

Italian Wine Club April 2021 WILDFLOWERS

It's April! Again. Although many of us might still be feeling a bit Groundhog Day-like, Spring is here, again, damnit, and it's bringing hope and lots of flowers. Italy has an unrivaled amount of picture perfect landscapes there is nothing dreamier to take in than its flowers in full blossom. This month, we bring you on a fun off-trail experience with four wines grown in close proximity to some of Italy's most fabulous explosions of colorful floral bloom.

The Annesanti Grechetto is grown in the natural splendor of southern Umbria not far from Castelluccio, recognised as the best place in all Italy to witness a mass flower bloom. The spring transforms these fertile green hills into an endless rainbow that is worthy of a photography pilgrimage. Interestingly enough, this efflorescent display is mostly by the lenticchia plant aka lentils - who knew?

Punta Crena's grapes cling to the epic terraced coastline of Liguria, just above the region dubbed the 'Riviera of the Flowers.' Parks and gardens are the feature destination in cities like Bordighera and Sanremo (the 'City of Flowers'), but the real beauty lies in the coastal hikes that are positively peppered with wildflowers throughout April.

Franz Gojer is famous for his St. Magdalener wine grown near Bolzano. Just a bit further up into the Alps to the Northwest is the Val Venosa, famous for its apples. So when those endless rows of apple trees are all in bloom, this alpine valley is one of the most spectacular sites around. Not to mention one of the most intoxicating high mountain dreamscapes for the olfactories as well.

Sesti's Sangiovese comes from some of the most renowned terroir in Italy, and few panoramas evoke the quintessential Italian countryside more than the bright yellow fields of sprawling sunflowers basking in the warm Tuscan sun. These iconic monsters waving in the breeze are found along the rambling backroads outside Montalcino and on up to Siena, a famously spectacular sight in summer months.

WINE NO. 1

Annesanti 'Fonte Farro'

Grechetto

Valnerina, Umbria, Italy, 2019

RE-ORDER: \$25

GRAPE: GRECHETTO [greh-KEH-toh]

Grechetto. The little Greek one. SO many varieties were simply referred to as Grechetto or Greco and assumed a family of very similar grapes from Greek origin, but they've finally isolated this important grape, native to the Umbria / Lazio border, from the rest. Orvieto is where you'll find it most densely grown, and the rare producers like Roccafiore, Barberani and Sergio Mattura have been making fabulous varietal wines, as opposed to the far more common local blends. With Sagrantino as Umbria's flagship red, it is high time that Grechetto gets taken more seriously and championed for representation in the region.

GROWER: Francesco Annesanti says that his soul is in his wine- a pure Italian sentiment through and through. He organically farms the vineyards that his grandfather planted decades ago in a remote, rural area in Southern Umbria, where, from Francesco's cantina, there are no other vines for miles in any direction. In his remote locale he doesn't fit into an official appellation, so his wines are simply *Umbrian*. His passion and dedication to his work mean that he literally does everything himself, from farming to fermentation, hand bottling down to designing his own labels. Francesco uses only native yeasts and stainless steel for fermentation and aging, and minimal sulfur with no fining or filtration. His Grechetto vines grow on clay and limestone soils, and take the name 'Fonte Farro' from a spring where his grandparents brought their animals to drink.

GLASS: Idiosyncratic and full of character without being the least bit rustic, this wine compels you to try to put your finger on it. There's a Grüner-like celery salt and white pepper spice, with wild fruit like fresh juicy ginger, underripe pineapple, and star fruit. It draws out a bit of cinnamon spiced apple and even a hint of old library books. It's rare to drink a white that has so much natural tannin and mouth watering phenolics, all bolstered by surprising acidity.

SIDE NOTES: Annesanti is located on the border of the beautiful Parco Fluviale del Tevere, a nature preserve on the Tiber River complete with ancient ruins and Italy's largest travertine caves, twisting over 1.5 miles underground.

