

Italy's DOCG Dilemma



© Understanding Italy | Although undeniably beautiful, Italy is also home to some of the most complex wine rules and regulations in the world. DOCG should mean better quality than DOC wine but it ain't necessarily so, **Tom Hyland** discovers. Posted Wednesday, 30-May-2018

What's the best way to learn about the remarkably diverse subject of Italian wines? As someone that has written and lectured about these products for more than 20 years, I'd like to pass along some advice. Study the grape types, the production zones and the finest producers, and of course, taste enough bottles. But please, don't take much time worrying about whether a wine is DOC or DOCG, as you won't get a true picture of what Italian wines are all about.

I say that because the foundation of these regulations for classifying wines, while basically a good idea, has become a marketing tool that has uncertain ties to quality. The sound bite – [DOCG](#) wines are the best wines of Italy – is in reality, far from the truth.

In the 1960s, [Italy](#), seeking to raise the profile of their wines, adapted the DOC – *denominazione di origine controllata* – structure. This was largely based on the French appellation arrangement, which identified wines based on the particular grape or grapes used, along with yields, region of origin, aging requirements and other controls; this is seen on labels of French wines ranging from a few dollars to several hundred, from Provence to Burgundy, from Bordeaux to Champagne.

The DOC system was truly necessary in Italy, given the image of the country's wines back then. Unlike today, few consumers at that time thought of Italian wines as among the world's finest, so a format to let the public know that the bottle of [Chianti](#) they purchased was indeed produced primarily from [Sangiovese](#) grapes from the Chianti zone, was a wise decision. One could only wonder about this in the past, but with these new rules, one could pretty much be assured that a DOC wine was truly a product of its origins, and not counterfeit. (DOCs represented a particular place – be it a region or a production area – and were established for hundreds of other wine zones throughout the country as well.)

This new system worked well for the country's wine industry, and soon after, a new set of regulations known as DOCG – *denominazione di origine controllata e garantita* – was instituted to identify some of Italy's most famous wines. The *garantita* part of the term guaranteed that these wines would be held to a higher standard; DOCG wines would be produced from smaller yields in the vineyards, bottled in the wine's production zone, and often have a slightly higher percentage of alcohol.

The first DOCG wines were approved in 1980 and included [Barolo](#) and [Barbaresco](#) from Piedmont, and [Brunello di Montalcino](#) and [Vino Nobile di Montepulciano](#) from Tuscany. Wonderful choices all, as these truly were among Italy's most renowned wines. (The joke at the time in Italy was that the "g" in DOCG, instead of standing for *garantita*, referred to God, as he was the only one that had the money to afford these wines.)

But as time went on, more and more wines received DOCG approval. In the case of Taurasi from Campania, or Gattinara from Piedmont, this was a good thing, in the opinion of most Italian wine specialists. But today, there are 74 wines that are DOCG in Italy, including such humble offerings as Bardolino Superiore, Frascati Superiore (a dry white from Lazio) and Colli Bolognesi from Emilia-Romagna. Are these particular wines really among the best the country has to offer? Are there truly 74 various wines that deserve the DOCG title?

"About the number of DOCG wines, I believe that we should reduce it," says Riccardo Ricci Curbastro, president of Federdoc, an organization that represents almost every wine designation in the country. "According to the national current legislation, the naming DOCG is reserved for wines of great value with high intrinsic qualities that have gained commercial value both in national and international markets," Curbastro remarks. He has commented for years that there are too many DOCG and DOC wines. "The high number of designations do not let us promote and protect these wines with suitable and effective tools."

At [Masi](#), the famed Amarone producer, president Sandro Boscaini notes that "there are some downsides to DOC regulations", stating that "quality cannot be created by law. As the number of DOCs increase, the more this waters down the message and the system's impact."

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© Tom Hyland/Wine-Searcher | Many people have no idea what the difference is between DOC and DOCG.

So what do these designations mean in reality? At the [Elio Grasso](#) estate in Monforte d'Alba in Piedmont, winemaker Gianluca Grasso says: "The DOC or DOCG regulation is a way to have legislation; it is a way to control much more the quantity and not the quality."

