

LETTER FROM NEW YORK

Elin McCoy

'New York City is now wine heaven for Italophiles'

IN THE MID-1980S, I was keen to sample a Brunello di Montalcino from Biondi-Santi so I phoned Lou Iacucci, who owned a New York shop known for Italian wines, to see if he had any for sale. He didn't – but was so impressed I'd heard of the iconic producer that he gave me a bottle from his personal cellar.

We New Yorkers like to think our city offers the world's greatest concentration of great wines, but back then most Italian restaurants were serving rustic Chianti from straw-wrapped bottles and low-level Lambrusco. The Big Apple was a French wine town.

So when 100 Italian winemakers descended on New York this year for *Vino 2016*, an annual week of tastings, it was a clear sign of how much has changed. The city is now wine heaven for Italophiles, whether you crave a Nerello Mascalese from Sicily's Mount Etna, a Ligurian Pigato or classic Barolos and Brunellos.

The little-known southern Italian whites and rosés poured for the *Vino 2016* panel I moderated can be found on select restaurant lists, like dozens of other once-impossible-to-obtain labels. And even grand French oases like Restaurant Daniel and Jean Georges offer famous names like Bruno Giacosa.

How did it happen? Restaurateurs like Puglia native Nicola Marzovilla, who opened *Enoteca I Trulli* in 1998 with an all-Italian wine list that included 50 labels by the glass, were key. That's where I – and many other wine lovers – first tasted Sassicaia. A few years later Marzovilla added an all-southern-Italian wine retail shop.

The same year Mario Batali and Joe Bastianich opened *Babbo*. It too featured a long Italian wine list, and when Bastianich urged you to try a red or white you'd never heard of, he offered to drink it himself if you didn't like it.

Sergio Esposito's Italian Wine Merchants, founded a year later, wooed collectors with a highly curated selection of top estates. 'We put Italian wine front and centre when

What I've been drinking this month

During the week of tasting and talking at the annual **II Collisio**ni music, literature and wine festival in the historic town of Barolo, I watched my first live Elton John concert from the grand terrace at **Marchesi di Barolo**.

My hosts poured some delicious wines but the star was a magnum of the intense, leather-and-spice **Cannubi 2011** which a colleague and I shared as we kept time to 'Madman across the Water', 'Crocodile Rock' and 'Candle in the Wind'.

you couldn't give Giacomo Conterno Barolo away,' Esposito told me recently. 'We treated it as seriously as others treated their best Bordeaux.' By which he means that at a time when most Italian wine was being slowly cooked in overheated warehouses, he was importing and storing them in temperature-controlled conditions.

A handful of other adventurous, quality-minded importers, like Leonardo Locasio, Vias and Domaine Select, helped.

Yet considering that New York has the highest number of Italian-Americans of anywhere in the US, it's surprising that it took another decade for top Italian wines to become ubiquitous. The lack of sommeliers with Italian wine expertise to guide drinkers through Italy's many, many obscure local grapes surely slowed the process. So what about now?

In the past seven years or so a new wave of sophisticated Italian restaurants celebrating ever-more specific regional cuisines (like the island of Ischia) have pulled excitement away from France, reflecting the city's overarching casual dining zeitgeist. Their Italocentric sommeliers are making the little-known understandable at the same time that the city's wine drinkers have become a more adventurous lot.

Jeff Porter, wine director for *Batali* and *Bastianich's* expanding culinary empire, has certainly upped the game. Their glamorous, upscale *Del Posto* has an encyclopedic 2,000-label selection.

Just as Daniel Johnnes made *Montrachet* a destination for Burgundy lovers in the 1980s and '90s, Jeff Kellogg has made *Danny Meyer's Maialino*, which focuses on the foods of Rome, into a destination for Nebbiolo from Piedmont – not exactly a politically correct pairing. But its Barolo bar, showcasing old bottles at amazingly low prices, is practically a public service for the Italian wine-obsessed.

My current favourite casual spot for Italian wines is *Marta*, a posh pizzeria, where I'd happily sip *GD Vajra's Kyé*, a fresh, elegant and complex *Freisa*, with my pizza, though there is a *Biondi-Santi* on the list.

What's next for Italian wine in New York? I can hardly wait to find out. **D**

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