

TASTES OF ITALIA

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VERMENTINO: COASTAL PLEASURE

Like a bronzed, beach-going Italian, Vermentino craves the sea, thriving in the maritime triangle of Liguria, Tuscany, and Sardinia.

by Patricia Thomson

Stepping out of the bright coastal sun, I duck into Enoteca Grazia in Sestri Levante, my favorite wine shop on the Riviera. There’s no better place to find a good selection of Vermentino and Pigato, those identical twins of the Mediterranean. These wines capture the essence of the *macchia*—the fragrant broom, wild fennel, sage, and pine that any Cinque Terre hiker will recognize. Swirling a glass

of Vermentino, one smells those same savory herb and floral notes, and a sip reveals fantastic minerality and trace of *sapidità*—that salinity on the finish that identifies this wine as a seaside treasure.

It’s mid-afternoon, so the shop is quiet. I grab several bottles by my favorite producers—Maria Donata Bianchi, Terre Rosse, Terre Bianche, Ottaviano Lambruschi, and Lunae—and hand them over to the shop owner, Grazia Stagnaro. As she wraps them one by one in tissue paper, her partner, Sandro Defilippi, excitedly fusses with a new flat-screen mounted above the cash register. I’d casually asked, “Where are the best vineyard sites for Vermentino?” and he seizes the moment to show me his new toy. It seems that



Defilippi has recently Google-mapped all the Ligurian wineries carried by his shop. So up pops Google Earth, and we're on our way.

Whoosh. We zoom into Terre Bianche, its vineyards clinging to the rocky promontory above Dolceacqua, near the border of France. *Whoosh.* Now we fly over to Maria Donata Bianchi, high up on a twisty road above Imperia. *Whoosh.* We rocket east towards the Tuscan border to Lunae and Lambruschi, both a stone's throw from the marble quarries of Carrara beloved by Michaelangelo.

What do all these sites have in common? They're all in eyeshot of the Mediterranean. A winemaker once told me, "Vermentino is a grape that needs to see the sea," and Defilippi's magic carpet ride proves him right.

Plump and prone to breakage and rot, Vermentino craves the Mediterranean heat, radiant rocks, and diurnal breeze off the water, like a bronzed Italian on permanent vacation in the Riviera. The grape thrives in Liguria, both east of Genoa (the Levante) and west (Ponente), where its genetically identical, freckled cousin Pigato also grows. (*Pigato* is dialect for spots, which develop upon ripening.) It also excels over the border in Provence and the Languedoc, where it's called Rolle; in Provence, it's the only grape that's permitted to be bottled pure, rather than blended. Traveling south along the Italian coast, it's made a comfortable seaside home in Tuscany. But its cradle is Sardinia and Corsica, smack in the middle of this maritime triangle.

Vermentino came to Italy by way of Sardinia, brought by the Spanish who occupied the island from 1324 to 1720 under the Crown of Aragon. That's one theory anyway, buttressed by the fact that the Aragonese most certainly introduced Carignan and Grenache (Cannanau) to Sardinia. A competing theory is that it came through Corsica and arrived in Liguria first. Alfonso Gagliano, Sella & Mosca brand ambassador at Campari Wines, is one who makes an etymological case for Sardinia. Northern Sardinians pronounce *f* like *v*, he notes, "so *fermentino* would be *vermentino*."



This varietal ripens early, so it's the first to ferment—thus *fermentino*.”

One thing is sure. “The origin of Vermentino is a Malvasia from Iberia,” says Gagliano. “From a genetic point of view, Malvasia is a big grandmother of many Italian varietals.” Among Vermentino's cousins are Vernaccia di San Gimignano and Torbato from Sardinia.

Complicating everything is genetic testing that suggests Vermentino's kinship with Furmint, the grape in Hungary's dessert wine, Tokaji. But all could have descended from some Ur-grape in Greece or further east, so the historical threads have yet to be untangled.

While scientists battle it out, you can skip over to your local wine shop for some personal research. The Vermentino you're most likely to encounter comes from Sardinia, which makes about 75 percent of Italy's output. Two ubiquitous brands are Costamolino from Argiolas (\$15) and La Cala Vermentino from Sella & Mosca (\$10), the island's largest producers. These entry-level wines come mostly from the flatlands—fertile soil that makes for a plumper style with flavors veering towards tropical fruit (think pineapple and citrus). Both are easy summer quaffers that'll brighten up any grilled fish like a spritz of lemon.

You also might bump into two excellent examples from Bolgheri, Tuscany's Gold Coast, both by boldface names: The Antinori family, vintners for 500 years, crafts an elegant, full-bodied Vermentino di Bolgheri (\$20) at their Guado al Tasso estate. Down the road is Poggio al Tesoro, a new property of the Veneto-based Allegrini clan, known for their Amarone. Using a small-berried clone from Corsica, they make Solosole Vermentino Bolgheri (\$18), redolent of acacia and fresh apricot. Like the best Vermentinos, this has prolonged lees contact and no aging in wood (thus its name *solo sole*, or “only sun”), resulting in clean, concentrated flavors.

The jewel in the crown is the rare Vermentino di Gallura, the only Vermentino to warrant top DCG classification. Gallura is an area on the jagged northern edge of Sardinia, where vineyards grow on granite cliffs with just the barest hint of top soil. Buffeted by winds from the open sea, the stressed vines produce Vermentino is at its most intense. Though Sella & Mosca makes a gorgeous Gallura, production is just too small for export. Sadly, that's a common tale. Scouring New York's meticulously stocked, sommelier-worthy wine shops, I could find just one: Vermentino di Gallura Juannisolou from Vigne Surrau (\$16). So if you see a Vermentino di Gallura, grab it.

But take heart. The crème de la

crème, in my opinion, comes from Liguria. Here too, few export; we're talking handkerchief-sized vineyards tucked into the folds of the Ligurian Apennines, so production is painstaking and small. Nonetheless, a few bottlings make it Stateside, and they're worth tracking down. There's Laura Aschero's sprightly Vermentino Riviera Ligure di Ponente (\$50), plus two from Cantine Lunae Bosoni. Because Lunae collaborates with 150

growers, they're able to get some volume. Their gray-label Vermentino Colli di Luni (\$20) is fresh, floral, and bright—a benchmark wine. The black label (\$33) comes from a rigorous selection of grapes with two days of cold maceration, offering more color and complexity. Both have been racking up awards and, according to importer Laird & Company, reaching the U.S. in greater supply.

So do yourself a favor. Hunt down a good Vermentino and some fresh focaccia. Pour yourself a glass. Then pour another alongside your *pesto alla genovese*. Then another with your roasted sea bass with olives, cherry tomatoes, and rosemary potatoes. You'll swear you can hear the waves breaking.

