

Food-friendly Italian buys

MY TOP 20: food-friendly
wines from around Italy

In a country where food and wine have long been two essential pillars of everyday life, the potential for standout pairings is endless. **Andy Howard MW** selects 20 of his favourite, top-value mealtime bottles, and suggests the best dishes to go with each

To prove the point that Italian wines are versatile and adaptable, I recall a business dinner a decade ago with Cliff Roberson, the colourful founder of Roberson Wines. Back then I was a supermarket buyer, and when invited out to dinner during the annual Vinitaly exhibition in Verona, I cheekily said I would only go if we could drink a wine which had a name ending in '-aia'. Unfazed by my request, Roberson took me to the most unassuming back-street pizzeria, where we duly consumed a bottle of Solaia 2004 with the cheapest margherita pizza. It was a memorable match, proving (to me, at least) that Solaia is the ultimate pizza wine.

Culinary landscape

Italy is a hugely diverse country, famously referred to by early 19th-century Austrian statesman Count Metternich as being 'only a geographical expression'. From the mountainous north, through the agricultural lands in the centre, the rugged, volcanic south, and the sun-baked islands, Italy has a vast range of cultures, geologies, grape varieties and culinary specialities.

Food has always played a leading role in Italian life. Elizabethan poet Thomas Nashe referred to Italy (in his 1594 work *The Unfortunate Traveller*) as 'the paradise of the earth and the epicure's heaven'. Today, Luca Speri, co-owner of leading Veneto producer Speri, explains the close link between Italian food and wine dating back many centuries: 'Food and wine have always been connected – wine has always been considered food for us.'

Speri believes that indigenous varieties and modern winemaking styles have created wines ideal for pairing with food: 'We see hundreds of native varieties that have good acidity and fine tannins – great conditions for very food-friendly wines, not only with local dishes but with any kind of meal.'

Italy comprises 20 regions – Valle d'Aoste, Piedmont, Liguria and Lombardy in the north; Trentino-Alto Adige, Friuli-Venezia Giulia and

Veneto in the northeast; Emilia Romagna, Tuscany, Le Marche, Umbria, Lazio, Molise and Abruzzo in the centre; with Campania, Basilicata, Puglia, Calabria, Sicily and Sardinia in the south.

In the cooler, mountainous north, powerful Nebbiolo- and Corvina-based reds help cut through the rich, creamy characters of risottos and meat-based stews. Wonderful seafood from the Ligurian coastline is perfectly partnered with saline, fresh Vermentino, while the northern Adriatic has some of the Mediterranean's finest fish – wonderful with a light, pure Pinot Grigio. The wooded areas of Tuscany and Umbria are home to powerful meat dishes, with Chianti wines (bolstered by the robust tannins of Sangiovese) a great match. Further south, olive oil becomes more dominant than butter, with fragrant, juicy whites (Falanghina, Fiano and Greco) and reds (Aglianico, Primitivo and Nerello Mascalese) matching roasted meats, fish and sun-ripened tomato dishes.

Unfairly, Italian restaurants were characterised in the 1970s as simple trattorias adorned with red-check tablecloths and pouring cheap Chianti from straw flasks. Today's consumers can choose from delicious wines made in a modern style with balanced ripeness, tannins and acidity, and explore these with different foods. Jack Lewens, ex-sommelier turned wine producer at Vigneti Tardis in Campania, believes acidity to be a key factor: 'Italian wines tend to be more food-friendly because they have higher acidity – a key factor in food pairing.' It seems there is no better time than the present to experiment with Italian wine and food pairings.

'Food and wine have always been connected – wine has always been considered food for us'



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Luca Speri

Food-friendly Italian buys



Passopisciaro, Passorosso, Etna Rosso, Sicily 2016 ⁹³

£34.50 AG Wines, Corney & Barrow, Hic

From 70- to 100-year-old vines on the volcanic slopes of Etna between 500m-1,100m, this is a typical Nerello Mascalese; an ethereal, thinker's wine. There's firmness on the palate, allied to lively acidity and a lingering, mineral finish, together with floral red fruits on the nose. Deceptively light in appearance, this has the structure to be a fine accompaniment to slow-cooked lamb, or robust fish such as roast turbot or halibut. **Drink** 2021-2026 **Alc** 14%

Roagna, Barbera d'Alba, Piedmont 2014 ⁹³

£26.30-£33.95 Hedonism, Philglas & Swiggot, Twisted Cellar, Uncorked, Vinified Wine, Vinvm

Despite its reputation as 'pizza' wine, good Barbera is incredibly versatile, especially when it's made by a leading Piedmont producer like Roagna. This wine comes from the 2014 vintage, cooler and more challenging than some, but it has benefited from age and has a lovely, lifted perfume and subtle oak. Barbera's acidity makes this an exemplary match for tomato-based dishes, and it also works beautifully with spiced sausages and aromatic curries. **Drink** 2021-2024 **Alc** 13.5%



Le Potazzine, Rosso di Montalcino, Tuscany 2017 ⁹²

£24.28 Lay & Wheeler, Stannary Wine

'Le Potazzine' refers to the local coal tit birds, but it was also the nickname of Viola and Sofia Gorelli, daughters of Gigliola Giannetti, who owns the 5ha estate. This fresh, refined wine has spicy cherry notes and crisp tannins. It pairs well with rich poultry such as roast duck, or lighter meat dishes like roasted loin of pork with rosemary or sage (arista di maiale). **Drink** 2021-2025 **Alc** 14%



Battifarano, Akratos, Basilicata 2015 ⁹¹

£14.95 Lea & Sandeman, Stannary Wine

An intriguing red for those who think that southern Italian Primitivo is only about high alcohol and residual sweetness. From the Basilicata DOC of Matera, Akratos is a bright, fresh wine with red fruit and lifted, spicy, floral notes on the nose, combined with mellow, juicy dark fruit on the palate. The spice and lifted characters make this medium-bodied red a brilliant match for barbecued chicken, beef and pork dishes. **Drink** 2021-2024 **Alc** 13.5%



Cantina Valpantena, Tesco Finest, Valpolicella Ripasso, Veneto 2018 ⁹⁰

£11 Tesco

The Valpantena co-op is one of the region's leading producers of great-value DOC Valpolicella Ripasso. The combination of freshness with a hint of sweetness to the ripe red-fruit and black-cherry flavours makes this an ideal match for grilled steak and game dishes. The lift of spice and subtle oak also make it a fine accompaniment for aged hard cheeses such as Pecorino and Parmigiano. **Drink** 2021-2023 **Alc** 13.5% 

