

# Italian Wine Guide



# Introduction

Wine guides for the ultra curious, Approach Guides take an in-depth look at a wine region's grapes, appellations and vintages to help you discover wines that meet your preferences.

With nearly 400 grape varieties — representing over one-quarter of the world's 1400 that produce wine in commercial quantities — Italy offers something new and engaging for even the most passionate wine drinker. And that's just the tip of the iceberg, as these grapes reveal distinctive styles depending on where they are grown. This guidebook makes sense of this complex landscape, allowing you to find your favorites and appreciate them in an even deeper way.

## What's in this guidebook

- **A region-by-region review.** This Approach Guide provides a high-level review of each of Italy's regions, its red and white grape varieties, the denominations in which these grapes reach their highest expressions and the flavors wines typically exhibit. A short list of leading wine producers is also provided.
- **Vintage ratings.** We offer a straightforward vintage ratings table that lays out the best and most challenging years for wine production in Italy.
- **Recommendations.** To help in your selection process, we have marked our favorite regions, grape varieties and denominations with asterisks (\*) — look for this indication as a sign of quality, consistency and good value.
- **A distinctive approach.** This guidebook's approach is unique: rather than tell you what specific bottle of wine to order by providing individual bottle reviews, it gives you the information you require to make informed wine choices on any list.
- **Information the way you like it.** As with all of our guides, this book is optimized for intuitive, quick navigation; information is organized into bullet points to make absorption easy; trademark features of grapes and denominations are front and center.

## Contact us anytime

Our readers are our greatest inspiration. Email us at [founders@approachguides.com](mailto:founders@approachguides.com) to let us know about your experience with Approach Guides — many of our recent updates have been inspired by customers like you. We personally respond to every email.

We hope that this guide serves as a great resource for your wine adventures in Italy and sets you on a path to making your own discoveries.

Salute!

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "David Raezer".

David and Jennifer Raezer  
Founders, Approach Guides  
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# Italian Wine Guide

**Version 2.0**

by [David Raezer](#) and [Jennifer Raezer](#)

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# Contents

Introduction

How to Use This Wine Guide

Overview

An Italian Wine Label

Vintages

## THE REGIONS OF ITALY

Abruzzo and Molise

\* Alto Adige (Südtirol) – Trentino

Basilicata

Calabria

\* Campania

Emilia-Romagna

\* Friuli-Venezia

Lazio

\* Liguria

Lombardia

\* Marche

\* Piemonte

Puglia

\* Sardegna

Sicilia

Toscana

Umbria

Valle d'Aosta

\* Veneto

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# How to Use This Wine Guide

A go-everywhere resource, this a very different kind of wine guide. It leverages the strengths of the digital medium to make understanding Italy's wines easier and more intuitive.

## What's Inside

- **A framework.** We emphasize the fundamental themes that are key to understanding Italy and its wines.
- **Everything in context.** We place grapes and denominations into context by comparing them to regional and national benchmarks.
- **Strategy and recommendations.** We provide a strategy for choosing wines in each region, giving particular consideration to those that offer the best values. Our recommended regions, grapes and denominations are marked with asterisks (\*).

## How It's Organized

- **Highlighted information.** Our region-by-region review uses bullet points to organize information and bold text to highlight key points; this makes it easier to isolate what is most important.
- **Simplified navigation.** We have designed the table of contents so that you can quickly jump around to find what you are looking for. Further, you do not have to read in a linear manner, start to finish, since we ensure that key points are included in each region's profile.
- **Quick search.** We encourage you to use the search feature to find exactly what you are looking for: a favorite grape, a denomination or even a specific flavor.

**Author Tip:** We highly recommend that this wine guide be used in conjunction with our Approach Guide entitled "[Guide to the Regional Foods of Italy](#)". We have also designed this guide as a [wine app for the iPhone or iPad](#).

