

# ITALY'S *lighter red wines*

Reds of lighter body can be found all over Italy, where varieties of both big and small renown have adapted to the country's ideal growing conditions to produce an increasingly in-demand style. Our expert picks 20 delicious buys

STORY & SELECTION MICHAEL GARNER

As rising temperatures send alcohol levels in wine soaring and social mores prompt consumers to drink less, this is the perfect time to embrace one of Italy's most memorable but overlooked wine styles: the lighter-bodied red. While the country may be best known for fuller reds of outstanding quality such as Amarone, Barolo, Brunello *et al*, a plethora of lighter styles highlights its unrivalled diversity.

For the purposes of this feature, that means wines with a maximum 13.5% alcohol, a palate that is neither particularly rich nor weighty, and a certain lightness of spirit that mirrors a lightness of touch in the cellar.

## EVERYDAY VERSATILITY

Three key elements allow this genre to flourish in Italy. Firstly, the right winemaking approach is fundamental; relatively short maceration times with fermentation at coolish temperatures of just-ripe fruit and sparing use of oak (if used at all) are generally required. Secondly, the choice of grapes is critical. Various varieties have the production of lighter-bodied reds written into their DNA: Piedmont's Grignolino, Trentino's Marzemino, and Sicily's Nerello Mascalese and Frappato, to name just a few.

Surprisingly, most red grapes can be suitable candidates when the third condition applies: in cooler growing conditions and particularly at higher altitudes, even Nebbiolo (in parts of Piedmont, the Valle d'Aosta, and Lombardy's Valtellina) and Sangiovese (in Emilia Romagna, Marche and Tuscany's Colli Fiorentini) can fit the bill. Furthermore, certain areas have natural advantages, notably the Adige valley where

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Italy's second longest river, which runs from the Alps to the Adriatic coast, helps provide the requisite growing conditions for grape varieties that have adapted to them.

Producing probably Italy's finest Pinot Nero, the northern reaches are also home to another potential star in Schiava. This working-class hero has undergone a total makeover in recent years and is starting to produce exciting and distinctive lighter reds. Towards the bottom of the valley lie the Veneto vineyards of Bardolino and – slightly further down, as the river makes a 90° turn eastwards – Valpolicella. These two well-known stalwarts produce, at best, archetypal examples of the lighter genre.

Throughout the length and breadth of the Italian peninsula, interesting examples can be found, often as a one-off local speciality such as the Marche's Lacrima. What unites these light red varieties is their amazing versatility: they invariably make excellent table wines, in contrast to many of the better-known reds whose personalities can prove too overbearing for successful food matches.

Perhaps the most surprising feature of all, though, is that a number of lighter-bodied reds can age well, too, helping to remind us that the real key to longevity is balance – the overall harmony of a wine's constituent parts. Just one note of caution, however: these reds are dangerously moreish, so drink responsibly!



**Ca' La Bionda, Casalvegri, Valpolicella Classico Superiore, Veneto 2019 96**

£22 Bat and Bottle

Alessandro Castellani is the champion of making 'fine wines from fresh grapes' in Valpolicella and dedicates his Casalvegri vineyard to growing fruit solely for Valpolicella Classico Superiore, resisting the lure of appassimento. The 2019 is a vindication of his stance, displaying the effortless charm and immaculate balance that distinguish only the finest wines. Restrained and elegant with exquisite tonality. Organic. **Drink** 2025-2035 **Alc** 13.5%