



Southbury Package Store Uncorked



Italian Wine Law: A Primer

European Countries have a hierarchal structure to govern wine production. If you look at the chart below, you will see the levels that govern European wine law on the left and Italy's corresponding levels on the right.



It is a tidy representation of some complex regulations as each wine region has specific law dedicated to categorizing their classified wine product.

We will begin with the bottom of the pyramid, **Vino da Tavola (VdT)**. This category is dedicated to simpler wines with very few governing rules. Early on these wines were only permitted to say: “table wine” on them, but now they can list grape and vintage on their label if they are produced from a minimum of 85% of the grape or vintage. These wines are rare in our market and you would never see a wine from Chianti, for example, carrying this designation.

The next category (**IGT**) was added in 1992 to aid winemakers who wanted to step outside the traditional DOC/G law but still make quality wine. Prior to 1992, many wines failed to qualify for DOC or DOCG status –because they were made from grape varieties (or blends) not sanctioned under DOC/G laws. The **Indicazione Geografica Tipica (IGT)** classification focuses on the region of origin, rather than grape varieties or wine styles. The term ‘Super Tuscan’ emerged in the 1970s, to describe a particular set of high-quality Tuscan wines which were barred from claiming DOC or DOCG status because they broke traditional Italian winemaking law and had to originally be labeled as **VdT**. Several of these wines earned global recognition and exorbitant price tags. This ultimately led to the creation of the IGT category, with its relatively relaxed production rules. **Poderuccio Rosso Toscano 2018 (\$16.99)** is an example of such a category. Produced by Camigliano (an actual town of 32 residents) in Montalcino this wine is not Brunello but a blend of Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Sangiovese. The nose shows dark berries with a hint of mint and toasted earth. On the palate this is dry, medium bodied with stunning flavors of black raspberry and chocolate, boosted by a touch of leather. The tannins are round and well-integrated on the finish. A nice value!

The next step on the pyramid is the **Denominazione di Origine Controllata (DOC)**. These wines are subject to a set of regional specifications that are meant to protect a placename by ensuring high standards and making sure the wine fits the specific style of the area. Bolgheri is a relatively young, yet prestigious Italian appellation located in Maremma on the Tuscan coast. It is known for deeply colored, supple yet age-worthy red wines, usually based on the Bordeaux grape varieties. After the addition of the **IGT**

level, Bolgheri was able to demonstrate a uniqueness in wine and became a **DOC** in 1994. The **Cerlati Sciré Bolgheri Rosso 2017 (\$16.98)** is a classic Bordeaux-style blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. Located in the territory of Castagneto Carducci at the southern part of Bolgheri, the Alfeo family owns 13 hectares of vineyards that have been farmed for several generations. The family initially sold their harvests to wineries like Ornellaia and Sassacaia, quite an honor considering the history of those estates. Now they bottle 100% of the harvest. This wine has a charming, rich aroma, and expresses subtle notes of raspberries, cinnamon, and a savory hint of bacon with soft-velvety tannins, and a long, elegant finish. Sign me up!

We have finally reached the top! **The Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita (DOCG)** embodies all that the **DOC** regulations stand for and have the added security that is guaranteed by the Italian government. These wines are evaluated by an expert tasting panel and upon passing the evaluation each bottle gets an individually numbered tax stamp. This category was written into Italian wine law in 1963 but it was not until 1980 when Brunello di Montalcino became the first, official DOCG.

Undoubtedly the most famous **DOCG** region is Chianti. After World War II Chianti made its way to the United States as it was an affordable and somewhat whimsical alternative to the wines of France, after all it came in a straw wrapped bottle (a candle holder in the making). EVERY wine that carries the appellation Chianti is a DOCG wine. The following wines are excellent representations of the many, diverse versions of the mystifying Chianti wine types.

Ruffino Chianti 2018 (\$9.99) – must be made from at least 70% Sangiovese with other varietals allowed including white varieties.

Santa Cristina Chianti Superiore 2016 (\$11.99) – can be made from any of the subzones of Chianti except for Classico and requires nine months of ageing, three of those months must be in the bottle.

Fattoria Selvapiana Chianti Rufina 2018 (19.98) – must be made in the Rufina (not Classico) subzone which is one of seven not considered part of Chianti Classico.

Volpaia Chianti Classico 2018 (\$21.99) – must be made from a minimum of 80% Sangiovese, come from the Classico zone, have a minimum of 12% alcohol, contain no white varieties and not be released for sale until a year after harvest.

Castello Vicchiomaggio Chianti Classico Riserva 2016 (24.99) – has the same standards as Classico but must be aged for two years and an additional half degree of alcohol than Classico.

What does all this alphabet mumbo jumbo mean? Chianti, Chianti Classico, Rufina, riserva, and superiore are all terms to help guide you through the ocean of Sangiovese based wines from Tuscany. Wait? Did someone say Brunello or Morellino?



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Winter Warmers

In his poem 'The Waste Land', T.S. Eliot opined:

"April is the cruelest month, breeding
lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
memory and desire, stirring
dull roots with spring rain."

For me the cruelest month is a toss-up between February and March which is why this time of the year I turn to 'comfort wines'. Comfort wines are different for everybody but this time of year my comfort wines are all red, all full-flavored, all familiar and all tasty and ready to go. Let me share with you a few of my favorites.

