



Varietals as nose-worthy as Pinocchio highlight Vancouver festival

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Italy's grapes outshine France's merlot, pinot noir

VANCOUVER WINE FEST

Italy stands out at party for 25,000



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VANCOUVER

One of the defining moments of this year's Vancouver Playhouse International Wine Festival, at least for me, involved Pinocchio.

Not the mendacious marionette of the Italian fable, but something else with an impressive nose, a wine by that name made from the almost-famous Sicilian grape nero d'Avola.

"I-o-o-o-ve this wine," declared a woman displaying the Valley Girl legato tones and denuded midriff of someone in her mid-20s.

Seeing as supplies had sold out at the festival's temporary liquor store in the waterfront convention centre, would the visiting Italian exporter sell her a bottle under, ahem, the table?

Her ample charms notwithstanding, the woman failed to persuade Alessandro Costantini to break the rules. "Sorry," said the co-founder of Milan-based Wineoclock SRL, with a smile. "Cannot."

Emerging Mediterranean grapes, catchy modernist labels and dulcet Italian accents were everywhere at the 30th-annual festival, a week-long downtown blowout that culminated on Sunday and featured Italy as its theme.

Also in abundance were the city's fashionably dressed and impressively well-behaved wine lovers, who once again proved they know how to throw a civilized party for 25,000.

It's been estimated Italy is home to more than 1,000 grape varieties more than any other country. Many were displayed at the show and, for once at an international wine fair in Canada, overshadowed the globally dominant French quintet of cabernet sauvignon, chardonnay, merlot, pinot noir and syrah.

Nero d'Avola, a rising star of Italy's rising south, led the Italian invasion, or at least played important second fiddle to Italy's most popular native variety, sangiovese, of Chianti fame. And few reds at the show were as crowd-pleasing as the aforementioned \$22 Pinocchio, made in Sicily by Tuscan producer Dievole, with its fruity richness and, not least, text-free label displaying a black-and-white sketch of the storybook character.

Though not available in Canada, it is sold in other foreign markets by Wineoclock, a sort of indie record label of Italian wine, which discovers and exports family-produced, handcrafted gems pressed from indigenous, heritage grapes. "We believe that small is better than big," Mr. Costantini said.

If nero d'Avola is the trendy Berkshire pork of the wine world, Italy also is a hotbed of lesser-known varieties, many in danger of being confused here with Pinocchio's woodcarver creator Geppetto, like gaglioppo, grillo, catarratto, bombino, magliocco or zibibbo. Still other varieties, such as nerello cappuccio, to a West Coast urbanite can sound more like a Starbucks order than something with alcohol in it. Then there's aglianico, primitivo, insolia, pecorello, guarnaccia bianca, guardavalle, nocella, castiglione, ansonica and marsigliana, to name just a few more.

One of the standouts of the show from a price-quality standpoint was **Odoardi Savuto 2003**, also from Wineoclock and available in B.C. liquor stores for \$19.99 (prod-

uct No. 568220). A veritable minestrone of grape types, it's blended from gaglioppo, greco nero, magliocco, canino, nerello cappuccio and sangiovese. Full-bodied and rich, the wine, from the tiny Savuto district of Calabria province on the toe of Italy's boot, is remarkably balanced, with pure flavours of dark fruits, spices and minerals. If you want an international reference point, think of a good, rich California merlot, but with livelier acidity.

Italy's top two collector-worthy obscurities, aglianico and sagrantino, were also in abundant evidence in Vancouver. **Tormaresca Bocca di Lupo**, an aglianico-cabernet blend recently embraced by famed U.S. wine scorer Robert Parker, quickly ran out on the first day of the show and is unavailable in stores. Grown widely in the southern regions of Campania, Basilicata and Puglia, the aglianico grape is widely considered the noblest of southern Italy's varieties, not as concentrated as the more widely exported negroamaro and primitivo, but generally more elegant and complex.

"It's a very classy wine, very complex, with something more to say," said Francesco Domini, general manager of Puglia-based Tormaresca, which also makes a nice, full-bodied red called **Tormaresca Neprica** blended from negroamaro, primitivo and cabernet sauvignon (hence its name) that is available in B.C. stores (\$14.99, No. 612036).

Frequent vacationers to Italy's Umbria region may be familiar with sagrantino, a noble red that, when treated with care in the vineyard and winery, can resemble a top-end **Vino Nobile di Montepulciano**. One excellent example, available in B.C. government stores, is **Scacciadiavoli Sagrantino di Montefalco**. It's not cheap, at \$41.95 (No. 202747), but it delivers as much for the money as one can reasonably expect, bursting with essences of violet,



Italian exporter Alessandro Costantini pours a sample of Pinocchio at the Vancouver Playhouse International Wine Festival last week. RICHARD LAM FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

cherry, vanilla and spice, with a texture that begins soft and round, then finishes with gritty, tea-like astringency.

Standouts from Cusumano of Sicily include **Cusumano Insolia 2005**, a crisp white (\$17.99 in British Columbia, No. 141242; also available at Richmond Hill Wines in Calgary) and **Cusumano Nero d'Avola 2005** (\$17.99, No. 143610). Ten or 15 years ago, producers like these from southern Italy would not have dreamed of dominating a world-renowned show such as Vancouver's. Primitive technology, such as cement fermentation vats, and a traditional emphasis on cultivating maximum fruit per acre had confined southern Italy to the jug-wine ghetto.

Today, it's shocking to see what simple changes such as lower crop yields and electronically cooled stainless-steel fermentation vats (standard equipment elsewhere since the 1960s) have done. Where once wines were predominantly thin, bruised and lifeless, they now explode with freshness and pure fruit.

"The problem for most of the Italian varieties was that they were selected for quantity, not for quality," said Antonio Rallo, owner of Tenuta di Donnafugata, a 157-year-old family winery in Sicily.

Adventurous white-wine drinkers might want to seek out Mr. Rallo's **Donnafugata Anthilla 2006** (\$17.99 in British Columbia, No. 213298), a blend of ansonica and catarratto grapes, with a rounded texture and flavours of peach, red plum and mineral.

For the ultimate in nero d'Avola, patient British Columbians will be able to buy **Donnafugata Mille e una Notte 2005** starting in July, for \$73.99 (for more information call Maxxium Canada 1-866-348-4507). It's made with a special clone of the grape to yield a super-rich red with a voluptuous palate of concentrated black fruits and a nose that's, well, way more impressive than even Pinocchio's.