WINE NO. 2

Punta Crena 'Vigneto Ca' da Rena'

Pigato

Riviera Ligure di Ponente, Liguria, Italy 2019

RE-ORDER: \$29

GRAPE: PIGATO [pee-GAH-toh]

Pigato has been undisputedly genetically identified as Vermentino, along with Favorita (a Piedmontese darling) and Rolle (an aromatic beauty from Southern France.) Digging deeper into this well travelled grape unlocks an even bigger ball of tangled twine as the mystery remains as to where it originated. Vermentino is prolific and adored in Liguria and Sardegna, and is always a pretty safe bet for a delicious go-to when given the opportunity. Pigato is a clonal selection, a freckled twin of our favorite Favorita-Rolle-Vermentino, that carries a distinct and important local identity and flavor in the Western climes of the Ponente coast.

GROWER: Punta Crena gets its name from a big old promontory sticking out into the Tyrrhenian Sea, with their idyllic vines perched just a half mile from its electric blue water. Their small acreage in the tiny village of Varigotti is right on the Mediterranean, a tiny hamlet that is really just a few rows of houses and restaurants on a perfect beach stacked against very steep rocky clay hills. Their tightly terraced vineyards have been hand-built from stone in the same method for over 3,000 years.

Their vineyards have been in the Ruffino family for over 500 years, including local oddities like Mataòssu, Cruvin, and Barbarossa (arguably the only one produced in Italy?) and today the place is run by four siblings: one a winemaker, another a salesman, one in logistics, and another all things vineyards and winery. Punta Crena is the perfect case study in the Pigato vs Vermentino debate as they make bottlings from both clones and appreciate their clear differences; they vinify the variants the same way: in stainless steel, no malolactic and aging on the lees for 4 months; their Pigato is arguably more aromatic with slightly richer texture, but it's more fun to taste and decide the Pig v. Vermen debate for yourself!

GLASS: Wine just doesn't get any more marine than this - brisk and light like sun through sea spray, the nose is fresh as clean sheets flapping in a stiff breeze. There's a stony minerality and a hint of salty seaweed with a handful of marcona almonds, and that all melts into a delicate perfume of fennel flower and a zest of kaffir lime. This is the kind of brilliant, fun and light wine with zero pretension and maximum joy that we really just can't get enough of.

SIDE NOTES: Do yourself a favor and serve with a platter of Fritto Misto (*and* pro-tip: fried lemon wheels) or a mess of anchovies prepared any way imaginable.

WINE NO. 3

Franz Gojer 'St. Magdalener'
95% Schiava + 5% Lagrein
Glögglhof, Alto-Adige, Italy 2019

RE-ORDER: \$25

GRAPES:

SCHIAVA [ski-YAvA] / (aka VERNATSCH, aka TROLLINGER)

This is actually the most widely planted grape in Alto Adige, despite the fact that the overall percent produced favors white over red 60:40. Only recently have single varietal Schiavas made it stateside, versus just consumed locally. Could Americans be interested in this tart and light bodied red? A few delicious wines from the St. Magdalener DOC wines have helped pave the way - always Schiava but with a small amount of Lagrein (inky dark native grape) blended in for color and backbone. Schiava is the Italian for 'slave,' maybe from the high yields that the vines carry, but local producers use the vernacular "Vernatsch," and Germans call it 'Tyrolinger' (from the Tyrol) confirming its native roots. Viva Schiava!

LAGREIN [la-GRAIN] or [lah-GRINE]

In 1526 there was a revolt led by local farmers against the nobles and the church in order to expand their rights, most importantly, to be allowed to drink Lagrein. Lagrein is an exception to many alpine reds which can run pale and lean- Lagrein takes on much darker coloring but still maintains light body, high tannin and pronounced acidity. It is a grape that loves as much sunshine as possible- although that sounds like it's perhaps in the wrong place, Lagrein is a native at home in the mountains and tends to get finicky when grown elsewhere. Truly, a grape variety worth fighting for.

