous viticultural product after Sangiovese, most identified with Tuscany through the wines we call Chianti and Brunello.

Ever the nosy wine wonk, I'm always on the lookout for the exotic, delicious and hard to find, like the time in 2007 at a restaurant in Montreux, Switzerland, when I ordered a bottle of Sagrantino di Montefalco made by the Umbrian producer Arnaldo Caprai. I'd only read about it in *A Hedonist in the Cellar*, a wine book by my favourite novelist, Jay McInerney (yes, beyond *Bright Lights, Big City*, he's written a few), and the wine turned out to be magnificent, every bit the bold and bodacious red I needed to go with my rib-eye steak, a true revelation. Wine lovers live for such moments.

Sagrantino is actually one of those magic words that wine insiders whisper, like a password to a secret club. The Sagrantino grape is grown only in a tiny area around Montefalco, halfway between Perugia and Spoleto in Umbria; only a dozen serious producers exist, all making a ridiculously small amount (a few thousand cases a year, at best), the least obscure ones being

Arnaldo Caprai (who pioneered it in 1971), Antonelli, Alzatura, Còlpetrone, Paolo Bea and Scacciadiavoli.

"The ideal Sagrantino," McInerney wrote, "tastes like blackberries and bitter chocolate dusted with cinnamon, nutmeg and clove." There's a growing consensus among wine writers that this is one Italian wine worthy of greater recognition. However, Sagrantino di Montefalco's current vintner, Marco Caprai, told me recently that he doesn't really care about widespread fame, because the segment of wine drinkers who know it really love it, and that matters more to him than mass appeal.

Some of us are fans, though, helping him spread the word – such as wine scribe Sarah Heller in a recent *South China Morning Post* piece about wine collecting. "If you're buying today to stash away, Italians are the horses to back: all life-lengthening acid-tannin 'backbone' and very little fat," she wrote. "And I don't necessarily mean an iconic brand such as Sassicaia. The true beauty of building a wine collection is saving bottles nobody would necessarily think to keep. A

VALLE DELL'ACATE





decade from now, drinking that '14 Sagrantino may be a transformative and genuinely unique experience."

Transformative and unique – that's what I thought when I met Gaetana Jacono to learn about her 100-hectare estate, Valle Dell'Acate, in Sicily. I lunched with her recently to taste three of her wines: Insolia (a white, made from the Insolia grape), Il Frappato (a red, 100 percent from the Frappato grape) and Cerasuolo di Vittoria (a blend of Frappato and the better-known, dark red Nero d'Avola). She'd just discovered that her wines match perfectly with dim sum, particularly cheung fan, siu

mai and char siu bao. This vindicated her belief that great wines pair wonderfully with great cuisine.

"Frappato is a food wine, and normally it's very good with cheese and also pomodoro, our tomatoes," she told me. "If you serve Frappato chilled, you can have it with fish or shrimp, or tuna or crab. My family has had long experience with the Frappato grape and we believe that our terroir is special. We've tried other Frappato from around the area and they're not the same as ours. We make our Frappato wines with no oak – all in stainless steel, completely – and we try to make it rich, not too heavy. We're organic in the vineyard, we try to be natural, because if you do less to the Frappato, it will come out great. We suggest drinking young, inside two years or maximum

three years. It's not made for ageing. The 2013 vintage is great."

Wine should not assault you with fruit, she said, like many of the New World "fruit bombs" that hide elegance in a wine. If it has a floral character, like hers tend to, a certain amount of "lift" occurs that results in a freshness in the mouth, overriding residual tannins and a state enabled, arguably, by organic or biodynamic winemaking. "We're an organic, sustainable vineyard and we're very lucky," she said, "because of the weather and the soil in Sicily. My father taught me that – to respect nature and the time for



"When I started in 1992, Europe was not prepared for this type of wine"

Gaetana Jacono

the wine to happen."

"My father built the winery in 1981," she added. "He fell in love with the valley we're in and wanted to give it a name that would be remembered that way, so it became Valle Dell'Acate, the valley of Acate, which is our little town. I was born in the area of Ragusa, a beautiful place, but when I was young and travelling I would tell people I was from Sicily and the only word I usually heard back was 'Mafia'.

"And I would say, 'No, that's not true! It's also full of good things, and I want people to know that. When I started in 1992, Europe was not prepared for this type of wine – very

elegant and very clean, like the Burgundy style. And from Sicily, especially, people expected the wines to be overpowering, very strong, but I tell people they're not strong but elegant. In our valley, the gap between day and night is very high, hot during the day and cold in the night – very good for grapes. We're also a windy valley, 10km from the sea, so we have the maritime influence in the wine."

Inspired by this, Jacono decided to travel herself, starting in 1999 with trips to the United States as the company's global ambassador, and

today 65 percent of Valle Dell'Acate's production is exported. "By 2012 we had the privilege of having seven different soils in our vineyard, seven soils for seven wines," she recalled. "So my father and I decided where was the best soil for each grape. Our first two white wines, Insolia and Zagra, come from the first soil, a yellow soil. Insolia is very dry with good acidity because it's made in 100 percent stainless steel, no barriques, and Zagra is made from the Grillo grape." Zagra, matured in steel vats for four months and in bottles for a further four, is a bright yellow wine full of peach and exotic fruits, perfect for seafood and summer and, like Insolia, best when drunk young.

Her flagship wine is Cerasuolo di Vittoria, the one I liked best, made from 60 percent Nero d'Avola and 40 percent Frappato. "This is the 2011, the current vintage," she said as we savoured it together, "released after 18 months, food friendly and an easy combination with chicken, lamb and spicy food even – because you have the full-bodied Nero d'Avola presented in a delicate way and then you have more versatility because of the Frappato. You can recognise the strawberry and blackberry smells from the Frappato, but in a quiet way. The body is full but the Frappato gives freshness to the wine. I believe this wine has a big chance to become very famous because it's elegant and delicate and very versatile with a lot of food. I wish the world will fall in love with this wine."

Indeed, there are many wines that can compel that sensation, if only we knew of them. "Frappato is pretty hipster these days," my colleague Ned Goodwin MW notes, citing COS Cerasuolo as a prime example. That's one of Gaetana Jacono's competitors, but it's all good if you ask me. They're trying to make better known just a few more of the staggering number of Italian wines, many of them promising the exotic and delicious, many of them masterful expressions of amore. **P**

ABOVE: VALLE DELL'ACATE. OPPOSITE: GAETANA JACONO