## An Italian Wine Label

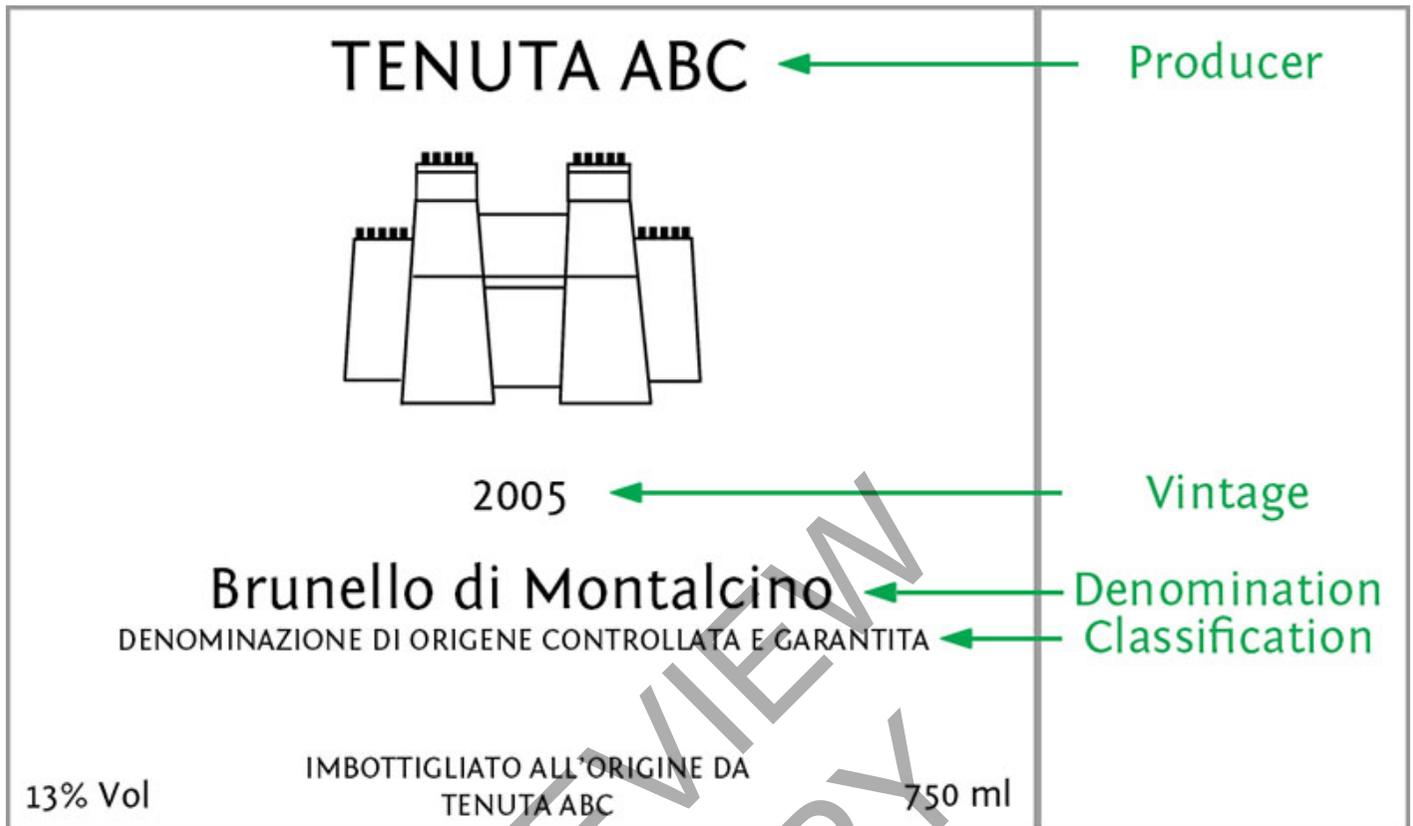


Fig. 1. An Italian wine label.

An Italian wine label provides critical information for understanding what to expect before you open the bottle. Most important, labels reveal the wine's producer, vintage, denomination and classification (green highlights in Fig. 1). The denomination and classification indicators are a bit more complicated and require some explanation.

### Denomination

Even if you know nothing about a wine's producer, the denomination gives you the first big clue as to what's in the bottle. Put simply, a denomination **identifies the specific geographic location** in which the grapes for a wine were grown. Knowing the denomination in which a wine was produced affords you critical information.

