

SUMMER QUAFFERS

10

WINES UNDER

\$20

Story and Photos by Patricia Thomson

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As a kid, my approach to the dog days of summer was simple: Head to the pool and don't come back until suppertime. We'd beeline to the vending machines during Adult Swim to get ice-cold sodas. Life was easy, our choices no more complicated than Tab versus Fresca. While I can't send us back to the good old days, I can tell you that summertime drinking should be just as carefree as adults. It's too hot to stress, and neither food nor mood calls for big meditation wines. Now's the season for quaffers—low in alcohol, tannin, and, happily, price. But an easy wine doesn't have to be a boring wine (so put that generic pinot grigio back!). There are plenty of tantalizing options for under \$20—rare grape varieties, obscure regions, or simply classics well done. The following Italian wines, listed north to south, can provide a summer's worth of drinking pleasure, no brain power required.



A pair of Italian white wines are ready for sampling.



Small boats rest along the Amalfi Coast.

WHITES

1 Brut, Rotari, \$13

Why more people don't drink sparklers is a mystery to me. Refreshing and low in alcohol, they go with everything: salad, grilled salmon, sushi, even potato chips. Maybe it's their highfalutin image. If it's their price, this Brut from the alpine region of Trentino should change some minds. A mere \$13 gets you a méthode champenoise-style wine, meaning the bubbles are made through secondary fermentation inside the bottle, like champagne. It's a more laborious process than the tank method used in Prosecco—which this blows out of the water. Likewise, when my neighbors and I did an informal blind tasting comparing the Rotari to a more famous Brut that costs three times as much (*ahem*, Ferrari), Rotari came out the surprise winner, exhibiting more of those delectable biscuity, yeasty notes. A superb value.

2 Soave Classico, Pieropan, \$17

Have you tried Soave lately? A *good* one? Forget the cheap, nondescript Soave mass-produced in warehouses on the Veneto flatlands. You want the real deal: Soave Classico from the hills surrounding the Castle of Soave. This soil is special. It's volcanic—black with basalt and pumice, with outcroppings of limestone. When you plant white grapes in soil like this, magic happens. Minerality comes to the fore and the wine carries a precise stamp of terroir. Personality, in a word. None do Soave better than Pieropan, the winery that captained the ship that saved Soave from itself when

quantity threatened to overpower quality in the 1970s. Their best are age-worthy *cru* from old-vine garganega, but those run \$27 to \$36. For drinking tonight on the patio, grab their basic Soave Classico. It'll inspire you to toast the end of Soave's checkered-tablecloth purgatory.

3 Costamolino Vermentino, Argiolas, \$14

There's a saying: "What grows together, goes together." That makes the coastal grape vermentino perfect for seafood. Vermentino's territory encircles the Ligurian sea, going from the French to the Italian Riviera, down the Tuscan coast, and out to the islands of Sardinia and Corsica. Its ideal vineyards are baked by the sun and ventilated by a steady sea breeze. That can impart a touch of salinity on the finish, which is more appealing than it sounds. Up front, vermentino combines citrus and stone fruit with aromas of the *macchia*—the pine, broom, and herbal scrub that covers the rocky coastal hills. Match vermentino with the seafood of your choice: fried calamari, pasta with clams, baked seabass with olives. Vermentino from Sardinia is easiest to find, particularly Costamolino from Argiolas. Lovely and vibrant, it'll be your house white in no time.

4 Sannio Falanghina, Feudi di San Gregorio \$14

I remember the night I fell in love with this wine: It was dinner at Gege's apartment in Milan. The evening was casual, just three journalists hanging out. She served multiple courses (I recall an excellent pasta with artichokes) and poured the same wine for every dish: this falanghina. Sheer perfection. That's when I discovered that falanghina is one of the most versatile, food-friendly

grapes around. It's an archaeological variety found south of Naples; Pliny the Elder, who died under the ashes of Vesuvius, listed it in his *Naturalis Historia*. It's the fruitiest of Campania's whites, but it's got a racy streak of acidity that makes it terrific with food. Sannio Falanghina comes from one of the region's largest producers, Feudi di San Gregorio, a pioneer in the renaissance of Campania wines.

5 Grillo Parlante, Fondo Antico, \$16

As any Italian child will tell you, Grillo Parlante means "talking cricket." That's Jiminy Cricket to you and me, raised on Disney's *Pinocchio* rather than the original serialized novel by Carlo Collodi. This is a play on words, since *grillo* is also the name of a Sicilian grape. For eons, grillo labored anonymously as part of the trio used to make marsala. But recently it's emerged from the backup singers to become an acclaimed star. That metamorphosis began in 1990 with Marco De Bartoli's barrel-aged Grappoli del Grillo—still one of the best, but at \$36 not a casual plaything. Fear not! Most modern grillos are made in stainless steel, which drops the price. A favorite of mine is Grillo Parlante from Fondo Antico, between Trapani and Marsala. Its lemon zest and grapefruit flavors just sing with Sicilian dishes like swordfish carpaccio, grilled tuna, and pasta with sardines, pine nuts, and raisins.