GROWER: Franz Gojer's estate, Glögglhof, is smack in the middle of the St. Magdalena hill, a stunning amphitheater outside of the city of Bolzano that is THE appellation for Schiava. St. Magdalener (pronounced either way) is all steep dolomite slopes that clock among the sunniest and hottest in this whole alpine zone, building powerful and structured Schiava. Magdalena's DOC regulations also allow for a small amount of Lagrein to be included, usually in the realm of 5-10%, (in Classico bottlings around 5%.)

Gojer is considered by many to be one of the Alto-Adige's 'gang of four,' a group of high-quality small producers that share a winemaking philosophy that aims at pure expression of native varieties, with the other members including: Andreas Widmann, Ignaz Niedrist, and Kuenhof's Peter Pliger. Franz's son Florian is now part of his team after an apprenticeship in California with Jim Clendenen of Au Bon Climat. Father and son have also purchased a high-altitude vineyard on the other side of the valley from Glögglhof; the site is around 2,000' elevation at Karneid, where they have planted Weissburgunder, Kerner and Sauvignon.

GLASS: Just as mountain air smells so unmistakably alpine, somehow, magically, alpine-ness also translates universally to high-altitude grapes. This is pure mountain mystery in the nose, with that barely roasted coffee bean savory green so indicative of elevation. There's a ton of red fruit like seared raspberries, wild summer strawberries, and the flinty gunpowder of great Lagrein. While the nose also hints at some tutti frutti, the palate takes you directly to spice town, with cinnamon and rose petals and a pop of black pepper.

SIDE NOTES: Speck Alto Adige, aka Tyrolean Speck, is not a Star Trek food but a protected geographical indication (PGI) for dry-cured, lightly smoked ham - but is certainly *not* prosciutto!

WINE NO. 4

Sesti 'Monteleccio'

Sangiovese

Montalcino, Tuscany, Italy 2018

RE-ORDER: \$26

GRAPE: SANGIOVESE [san-GEE-OH-vay-say]

Sangiovese is Italy's most planted grape. By far. It is suited to grow well in lots of different soils throughout the country and can deliver outstanding results that beautifully reflect the different locations. Consumers know this prolific chameleon grape throughout Tuscany in the form of endless expressions in Chianti, and Vino Nobile di Montepulciano (as Prugnolo Gentile) and in Morellino and Carmignano etc., as well as from our local hero, Brunello di Montalcino (as Sangiovese Grosso).

GROWER: Giuseppe "Giugi" Maria Sesti is a true Renaissance man, an astronomer and student of music and art, and a Venetian to boot. In 1975 Giugi and his wife Sarah moved south, and bought the abandoned ruins of a Tuscan hamlet and its castle Argiano, painstakingly restoring the buildings and creating a strikingly beautiful estate. Giugi planted his own vineyards on the slopes of the castle's hill 30 years ago, and based on observation of his many neighbors' estates, he determined to farm organically and to make natural wines right from the start.

He's a proud papa of four, vice-director of a local opera festival, and author of many astronomy books, and was clearly in need of a little extra help around the estate when his daughter Elisa joined in 1999. She and her father now share all the vineyard management and winemaking, with special interest in the moon's influence on living things in the farm and in the cellar.

This bottling is from south-facing vineyards at 1100' elevation in the heart of the Brunello di Montalcino DOCG, and barrel selected for earlier drinking, with just one year of *élevage* in large 800 gallon oak *botti*. The 'Monteleccio' name is an Italianization of the Latin name "Montalcino" meaning "hill of the holly oaks."

GLASS: You just can't deny the existence of terroir when you crack a bottle like this. This is undeniably baby Brunello, eyes closed and hands down. The dusty red cherry rides high throughout, soaring atop a Masterpiece Theater setting of leather-bound books, velvet curtains, and fresh pipe tobacco. A hint of mint and snappy rhubarb, a bouquet of fresh-cut flowers, stems and all. And as this wine is a Brunellito, it could use some time, some air, and some salumi to open up.

SIDE NOTES: The Argiano castle probably takes its name from the Roman god Janus- the god of doors, gates, and transitions, including big ones like life and death. Also very likely the god of wine keys, right?