- **Terroir.** Features of each location's physical environment — climate, soil type, altitude and exposure — fundamentally impact the nature of the grapes grown there. In this way, these features, often referred to collectively as *terroir*, have a profound impact on the wines produced.
- **Vineyard and cellar practices.** The denomination specification typically includes basic vineyard and cellar requirements to which producers working within the denomination must adhere, such as what grapes may be grown, maximum yields, aging requirements and alcohol levels.

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# THE REGIONS OF ITALY



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## \* Piemonte

### Introduction

Piedmont is definitely the Italian region **most prized by wine collectors** as overall **quality and consistency is very high**. While the stratospheric prices of world-class Barolo and Barbaresco wines might keep them out of reach, there are many nebbiolo bargains to be had, particularly outside of the core Langhe zone in below-the-radar denominations north of the Po river. Further, we encourage you explore the complete landscape of red wines where there are many exciting options: the light **freisa**, the food-friendly **barbera** and the fruit-forward **dolcetto**.

Although vastly unappreciated, Piedmont is also **home to impressive white wines** that hit attractive price points. Look to **arneis, erbaluce, nascetta and timorasso** for something new.

### Red Grapes and Denominations

- \* **Barbera**. Thin-skinned barbera — the most widely-planted grape in Piedmont and the fourth most popular in Italy after sangiovese, catarratto and trebbiano toscano — ripens late, typically after dolcetto but before nebbiolo. While wines are made in a range of styles, they generally offer low tannins, very high acidity and sharp, often sour cherry and red fruit flavors complemented by earthy overtones. If the grape is planted in select, warmer south-facing vineyards, wines can take on very good concentration. Barbera's trademark high acidity makes it pair exceptionally well with food, particularly rich and hearty fare. There are some basic stylistic differences among the wines from the three main barbera denominations: **Alba** (fuller, richer versions, including the three premier sub-areas of Nizza, Tinella and Astiano); **Asti** (lighter versions, often with very good balance; this is the largest DOC and perhaps offers the best price-value); and **Monferrato** (our favorites, a good balance). You will also find varietal wines in the Canavese, Colli Novaresi, Colli Torinesi, Colli Tortonesi, Gabilano, Pinerolese and Rubino di Cantavenna DOCs.
- **Brachetto**. Piedmont's thin-skinned, early-ripening brachetto produces light-bodied, highly aromatic wines with notes of roses, raspberries and strawberries. The grape — particularly in the Brachetto d'Acqui DOCG zone, but also in Roero, Asti and Alessandria — produces a slightly sweet, lightly sparkling wine known for its bitter highlights. It makes for a pleasant aperitivo, pairing exceptionally well with chocolate and fruit.
- \* **Dolcetto**. One of our favorites, thick-skinned dolcetto — meaning “little sweet one” — is the first to ripen of Piedmont's primary red grapes; this makes it ideal for cultivation in the region's higher, cooler elevations where barbera and nebbiolo might struggle to reach optimal ripeness. The grape delivers exactly what its name implies: relatively low acidity, soft (but pronounced) tannins and abundant fruit. Although styles vary, flavors inevitably include dark fruits (versus the red fruits of barbera), licorice, bitter almond and a signature essence of violets. Dolcetto achieves its highest levels in varietal wines from Piedmont's Acqui, Alba, Asti, Diano d'Alba (DOCG),\* Dogliani (DOCG),\* Langhe, Monferrato and Ovada\* DOCs. Overall, they represent **very high value for money** and can be extremely rewarding.
- **Freisa**. A genetic parent of nebbiolo, the thick-skinned, mid-ripening freisa grape yields simple appetite-whetting wines. Often sparkling, they are made in both dry or sweet styles (check

on this before ordering). Wines have bright aromas and flavors of cherries, strawberries and raspberries, often with high acidity, strong tannins and a trademark bitter finish. Look for varietal wines in the Freisa d'Asti and Freisa di Chieri DOCs.