Armando Serena, president of the Asolo Prosecco consorzio, confirms the quantity aspect of DOC/DOCG rules (these wines are now lumped together under the DOP – *denominazione di origine protetta* – umbrella, conforming to European Community laws). He notes that producers must register their parcels, meaning they can only produce so much wine, according to permitted yields. "The system is doing a good job," Serena remarks. But when I ask him if he is happy that Asolo Prosecco is a DOCG-approved wine (he is), he adds: "I guess it is more significant to state on the label Prosecco Superiore, as this term may be more understandable to the consumer instead of DOCG. At the end of the day, Prosecco must be superiore in quality as well."

As for the idea that DOCG wines are "better" than DOC bottles, consider Barbera, the most widely planted red variety in Piedmont. The two most famous examples are Barbera d'Alba, a DOC wine, and Barbera d'Asti, a DOCG wine. Why are these two wines classified differently? Is it a matter of quality? No, the reason is that the growers and producers in the Asti province lobbied officials for the DOCG status, while the vintners that produce Barbera d'Alba did not. As Barbera is the most important red grape in Asti and is planted in many of the best sites, Barbera is more vital to Asti producers than those that make Barbera d'Alba, many of whom also craft Barolo and/or Barbaresco.

So you have a situation where every bottle of Barbera d'Asti can be labeled as DOCG – even ones that sell for €8-10 (\$9-11.50) a bottle, while every Barbera d'Alba, no matter how expensive, can only earn the DOC designation. Think about the great examples of Barbera d'Alba, such as Vietti Scarrone (there are two versions), [Pio Cesare Fides](#) and [Elio Grasso Vigna Martina](#), to name only a few. Are we really to believe that as they are "only" DOC, they are lesser wines than the most basic versions of DOCG Barbera d'Asti? I hardly think so; thus the message is clear – DOCG does not mean "better" than DOC.

Another classic example has to do with [Soave](#). As of 2001, Soave Superiore became a DOCG wine, the first for a dry version of Soave – [Recioto di Soave](#), a splendid dessert wine, was approved as DOCG in 1998. Yet, almost none of the finest artisan Soave producers, such as Pieropan, Coffele, Gini and Suavia, use the term, preferring Soave Classico DOC. Why did they make this decision? According to Chiara Coffele, the producers from the Soave Classico zone were expecting a DOCG Classico designation, but when it was changed to merely to DOCG Superiore, most vintners declined to use this term. The result is that for the most part, Soave Superiore DOCG is the domain of the cooperatives in Soave, resulting in pleasant, but hardly remarkable wines. Here, the DOC wines are consistently more exciting than the DOCG examples.

Consider that [Sassicaia](#), made by Tenuta San Guido in Tuscany's Bolgheri zone, is one of Italy's most renowned wines, yet is not DOCG, but DOC. Why is this so? Priscilla Incisa della Rocchetta, co-owner of Tenuta San Guido, explains that the wine existed 26 years before the inception of Bolgheri DOC for reds, and that the creation of a Sassicaia DOC was "forged around the way we make wine". She notes that perhaps DOCG status "would not serve a purpose in identifying and further defining the profile of the wine and its quality. We have never thought of asking for the extra "G" and I am not sure we will do it."

Finally, do the best Italian wines need DOCG status in order to denote quality? Take the case of [Amarone della Valpolicella](#), which was finally elevated to DOCG with the 2010 vintage, after more than a decade of dispute and contention among local producers. While Maria Sabrina Tedeschi of the eponymous estate in the Valpolicella Classico zone does believe that "it was important to get DOCG for our wines, because it should represent the pinnacle of Italian wines", she does say that "it is not the rules of DOCG that make a great wine, but rather, the work of the producers in maintaining the traditions, and knowing how to innovate and promote the product throughout the world".

Following up on that, Grasso concludes: "The quality of each wine comes from the terroir, how the vineyards are trained, from the vinification, and always reflects the character of the producers. It can be a DOC or DOCG wine, but remember, the greatest wines always come from the greatest vineyards."

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