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Vermentino: Italy's Sleek And Sexy Seaside White Wine



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Food & Drink



Just-harvested Vermentino grapes at the vineyards of Cantine Lunae Bosoni in Liguria. PHOTO COURTESY CANTINE LUNAE BOSONI

There are hundreds of white grape types planted throughout Italy, many of them indigenous to one region or even one small district. These varieties work well in their particular locales, and tend to result in wines that have a special sense of place, based on factors such as climate, soils, and topography. Of all these whites, perhaps the one that is most perfectly suited to its settings is Vermentino, a dry white that is sleek, tangy and even a little bit sexy.

Vermentino is found primarily in three regions of Italy: Liguria, Sardinia and Tuscany, and in each of those territories, the plantings are very close to the sea. Simply stated, producing a Vermentino from seaside vineyards gives the wines a special character that you don't find from a warmer, inland area. Vermentino from a maritime climate tends to display a minerality or saltiness in the finish – as though you are tasting the soils and/or experiencing the tanginess of the sea when you are enjoying the wine – and if that doesn't appear too appetizing in print, wait until you pair a Vermentino with seafood *antipasti* or pasta with a pesto sauce!



Vermentino vineyards of Cantine Lunae Bosoni in the Colli di Luni territory of Liguria PHOTO COURTESY CANTINE LUNAE BOSONI

In Liguria, Vermentino is one of the most important varieties in the region, along with another white known as Pigato (believed by some researchers to be the same grape). This crescent-shaped region, just south of Piedmont, is one of the smallest in Italy, but its white wines are among the most distinctive. At Giacomelli, located in the Colli di Luni area in eastern Liguria, not far from the border with northern Tuscany, and just north of the Ligurian Sea, proprietor Roberto Petacchi describes Vermentino as having a “delicate bouquet of white flowers, aromatic herbs and white peaches, but also with some mineral notes. The best Vermentino are medium-bodied, fresh and quite round, with a floral aftertaste.” That freshness is the result of the natural lively acidity of the Vermentino grape, which provides balance as well as a marvelous affinity for pairing with a variety of foods.

At nearby Cantine Lunae Bosoni, proprietor Diego Bosoni notes the ideal climate in the Colli di Luni. “There is superb ventilation and optimal exposition to the sun during the day. The evenings are fresh and humid, always with moderate temperatures whether winter or summer.” Bosoni’s

vineyards are sited within two to three miles of the sea, and his two versions of Vermentino, *Etichetta Nera* and *Etichetta Grigia* (black label and grey label, respectively) have been among the country's most striking versions of Vermentino over the past decade.

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The Riviera Ligure di Ponente zone in western Liguria, is another great area for Vermentino in the region. Bianca Rizzo, proprietor of the Laura Aschero estate, notes the terraced vineyards here, with mixed soils of white and red clay; the resulting wines in her words are “more structured with a greater aromatic profile” than versions from Colli di Luni. Whatever territory, the finest Vermentino from Liguria are highly expressive and delicious wines.

On the island of Sardinia, on the Tyrrhenian Sea, Vermentino is grown in several areas, with the Gallura zone in the far northeast being the most notable. Renato Spanu, proprietor at Jankara, a relatively young estate (the first vintage here was 2010), notes the minerality of these wines; “almost 99% of the vineyards are planted in granite soils – Gallura is one big granite rock!” While there are subtle differences among examples of Vermentino di Gallura, depending on the specific sub-zone from where the grapes are sourced, Spanu comments that “one aspect that seems to be found in all is a slight almond-like finish that is typical of Vermentino.” Like most producers, Spanu does not use wood when vinifying this variety, preferring to let the exotic grapefruit and jasmine aromas emerge.

Vermentino also plays a role along the coastal zones of Tuscany, especially in Bolgheri as well as Montecucco, in the far southern reaches of the region. While most of these examples do not offer the intensity and structure of the best versions from Liguria and Sardinia, the best are fruit-driven with typical acidity and a pleasing spiciness. Look for the Collemassari Montecucco “Melacce,” the Col di Bacche Vermentino and the delicious Grattamacco Bolgheri Vermentino, arguably the best example of this variety in the region.

While the Jankara and other versions from Gallura display cellaring potential for up to a decade, most Vermentino should be enjoyed from three to seven years following the vintage. Food pairing is a treat with Vermentino, ranging from “simple plates such as delicate fish and crustaceans,” according to Bosoni, to “mussel soup or even sea bass or red snapper for the more complex examples of Vermentino,” opines Petacchi.

Vermentino is becoming more successful in the market, according to each of these producers. Petacchi notes the sudden interest in the wine in the US, as well as new markets such as Singapore and Brazil, while Bosoni notes “a great acceleration” in sales in recent years. He is quite pleased with these results. “We have set out to demonstrate that our territory is a historical one for the cultivation of Vermentino, and the public has responded in a very positive manner.”

Recommended new Releases of Vermentino

Liguria

Giacomelli “Pianacce” 2016 (Colli di Luni) Very Good

Medium-full, with aromas of Bosc pear, scrub brush and a hit of anise. Lemony finish with a light nuttiness. Very good overall balance; enjoy over the next 2-3 years.

Laura Aschero 2017 (Riviera Ligure di Ponente) Excellent

Striking aromas of melon and green olive. Quite delicious, ideal harmony and excellent ripeness in a challenging vintage. Pair with a filet of meaty, herbal-influenced fish. 2-3 years.

Cantine Lunae Bosoni "Black Label" 2017 (Colli di Luni) Outstanding

Heavenly aromas of orange blossom, golden apple and pastry cream. So appealing now, but this will drink well for another 3-5 years. Classic Vermentino character and Ligurian style.

Sardinia

Pala “Stellato” 2017 (Vermentino di Sardegna) Very Good

Pineapple, mustard seed and green olive aromas. Excellent ripeness, tart acidity. Nicely balanced with very good varietal character; notes of green tea in the finish. Peak in 2-3 years.

Jankara 2016 (Vermentino di Gallura) Excellent

Lovely floral aromas of jasmine, orange blossom and honeydew melon. Beautifully styled with excellent varietal character. Ideal with sautéed shrimp. Peak in 3-5 years.

Tuscany

Pepi Lignana "Leopoldino" 2016 (IGT Toscana)

85% Vermentino, 15% Viognier. Aromas of tea leaf, basil and spearmint, Ripe and lush, with a distinct saltiness in the finish. Enjoy over the next 3-5 years with strong seafood.

Text © Tom Hyland

I am a Chicago-based wine writer, educator and photographer, with 37 years of experience in the wine industry. For the past 20 years, I have been a freelancer, writing professionally about wines

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