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FOOD &amp; DRINK | ON WINE

# An Under-the-Radar Italian Wine Made for Summer Drinking

Verdicchio got a bad name in the 1970s and '80s thanks to inferior imports. Today, quality is higher than ever and this food-friendly white wine can be a tremendous value if you know what to look for



PHOTO: CARMEN SEGOVIA



By

*Lettie Teague*

May 31, 2018 3:15 p.m. ET

**WHY IS VERDICCHIO** so little known or loved by American drinkers? Surely this grape deserves a bit more affection. In his book “Native Wine Grapes of Italy,” Italian wine expert Ian D’Agata describes it as “arguably Italy’s greatest native white grape variety.” But even he adds, “That statement may come as a surprise.”

Outside Italy, Verdicchio has something of a checkered past: The mediocre Fazi Battaglia Verdicchio was a hugely popular import stateside a few decades ago, thanks in large part to the way it was packaged, in an emerald-green amphora-shaped bottle that came with a rolled-up scroll attached.

The 1970s and '80s were great decades for weird Italian wine packaging—which included both Verdicchio and Orvieto in fish-shaped bottles—but it wasn’t a great time for Italian whites. Most of them were vapid, dilute and/or oxidized due to poor winemaking techniques. It seems American consumers finally tired of the insipid old Fazi Battaglia Verdicchio; I couldn’t find a bottle in any of the stores I visited. Still, even though the quality of Italian white wines overall is quite high today, a new generation of ambitious Verdicchio producers is fighting both the battle of obscurity and

the old stereotype of a cheaply produced commercial wine notable only for its novelty bottle.

Verdicchio's flavor profile presents another challenge. The wines can be a touch bitter and green. Even the best examples have a bitter tinge, which some consider interesting (as I do) and others find off-putting. The name can be confusing, too. More than one wine drinker I know has mistaken Verdicchio for Vermentino, a white grape grown all over Italy and in other countries too, whereas Verdicchio is grown almost exclusively in the Marche region of Italy.

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Verdicchio is actually a remarkably versatile grape that can be vinified as a dry or sweet

or sparkling wine. It ripens easily and well. Furthermore, as Mr. D'Agata notes in his book, "It is also the white grape variety that has the greatest affinity for oak aging."

Leonard Rankin, wine buyer of Eataly Vino in New York, is a fan. He stocks a comparatively large number of Verdicchios (four versus the standard wine-shop offering of one). He also stocks a range of Verdicchio styles: oak-aged versions that he can recommend to customers partial to Chardonnay as well as more minerally, high-acid Verdicchios aged in stainless steel that are more to his personal taste. "I like the clean, smoky, mineral style of the coastal wines," Mr. Rankin said.

The best Verdicchio is grown in the clay and limestone soils of Castelli di Jesi and Matelica, the two most important sub-regions for the grape. The former is a much larger zone, and its wines are more readily found in stores. Verdicchios from Jesi are usually softer and rounder, a bit riper in character with fruity, even floral aromas, while Matelica Verdicchios are more mineral, more citrusy in aroma.

According to Kevin Russell, Italian portfolio manager for David Bowler Wine in New York, more and more sommeliers are embracing Verdicchio and exploring the complexities of its terroir, as they have other obscure Italian white grapes such as Ribolla Gialla and Fiano di Avellino. Yet Mr. Russell, a Verdicchio fan, is "consistently surprised" by consumers' unawareness or misunderstanding of the grape. Winemaker Leopardo Felici of the Andrea Felici estate feels much the same way. Mr. Felici, who worked as a sommelier in London before returning to Italy to take over winemaking duties at his father's estate, calls Verdicchio "a gem well known and loved by the experts but still hidden to the larger public."

**'Verdicchio is actually a remarkably versatile grape that can be vinified as a dry or sweet or sparkling wine.'**

At the Garofoli estate, one of the oldest in the Marche, the Garofoli family

has been instrumental in raising the profile of the grape. In 1981, they were the first to put Verdicchio in a Bordeaux-style bottle instead of the traditional amphora. “It was a break with the past,” said Gianluca Garofoli, who has traveled the world on behalf of his family’s estate. Ten years later, the family launched Podium, an old-vine Verdicchio created to demonstrate the ageability of Verdicchio. “My uncle wanted to make a Verdicchio that would age like a Chablis,” said Mr. Garofoli. It’s a wine “you can drink at 32 years of age.”

The 2014 Garofoli Podium Verdicchio was one of 12 wines I purchased from seven different stores in the greater New York area. Few stores, as noted, had more than one or two different Verdicchios, but the ones I did find were pleasingly inexpensive. Podium was the priciest at \$24 a bottle; the others were priced between \$12 and \$22.

The wine styles were surprisingly diverse, from soft and lush with a touch of oak to crisp and mineral, almost saline. The shape of the bottle usually offered a clue: The crisp, bright wines tended to come in straight-sided Bordeaux bottles while the softer, lusher ones were in Burgundy bottles. The wines I liked included both types, and even the lesser examples weren’t aggressively bad, just simple and dilute.

On the bright, mineral, high-acid end of the spectrum, the 2017 La Staffa Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi DOC Classico Superiore (\$22) from young winemaker Riccardo Baldi stood out—intensely mineral, almost saline, with an intriguing green olive note. The 2016 Cantine Politi “Loretello” Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi (\$15) was almost as good, with a zippy acidity though it was a bit more herbal and green. And the 2016 Andrea Felici Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi Classico Superiore (\$12) was an easy-drinking delight.

I liked a few softer, rounder Verdicchios almost as much as their more mineral counterparts. The lush 2015 Bucci Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi Classico Superiore (\$18), aged in large (not new) oak barrels, might convert a Chardonnay drinker. The 2016 Umani Ronchi Casal di Serra Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi (\$16) was even richer thanks to aging on the lees, but also well-balanced with fruity aromas. The 2014 Garofoli Podium Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi Classico Superiore (\$24) was decidedly the most complex of the wines, with layers of flavor, a rich texture and notes of stone fruit and minerals. It was easy to imagine it enduring for several years, even decades.

When will more wine drinkers discover Verdicchio? Prices are reasonable and quality is high, but production is small, so the wines can be harder to find. Yet Mr. Felici sounded an optimistic note. “We Verdicchio producers feel the moment for acclimation is very close,” he said. I hope he’s right.

## OENOFILE // 5 Particularly Pleasing

### and Well-Priced Verdicchios

#### 1. 2017 La Staffa Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi DOC Classico Superiore, \$22

This is a fresh, mineral take on the grape from the talented, 27-year-old Riccardo Baldi, who is already making some of the most noteworthy Verdicchios in Marche.



PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

**2. 2016 Andrea Felici Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi Classico Superiore, \$12**

Leopardo Felici is another young talent making vibrant Verdicchios in the Castelli di Jesi appellation. This approachable wine has lively acidity and a pleasing bitter note.

**3. 2016 Umani Ronchi Casal di Serra Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi, \$16**

The Casal di Serra bottling was first produced in 1983. Aged on lees in stainless steel tanks, this is a soft, medium-bodied wine with a bit of a tropical note.

**4. 2015 Bucci Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi Classico Superiore, \$18** The Bucci name has long been synonymous with high-quality Verdicchio, and this elegant, full-bodied wine is no exception, with notes of white peach and bitter almond balanced by juicy acidity.

**5. 2014 Garofoli Podium Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi Classico Superiore, \$24** Made from a special selection of grapes from a single vineyard and aged on lees, this is a rich and textured Verdicchio with notes of bitter almond and green olive.

Email Lettie at [wine@wsj.com](mailto:wine@wsj.com).

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