- **Grignolino.** A lesser-known Piedmont native, thin-skinned, mid- to late-ripening grignolino grows around the Langhe's Monferrato hills where soils consist chiefly of limestone-rich clay. It delivers pale-colored (orange-hued), lightweight wines with very high acidity. Raspberry and strawberry fruit flavors stand out in advance of a pronounced mineral finish. Overall, they are pleasant everyday wines that pair exceptionally well with food. Look for it in pure varietal expression in the Asti, Monferrato Casalese and Piemonte DOCs.
- \* **Nebbiolo.** The pinnacle of Italian reds. See details below.
- **Ruché.** The rare ruché is unique to Piedmont. The early- to mid-ripening grape yields wines with medium body, high tannins and low acidity. Ideally paired with mushroom and truffle dishes, they have a trademark rose-scented nose and flavors of berry fruit, violets and hazelnuts; there is often a slightly bitter finish. Varietal wines are produced in the Ruché di Castagnole Monferrato DOCG zone, located northeast of Asti, where ruché contributes at least 90% (the remainder being barbera and/or brachetto).

## **Nebbiolo: Italy's star red grape**

Nebbiolo produces the most sophisticated red wines in Italy.

- **Cultivation.** Thin skinned and very late ripening, the grape achieves its best results on vineyards facing south-southwest, as these aspects assure optimal sunshine. It further prefers the limestone-rich clay soils around Alba, on the right bank of the Tanaro river. Extremely expressive of terroir, nebbiolo is a favorite of connoisseurs that can distinguish slight differences from vineyard to vineyard; in this respect, it is most similar to pinot noir in France's Burgundy.
- **Trademark characteristics.** The light-colored wines are characterized by large amounts of acidity and tannin, which typically require many years of bottle aging to balance and integrate. Despite their power, nebbiolo-based wines are never dense, jammy or distinctly fruity. Showcasing powerful aromas redolent of red cherries, roses and truffles, they also have notes of eucalyptus, violets, pine needle, herbs, mushrooms and cinnamon spice. As the wines age, they take on darker notes of tar, tobacco, leather and earth.
- **Name origin.** The name nebbiolo is derived from the Italian word for fog, nebbia. The grape's fog association could be derived from one of two possibilities: the fog that typically settles over the area of the Langhe in October or the characteristic white-colored coating that appears on the skin of the grape late in the growing season. The grape is also known by the following names: chiavennasca (Lombardy's Valtellina), picotendro (Valle d'Aosta) and spanna (northern Piedmont).

## **Top nebbiolo-based denominations**

- **Barolo.** Piedmont's Barolo DOCG zone is located southwest of the town of Alba, east of the Tanaro river. Wines are derived exclusively from nebbiolo, grown chiefly on limestone-rich clay soils. Basic Barolo wines are aged for a minimum of three years (two in wood); riservas are aged for five years (two in wood). **As compared to those from Barbaresco, Barolo wines are typically more richly textured, fuller bodied and longer lived.** A tip: wines produced in the western half of the zone (the communes of La Morra and Barolo) have

historically been more delicate, fruity and perfumed, due to the more fertile clay soils; those from the eastern half (Monforte and Serralunga) tend to be fuller bodied, earthier and more powerful due to the poorer, stonier (sandstone) quality of the soils; as you might expect, the commune straddling the two halves (Castiglione Falletto) strikes an even balance.

