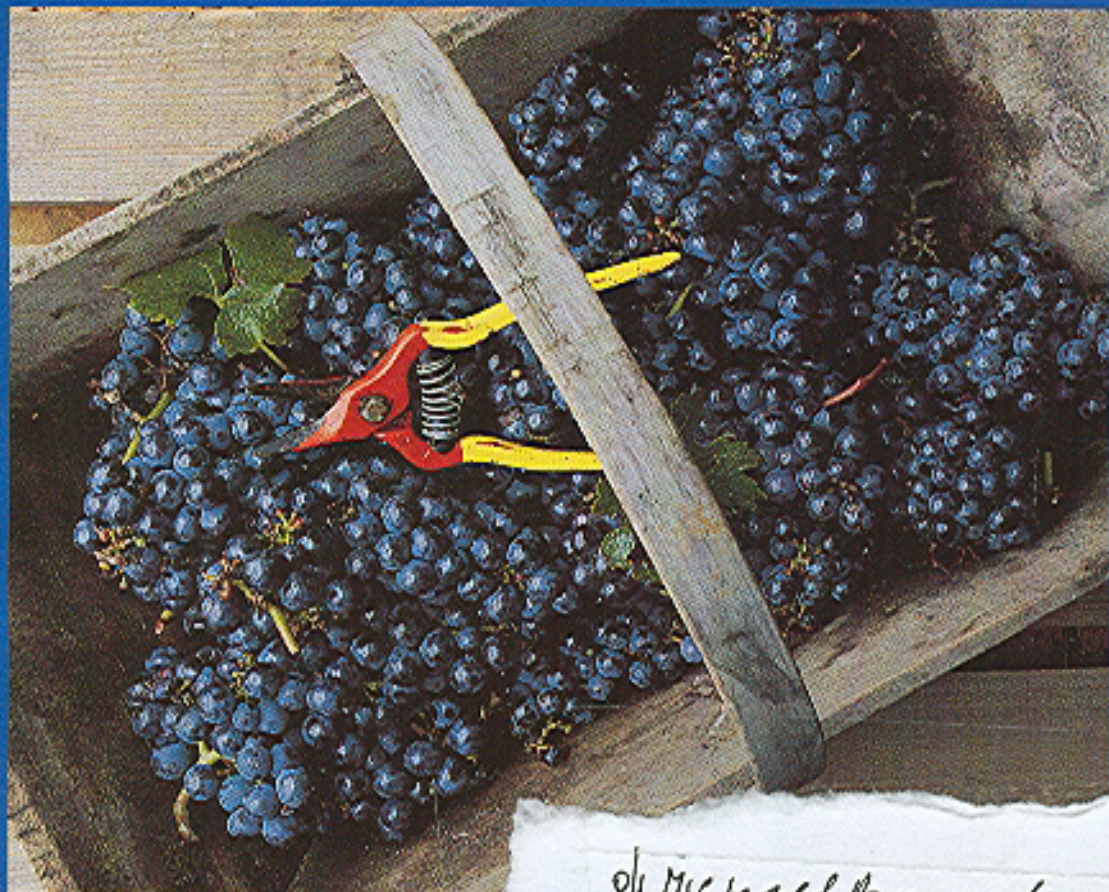


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di Michael B...
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MICHAEL BROADBENT'S TASTING NOTES

Number 270

When in Rome

How could I have waited so long for my first ever visit to Rome? It was of course, as always, a wine related visit, but for a brief and hectic couple of days Daphne and I packed in a fair amount of art and architecture, Bernini, Borricelli – even Christie's office is in a renaissance Palazzo at one end of Rome's most famous piazza.

It is, of course, a great advantage to be accompanied by someone in the know. In the land of long names and elaborate titles my old friend Gelasio Gaetani d'Aragona de Lovatelli filled the bill admirably. Erudite and eccentric, our entrances to restaurants provided an assault course of kisses and handshakes – everyone knew Gelasio. Mind you, he is pretty unmistakable with long flowing locks. A sort of raffish deb's delight.