Giorgio Medici, third-generation owner of the Medici Ermete winery, along with his dry Lambrusco, Concerto.

REDS

1 Verduno Pelaverga, Bel Colle, \$20

This Piedmont wine falls under both the “rare grape variety” and “obscure region” categories. Not that Barolo is an obscure region, but its Verduno township is. Verduno is the only place on earth that grows the pelaverga grape. And what a grape it is! Packed with red raspberry and white pepper flavors, it’s aromatic, light bodied, and low on tannin, which makes it ideal for summer. Among the half-dozen wineries in the world that make pelaverga, Bel Colle is perhaps the easiest to find in the under-\$20 range, and it’s a very nice example. Piedmont natives pair it with *bagna cauda*, a creamy, hot garlic-anchovy crudité dip, as well as *salsa verde*, a piquant parsley sauce for meats and appetizers. State-side, it’s a wonderful aperitif on its own, or serve it with a cheese plate, farro salad, or pasta with ragù.

2 Valpolicella Classico, Allegrini, \$16

Valpolicella, north of Verona, is famous for its opulent Amarone, but summer calls for something on the other end of the dial: Valpolicella Classico. This is the only wine in the region’s quartet of styles that does not use the *appassimento* drying technique on its grapes, so you’ll find none of those black fig and raisin notes that enrich Amarone, Ripasso, and sweet Recioto. Instead, Valpolicella Classico offers pure, unadulterated cherry, as lip-smacking and summery as mom’s cherry pie. Most Valpolicella goes straight from stainless steel tank to bottle without touching wood, preserving that bright fruit character. A great

example comes from Allegrini, a regional leader since the 1600s. Theirs is a softer version, thanks to 30 percent rondinella blended with the corvina. A great wine for patio buffets and burgers.

3 Concerto Lambrusco, Reggiano, Medici Ermete, \$20

Some might recall a time when Lambrusco was America’s number one Italian wine import. That era has faded, along with the jingle “Riunite on ice. That’s nice!” What lingers is a certain snobbery about Lambrusco and a false impression that it’s always sweet. Not so! This gently sparkling, grapey wine from Modena comes in dry and off-dry styles. If you can’t wrap your head around the idea of a fizzy red, trust me. There’s no better wine for Emilia Romagna’s comfort foods: lasagna, tortellini, ragù, heaping trays of grilled meats. That spritz cuts through the fat and cleanses the palate, so you’re ready for more. Grilling out? Try Concerto from Medici Ermete, the first Lambrusco to get a Tre Bicchieri award. Made in a dry style from the fuller bodied salomino lambrusco grape, it’s a benchmark wine. The jingle was right: Serve it slightly chilled.

4 Cirò Rosso Classico, Librandi, \$11

I admittedly don’t know much about Calabria, other than it’s the toe of Italy’s boot and is a rugged, empty landscape (having driven through there once on the way to Sicily). Plus this: My beloved Cirò Rosso comes from Calabria. Its leading producer is Librandi, continuing a local winemaking tradition that goes back to the Greek settlers. (Archaeologists uncovered aqueducts that carried grape juice down from the mountain vineyards to

the port and even to individual dwellings. Now, *that’s* a wine culture!) Made in the Cirò region from the native gaglioppo grape, Cirò Rosso is a full-bodied but easy-to-drink red, with gobs of red berry, pepper, and savory notes. Do as the Calabrians do and serve this with *pepperoncino*-spiced dishes, hot red pepper being one of their main crops. *Pasta arrabbiata*, anyone?

5 Etna Rosso, Tenuta delle Terre Nere, \$20

Sommeliers are crazy for Etna Rosso, grown on Europe’s most active volcano. It’s no wonder. The nerello mascalese grape rivals pinot noir and nebbiolo in its suppleness, nuance, and site specificity (hello terroir!). The variations in soil on Mt. Etna are endless, since every lava flow has its own unique mix of minerals, pumice, and stone. That’s reflected in the wines, especially single-vineyard bottlings. But limited production on these *cru* means a \$40 to \$60 price tag. Fortunately, the region’s largest producer, Terre Nere, makes an affordable option. Their entry-level Etna Rosso is a mix of young and old vines from multiple vineyards, aged one year in oak cask. It’s a wonderfully complex wine for this price, with layers of ripe fruit and sweet spice. Versatile, too. Go native and pair it with pasta alla Norma, pasta with pistachio pesto (Bronte pistachios grow on Etna), or grilled swordfish.

Patricia Thomson (@dolcetours) splits her time between Brooklyn and Piedmont. When she’s not writing about wine, she’s running wine tours through her company La Dolce Vita Wine Tours.



A selection of red wines await their pours.