- **Barbaresco.** Overall, as compared to those from Barolo, Barbaresco wines are typically more elegant and less tannic. The stylistic difference might be attributable to the more fertile soils and modestly warmer climate that allow nebbiolo to ripen slightly earlier than in Barolo, which often leads to shorter maceration times (which translates into lower tannins and less bitterness). The Barbaresco DOCG zone is located east-northeast of the town of Alba on similar limestone-rich clay soils. Basic Barbaresco wines are aged for a minimum of two years (one in wood); riservas are aged for four years (one in wood). Wines from the commune of **Barbaresco** itself — which includes the vineyards of Asili, Ca' Grossa, Cavanna, Cars, Cole, Faset, Martinenga, Montaribaldi, Moccagatta, Muncagota, Montefico, Montestefano, Ovello, Pajé, Pora, Rabajà, Rio Sordo, Roccalini, Roncaglette, Ronchi, Secondine, Trifolera, Tre Stelle, Vicenziana — tend to be the softest and fruitiest, given the southern exposure of many of the vineyards that assures optimal ripening; those from **Neive** — Albesani, Balluri, Basarin, Bordini, Bric Micca, Canova, Cotta, Curra, Fausoni, Gaia Principe, Gallina, Marcorino, Rivetti, San Cristoforo, San Giuliano, Serraboella, Serracapelli, Serragrilli, Starderì — are leaner, more aromatic, and more structured due to the cooler temperatures prevalent in the commune's higher altitude vineyards; those from **Treiso** — Ausario, Bricco, Bernardot, Casot, Castellizzano, Cichin, Ferrere, Fondetta, Garassino, Giacone, Giacosa, Marcorino, Manzola, Marcarini, Meruzzano, Montersino, Nervo, Rocche Massalupo, Pajoré Rombone, San Stunet, Treiso, Valleirano, Vallegrande — tend toward a similarly lighter, perfumed style.
- **Northern denominations.** While Piedmont's most famous nebbiolos are produced in the Langhe — the tongue-shaped piece of land wedged between the banks of the Tanaro and Bormido di Spigno rivers (in the north, east and west) and the Apennine mountains (in the south), which includes such famous towns as Asti, Alba, Barbaresco and Barolo — there is a collection of denominations located north of the Po river: Boca, Bramaterra, Carema, Canavese, Colline Novaresi, Costa della Sesia, Fara, Gattinara\*, Ghemme\*, Lessona and Sizzano. Overall, they yield **delicate, more perfumed and higher acidity versions of nebbiolo** that are more accessible when young. This stylistic bent is attributable to the lighter, poorer quality of the soils and the cooler temperatures (derived from the closer proximity to the Alps), both of which make bringing the late-maturing nebbiolo to peak ripeness more challenging. To soften the higher acidity and tannins that nebbiolo takes on in cooler northern vineyards, wines are not pure varietals, but rather blends with bonarda and vespolina, grapes that add fruit and body. These slightly lower on the radar nebbiolo-focused denominations are worth seeking out as **sources of good value**.

In these denominations, there are two basic styles:

- **Traditional style.** The traditional style favors non-temperature-controlled fermentation in large wooden casks, long maceration on the skins (to extract as much color and tannins as possible) and aging in wooden casks (that allows for modest oxidation of the wines).
- **Modernist style.** By contrast, the modernist style practices temperature-controlled fermentation in stainless steel, short maceration (to bring out pure fruit flavors) and aging in small wooden barrels (that introduces more noticeable wood-derived flavors such as vanilla, toast and oak).

