



Tuscan white: 20 top Vernaccias

Little-known, perhaps; underappreciated, probably. Yet Vernaccia di San Gimignano has a long pedigree, and provides some of Italy's most reliably good-value dry whites, ideal for summer drinking. Michael Apstein picks his favourites

THE ITALIANS CREATED the DOC (Denominazione di Origine), their classification hierarchy, 50 years ago, in 1966, to highlight their best wines. So what was Italy's first DOC, the one the Italians most wanted to trumpet? Brunello di Montalcino or Barolo would be reasonable guesses. But no – it was Vernaccia di San Gimignano. Brunello di Montalcino became Italy's first DOCG (Denominazione di Origine e Garantita) in 1980 – Vernaccia di San Gimignano followed later, in 1993.

Although experts today agree that

Vernaccia di San Gimignano is not Italy's greatest wine, the Italian authorities were right to put the spotlight on the region, as it produces appealing and crisp white wines with good density and complexity that – and here's where consumers should take notice – generally sell for less than £15 a bottle.

The grape, Vernaccia di San Gimignano, is unique, grown in central Tuscany to the southwest of Florence, and almost nowhere else. It is unrelated to other Vernaccia

grapes despite similar names, all of which probably arise from the Latin *vernaculus*, meaning local. Regulations allow blending of small amounts of other white varieties, such as Chardonnay or even Viognier, but few producers do so, fearing, justifiably, that the distinctiveness of the Vernaccia will be overwhelmed.

There are three categories of Vernaccia di San Gimignano: annata, selezione and riserva. Annata, the most common, and for many producers the only wine they make,

Vines in the municipality of San Gimignano, the only place where Vernaccia di San Gimignano can be produced

rarely sees any oak fermentation or ageing. Labelled solely with the name of the DOCG, these wines are typically crisp and light and often finish with an appealing hint of bitterness, which makes them very food-friendly but less useful as an aperitif.

Selezione, as the name implies, is a selection, being either a vineyard-designated wine or a cellar-created cuvée with a trademarked name.

Some undergo barrel fermentation and/or ageing, while other producers use lees ageing or brief skin contact to achieve more oomph. Generally the selezione wines have more density without being heavy, and greater complexity along with an alluring texture. This category can be confusing because there is no legal definition and it is difficult to tell whether the name on the label refers to a vineyard or is a trademark. But since there is no agreement regarding which are the best vineyards, and certainly no classification of sites,

distinguishing among them is – unlike the situation in Barolo, for instance – not critical.

Vernaccia di San Gimignano riservas are aged for an additional year and almost always undergo barrel fermentation and/or ageing. The edgy verve of the annata or selezione is replaced by a roundness that, in the wrong hands, can border on heaviness.

Fortunately for consumers, the stylistic range of wines within the annata and selezione categories is relatively small. That's not to say that there aren't differences among producers, but compared to the range of Chardonnay-based wines – from flinty, taut Chablis to bold, round New World ones – or Riesling, which stretches from enamel-cleansing dry to delightfully sweet, the shopper knows what to expect when buying Vernaccia di San Gimignano.

When it comes to the riservas, all bets are off. Maria Elisabetta Faggioli, owner of Montenidoli, certainly one of the top producers, eschews that designation, despite meeting the legal requirements for it with one of her wines. 'All my wines are riservas,' she says proudly. 'The designation is,' she pauses for a moment, 'stupid'. Similar to Montenidoli, Il Colombaio di Santa Chiara and Teruzzi & Puthod do a superb job with oak ageing – you feel its effects without tasting it. Their wines and Montenidoli's have a luxurious depth and suaveness.

With many other producers, I find the wood influence detracts from the crispness I've come to expect from Vernaccia di San Gimignano.

The 2014 and 2015 Vernaccia di San Gimignanos, both currently on the market, afford a fascinating comparison. The 2015s are more opulent, but still have plenty of verve, because of the naturally high acidity of the grape. The 2014s are leaner and racier. Older vintages, except the occasional riserva from top producers, should be avoided.

My favourite producers include Castello Montaùto, Falchini, Il Colombaio di Santa Chiara, La Lastra, Montenidoli, Panizzi, Teruzzi & Puthod and Tenute Guicciardini Strozzi.