A great wine to have this time of a good Cabernet Sauvignon. The problem is finding a good Cabernet that is ready to drink and drinking well. My favorite comfort Cab (that won't break the bank) is **Ultra Violet Cabernet Sauvignon 2018 (\$15.99)**. Winemaker Samantha Sheehan makes embarrassingly good Cabernet. This represents the best cheap and cheerful Cabernet that I have found to date. It is easy going and represents its varietal incredibly well. A blend of 95% Cab with 5% Cabernet Franc from the Red Hills AVA and Napa. Aged in oak for 16 months prior to release. The nose shows soft currant, briary raspberry, a hit of pepper and the lightest suggest of wood. The palate is moderate weight with softer fruits towards raspberry, currant and cherry with pepper and cedar to finish. As one professional reviewer stated, "It is really an extremely well-made bottle of Cabernet and an insanely good value...and it is a flat-out steal!" I couldn't have said it better.

I could not have a comfort wine list that didn't include a Zinfandel, red of course. Zinfandel is California's 'heritage' wine and some of my fondest tasting memories involve Zinfandel. Surprisingly, I find it difficult to find really good Zin at something of an affordable price. I love Ridge Geyserville but I don't love spending \$45 to find comfort. Luckily, **Valravn Zinfandel Sonoma County 2017 (\$21.98)** is the answer. Made from old, bush pruned vines averaging over 50 years in age and coming from appellations that read like a Who's Who when it comes to Zinfandel: Dry Creek, Alexander Valley and Russian River to name a few. The palate is loaded with dark cherry and black raspberry fruits finishing with a touch of white pepper spice. Succulent, delicious and affordable.

It would not be a comfort wine list for me if it didn't have a wine from the southern Rhone Valley. In this part of France, Grenache is the heart and soul of the red wines which range from simple Cotes-du-Rhone to expensive Chateauneuf-du-Pape. Grenache is the main variety but almost every wine from every appellation is a blend of Grenache with at least one and often a half a dozen other varietals. A favorite wine from a favorite producer is **Domaine de Piaugier Sablet Cotes-du-Rhone-Villages 2018 (\$21.98)**. Piaugier farms some 25 acres in and around the Village of Sablet in the northeast part of the southern Rhone. This wine is a blend of Grenache (75%) and Syrah (25%). The viticulture is organic (but not certified). The wine is fermented in cement

tanks and aged in old wood foudres to soften the tannins without imparting wood flavors. The wine is loaded with black fruits and pepper. There is a hint of earth and rusticity but there's a pleasant smoothness on the palate and finish. Would be great with pork stew or a roaring fire.

Now I must confess that I have only a few wines from Italy on any comfort list I make but I would be sorely remiss if I did not include some of the wines from the Piedmontese winery Paitin. Although this long-standing Barbaresco estate (founded in 1796) is best known for their Nebbiolo based wines, the **Paitin Barbera d'Alba 'Serra' 2018 (\$24.98)** is not to be missed. Juicy, organic, and wildly mineral-driven, the wine oozes with notes of sour cherries, raspberries, and fresh cut herbs. On the palate it is full-bodied, with an excellent core of fruit, polished tannin and a long, complex finish. Perfect for that pizza night in! This is quite a good Barbera that is approachable out of the blocks, but like so many wines from this varietal, it will be even better if given a year or two's worth of bottle age...but who can wait when you want comfort now!

There is a lot of comfort to be found in Spain but one of my favorites is CUNE. CUNE is among Rioja's most venerable houses, founded in 1879 as Compañia Vinicola del Norte de España—abbreviated as C.V.N.E. or CUNE—by brothers Eusebio and Raimundo Real de Asúa of Bilbao. And it remains in family hands to this day. Like most Rioja houses CUNE makes a plethora of wines from aged Reservas to lively Crianza's but all have one thing in common...they are delicious. Nothing provides more comfort for both the palate and the pocketbook than **CUNE Crianza 2016 (\$11.99)**. It is a blend of Tempranillo (85%) and Garnacha (Grenache) and Mazuelo. Although the estate is quite large, the grapes are hand harvested, then fermented in stainless-steel followed by aging for 12 months in American oak barrels. All very traditional. The color is a bit pale compared to our other selections but don't let that fool you, the wine is full of flavor. Plum, cherry, smoke and spice on the nose. Fresh and lively on the palate with notes of plum. Medium-bodied and finishing with zesty acidity. This is best served with some cheese or charcuterie or a light meal. A classic.

Cahors, in the southwest of France, is the one region outside of Argentina that is today almost exclusively dependent on Malbec. Locally the variety is called Cot, and makes a dense, earthy and black fruit dominant red wine. Perfect for these long winter nights. The problem with the reds of Cahors is that they have traditionally been made to require long aging in order to soften their tannic edges. Philippe Bernède, proprietor of Clos La Coutale, has tinkered with the grape blend to achieve a greater equilibrium. Today, the blend of **Clos La Coutale 2017 (\$15.99)** consists of 80% Malbec and 20% Merlot, creating an intense wine that juggles elegant rusticity with everyday drinkability. Black and red fruit harmonize among a dusty earthiness that give this wine a tremendous amount of character and flavor concentration for the price point. A wine for Francophiles and Malbec-lovers alike.