## White Grapes and Denominations

- \* **Arneis**. Thin-skinned arneis is **Piedmont's finest white**, grown chiefly in the Langhe and Roero. Arneis-based wines offer low acidity, floral aromas and a rather strong fruit-driven palate that includes ripe pear, orange, apricots and peaches. You may also get an edge of smokiness and a touch of bitter almond on the finish. Due to the grape's relative obscurity outside of Italy, these full-bodied whites are often great values. Arneis is a perfect accompaniment to heavier pasta dishes. Wines reach their greatest heights in varietal offerings from the Roero Arneis DOCG\*.
- **Chardonnay**. A native of France's Burgundy, thin-skinned, early-ripening chardonnay is one of the better international grape success stories in Piedmont. Ideally suited to the local limestone-heavy clay soils, it grows in vineyard sites with cooler exposures that are sub-optimal for nebbiolo. While they come in a range of styles, chardonnay-based wines reveal trademark notes of tropical fruit, melon, peach and hazelnut; they are typically fairly low in acidity and high in alcohol. Look for varietal wines in the Langhe DOC.
- **Cortese**. Thick-skinned cortese produces wines that are generally not that exciting. Achieving its greatest pure varietal expression in Piedmont's Gavi DOCG zone (northeast of Torino), the grape has been plagued by **overproduction and inconsistency** even there. When executed properly, cortese delivers wines with delicate fruits (think pear, green apple), a strong mineral backbone and high acidity. Look for it also in varietal form in the Cortese dell'Alto Monferrato, Monferrato (Casalese) and Piemonte DOCs.
- \* **Erbaluce**. Thick-skinned, early- to mid-ripening erbaluce is indigenous to northern Piedmont — the Erbaluce di Caluso DOCG\* and Canavese DOC zones northeast of Torino — and this is where you will find the best pure varietals. The grape produces wines with high acidity and delicate flavors of wildflowers and green apple, coupled with a distinctive minerality. They are ideally paired with simply grilled fish. Erbaluce also makes for very tasty sweet and sparkling wines. Made to consistently high standards, they are a reliable option. Look for it also in varietal wines from the Colline Novaresi and Coste della Sesia DOCs.
- **Favorita**. While favorita is genetically identical to two Ligurian grapes — vermentino and pigato — it achieves distinctive expression on the sandy soils of Piedmont's Roero, on the left bank of the Tanaro river. Despite many similarities to its genetic equivalents, favorita-based wines are a bit more subtle and reserved. While they have a shared soft, round mouthfeel due to low acidity, they favor flavors of pear and citrus over exotic fruits and are typically less likely to reveal a saline streak. Look for varietal wines in the Colli Tortonesi and Langhe DOCs. For more on favorita/vermentino/pigato, see the section on Liguria, where the most aromatic versions are made.
- **Malvasia**. Thick-skinned malvasia generally yields wines with stone fruit flavors and a creamy mouthfeel. As elsewhere in Italy, they are generally simple wines, made for everyday consumption. Look for them in the Malvasia di Casorza (malvasia di casorzo) and Malvasia di Castelnuovo (malvasia di schierano) DOCs.
- **Moscato**. See the section on Piedmont's sparkling wines below.
- **Nascetta**. The rare nascetta, potentially related to favorita/vermentino/pigato, is indigenous to Piedmont's Langhe and was only recently saved from extinction. Early to mid ripening, the grape delivers full-bodied, often unctuous wines with flavors of wildflower, white peach, herb, honey, sage, salt and mineral. Despite their rich characters, these aromatic wines possess sufficient structuring acidity to maintain balance, making them pair well with richer seafood dishes. Look for varietally-labelled wines in the Langhe DOC.
- **Timorasso**. The similarly rare timorasso is planted chiefly in Piedmont's Colli Tortonesi and Monferrato DOCs. Brought back from near extinction by winemaker Walter Massa, the grape

is making a **comeback among wine aficionados** (although perhaps only 20 hectares are under vine). The thick-skinned, early- to mid-ripening grape yields massive wines with a distinctive creaminess. Flavors include candied fruit, toasted hazelnut, honey, spice, bitter mountain herb and mineral. Timorasso's rich, full-bodied character allows it to pair with dishes that most other whites simply cannot, such as poultry, pork, veal, smoked meats and sausages. It is worth seeking out for lovers of powerful whites that are looking for a new favorite.

## Piedmont's Sweet Sparkling Wines

Spoiled in the minds of many wine drinkers by the Martini and Rossi Asti spumante ad campaign, the **moscato bianco grape** — aka muscat blanc à petit grains — has struggled in recent decades, yet it remains the most planted white grape in Piedmont. Despite the negative associations, these sparkling wines are **quite enjoyable**, exhibiting distinctly grapey aromas, gentle fruits (often peach) and a **touch of sweetness**, balanced out by a healthy dose of acid. Moscato-based sparklers are made in two styles: frizzante (known as Moscato d'Asti; 4-6% alcohol, with less bubbles and significant residual sugar) and spumante (known as Asti Spumante; 8-10% alcohol, with more bubbles and low residual sugar). They are best enjoyed as a **pre-dinner aperitivo**. Moscato sparklers reach their apex in the **Asti DOCG** zone, located in the southeast portion of the region around the town of Asti.