I do in fact drink quite a few Italian wines at home and my preference is for relatively straightforward Chianti Classicos rather than some of the new 'designer label' reds. For example, I preferred an old favourite, an easy to drink Castello di Volpaia, its 1995 Riserva, to the bottle my host produced, Marchese Carlo Guerrieri Gonzaga's 1993 San Leonardo, a modern style VINO DE TAVOLA made from a melange of Cabernet Sauvignon, Franc and Merlot. Its colour was that of Virgil's 'wine-dark sea', opaque, velvety, with a strange nose reminding me of black treacle. A surprisingly modest 13% alcohol despite its full fruit and character. Dry, but frankly not my style of wine. We were then joined by one of Gelasio's many cousins, the owner of another much sought after new wine, Tenuta di Trinoro: 'the Vallandraud' of Tuscany – 80% Cabernet Sauvignon, the rest Cabernet Franc. Also deep in colour, youthful (a 1997), with a very distinctive vanilla-and-strawberry aroma: sweet on the palate, fleshy, full bodied, yet not overtly alcoholic – yet, when I enquired, I was told it was 16%! Surely not? A small quantity finds its way to London. Corney & Barrow import the wine so if you are interested, and have a strong head as well as a capacious purse, they might put your name down for an allocation.

The thing about Italian restaurants is that they are such fun. Going to a top restaurant in France is like going to the theatre, formal, structured; in Rome even the most fashionable restaurants are bustling yet relaxed, noisy yet intimate – and few men seem to wear ties. Our vinous deliberations were interrupted by a 75-year old duke in a T-shirt trailing a rather pretty 31-year old fourth (or fifth) wife, in turn trailing a five-year old daughter. At the next table, an unhappy looking man was pecking off his even more distressed pregnant mistress back to India. Talk about dolce vita!



'The thing about Italian restaurants is that they are such fun...in Rome even the most fashionable are bustling yet relaxed...'

At other restaurants, including the trendy Dal Bolognese, the modest yet renowned Pierluigi's and the cheap and cheerful Otello della Concordia, conveniently near the bottom of the Spanish Steps (we were staying at the spectacularly lovely Hotel Hassler at the top... we had to take a taxi back), we consumed a fairly wide variety of wines, not all Tuscan. For example, Nino Negri's soft, easy drinking 1996 Inferno from the Valtellina, and Franz Haas' very attractive 1997 Pinot Nero.

Most of the readily available wines were youthful but I spotted a 1986 Rubesco Torgiano of Lungarotti at Otello of all places – in fact, for a rather touristy trattoria they have an excellent wine list. To be truthful, it was past its best though still an attractive drink, with soft fruit and an interesting uplifting end bite.

On our departure, Gelasio presented us with a bottle of Ruffino's 1969 Chianti Classico, Riserva Ducale. Having given the bottle several days to rest, upright, I pulled out its rather crumbly cork. Like the 1986 Rubesco, it needed a bit of air. In appearance the Riserva Ducale was, as expected, fully mature with a soft, open, orange tinge. Its bouquet was hard to pin down, somehow warm and bricky – redolent of hot roof tiles (all in the mind you know). On the palate

sweet, fleshy, with soft tannins acting like a comfortable supporting truss. All in all, a bit edgy, showing its age but still very drinkable.

When we got back home I looked through a bin of odd bottles of Italian wine, mainly Barolos, some Gaja Barbaresco's and Brunello's, mostly with 'K' for keep I wrote on the labels. I pulled out a bottle of the Marchese di Gresy's 1985 Barbaresco Camp Gros Martinenga and served it alongside a 1985 Château Canon at a weekend lunch party. A wonderful vintage, fully mature of course. The aristocratic Barbaresco's nose a bit disappointing: slightly singed, brown paper, brown sugar. But wonderful on the palate. Very sweet, lovely flavour, excellent length and finish. Seemed to go on and on. It certainly outshone the mellow Canon. Also, what should I find but another 1986, Mascarello's Barolo Monprivato. I opened it for a late Sunday lunch, finding the nose rather strange and showing its age. But having kept some back, I found that by 7pm its bouquet had opened up beautifully, rich and fragrant. A sweet, stylish wine, with good length, powerful finish. It had cost me £12.37 in 1991. Not exactly cheap then.

If you want to experience mature Italian wines, buy them young and sit on them. A good investment? Well, certainly well worthwhile.

Michael Broadbent is a director of Christie's