## Top Producers in Piedmont

Although the Barolo and Barbaresco are unrivaled, we encourage you to experiment with barbera and dolcetto in particular, given the improving quality of wines based on these grapes and the good pricing. Top flight producers include: Almondo (Barbera D'Alba), Alario (Barbera and Dolcetto D'Alba), Araldica (Barbera D'Asti), Agostino Bosco (Barbera D'Alba), Bera (Barbera D'Alba, Nebbiolo), Boroli (Barbera and Dolcetto D'Alba), Bricco Maiolica (Dolcetto and Barbera D'Alba), Ca del Baio (Barbaresco), Cascina Chicco (Barbera), Dessilani (northern Nebbiolo), Roberto Ferraris (Barbera D'Asti), Icardi (Barbera D'Asti), La Tenaglia (Barbera D'Asti), Marchesi Alfieri (Barbera D'Asti), Monchiero (Barolo), Montaribaldi (Barbaresco, Barbera D'Alba), Gianmatteo Pira (Barbera, Dolcetto D'Alba), Guido Porro (Barolo), Principiano (Barbera D'Alba), Ressia (Barbaresco), Giovanni Rosso (Barolo) and Villa Giada.

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# Italy Reading List

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Here are just a few of our Italy recommendations ([see the complete list](#)):

- **Innocents Abroad** A refreshing and funny travel narrative based on Mark Twain’s writings from his 1867 steamship voyage to Europe, Egypt and the Holy Land. *By Mark Twain.*
- **“Man, The Drinker”** The uncovering of an ancient tomb, the Midas Tumulus, in central Turkey at the ancient site of Gordion, sparks Patrick McGovern’s exploration of the origins of wine. *By Trey Popp.*
- **The Sounds of Italy** Listen to a personal collection of Italian tracks — heavily weighted to Neapolitan classics — compiled by our founder, Jennifer Raezer. The perfect pre-trip soundtrack.
- **The Legend of Old Befana** Just for kids! Delightful Italian Christmas legend about a busy old woman and her search for the Child King. *By Tomie dePaola.*

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**Los Angeles Times**

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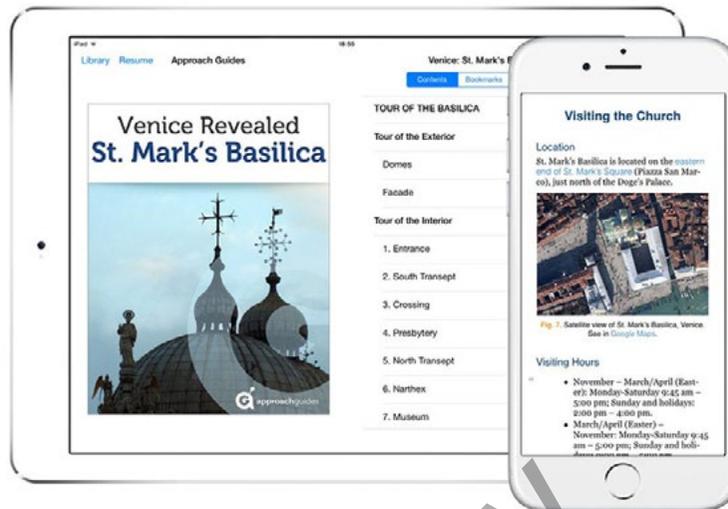
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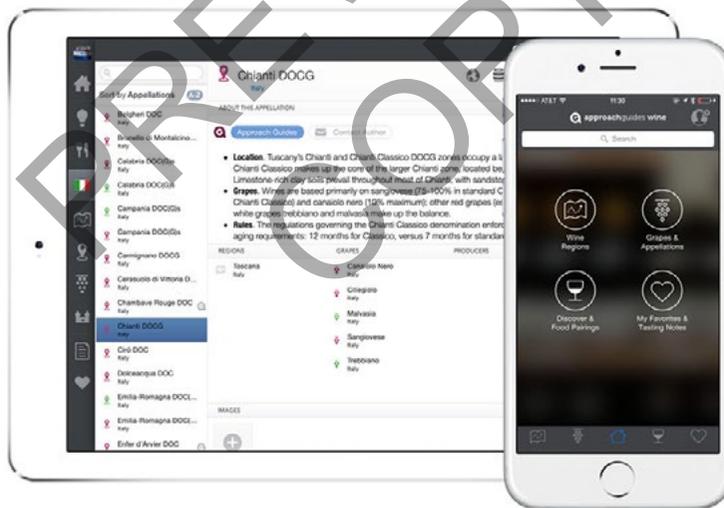
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