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Il Colombaio di Santa Chiara, Selvabianca 2015 93

£16 (2014) **Camisa, Da Vinci Italian Deli, Grantham's Fine Food & Wine, Islington Wine, Wimbledon Wine Cellar**

A marvellous selezione, this is lively, bright and juicy, with a touch of pineapple-like fruit. There's an almost paradoxical creamy bitterness in this electrifying-on-the-palate wine. **Drink** 2016-2017 **Alc** 13.5%



Montenidoli, Carato 2014 93

N/A UK www.montenidoli.com

Deftly fermented and aged in French barriques. Opulence and elegance without a hint of intrusive oak. Subtle nuttiness in the long and refined finish, the typical accent of the grape. **Drink** 2016-2018 **Alc** 13.5%



Casa alle Vacche, I Macchioni 2015 92

N/A UK www.casaallevacche.it

This selezione is just a touch denser than the regular bottling. Has a dollop of extra ripeness, yet maintains vibrancy and verve. Rich without being heavy, a delight to drink. **Drink** 2016-2017 **Alc** 13.5%



Il Lebbio, Tropie 2015 92

£18 **Pandemonio**

An appealing tension between roundness and a touch of citrus-peel bitterness. Suave texture but retains an invigorating bite. The uplifting finish keeps you coming back for more. **Drink** 2016-2017 **Alc** 13.5%



Tenute Guicciardini Strozzi, Titolo Strozzi 2015 92

£12 (2014), **Bibere, Colasanti, Direct Wines, Milton Sandford, The Haslemere Cellar**

A touch (10%) of Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc lends a refinement that retains the character of the grape while keeping its appealing bitterness. Understated yet persistent. **Drink** 2016-2017 **Alc** 13.5% ➤

VERNACCIA DI SAN GIMIGNANO



Teruzzi & Puthod 2015 92

£14.95 (2014) **Berkmann**

Ripe, but not in your face or overstated. Retains brisk acidity that holds it all together in an elegant expression. A nutty, subtle bitterness, a reminder of its origin, peeks out in the finish. **Drink** 2016-2017 **Alc** 12.5%



Casa alle Vacche 2015 91

N/A UK www.casaallevacche.it

Though crisp and cutting, there's good density here. An attractive bite and a pleasing punch of bitter almond on the remarkably persistent finish means this works better with food than as an aperitif. **Drink** 2016-2017 **Alc** 13.5%



Casale Falchini, Vigna a Solatio 2015 91

£12.35 (2014) **Fields Morris & Verdin,**

Sommelier Wine Co

More full-bodied, as befits a selezione. It's bright, pleasant with a prickly sensation and subtle grapefruit peel notes on the finish. Good density but no heaviness. Good with grilled swordfish. **Drink** 2016-2017 **Alc** 13.5%



Castello Montaùto 2015 91

£12.95 **Enotria&Coe**

Ripe, almost melon flavours jump from the glass. Bracing acidity and tell-tale citrus-peel bitterness on the finish remind you of its roots. Long and balanced, it's a winning example. **Drink** 2016-2017 **Alc** 13%



Castello Montaùto 2014 91

£12.95 **Enotria&Coe**

Reflecting the vintage, this 2014 is leaner and racier than the same producer's 2015, but no less enjoyable. This lovely, energetic wine delivers a citrus-like kick and enlivens the palate with a gentle touch of bitterness on the finish. **Drink** 2016-2017 **Alc** 13%



Il Palagione, Hydra 2015 91

£11.50 **Stone Vine & Sun**

This wine, with its slightly softer style, still conveys an attractive zing that awakens the palate. It has the glossy texture that's expected from a selezione, as well as the hint of bitter grapefruit peel on a remarkable finish. **Drink** 2016-2017 **Alc** 13%



La Lastra 2015 91

£13.95 **Bianca Trading**

The creamy texture gives this annata unusual grace, but there's still plenty of punch to keep you interested. A whiff of bitter almond comes through in the finish. There's nothing out of place here.

Drink 2016-2017 **Alc** 12.5%



Panizzi 2015 91

£12.98 (2014) **Châteaux Wines**

Classically framed, this wine is an immediate hit, showing vibrancy accented by a bright, tart zestiness. A trace of typical bitterness enhances its appeal. An invigorating wine – would be a good choice to cut through spicy Asian fare. **Drink** 2016-2017 **Alc** 13.5%



Podere Canneta 2015 91

£9.99 **Vinceremos**

The austerity in this tightly wound wine is more in keeping with a 2014, so it will appeal to those who prefer a leaner style. Its charm lies in an exceptional finish. With laser-like precision it will cut through any full-flavoured dish. **Drink** 2016-2017 **Alc** 13%



Poderi del Paradiso 2015 91

£14.50 **Dolce Vita Wines**

A subtle pineapple spice and a hint of creaminess add both an exotic touch and a tantalising texture to this remarkably refined wine. A characteristic hint of bitterness and zing on the finish keep everything in balance. **Drink** 2016-2017 **Alc** 13.5%



Fattorie Melini, Le Grillaie 2015 90

£11.22 (2014) **Mondial**

From Melini's top vineyards, which tend to be sunnier, and aged in barrel for about six months, so a touch rounder and riper. Thankfully, it maintains an uplifting zestiness that makes it ideal with pasta and a cream sauce. **Drink** 2016-2017 **Alc** 13%



Montenedoli, Tradizionale 2014 90

£15.99-£16.99 **Les Caves de Pyrène,**

Petersham Cellar, The Solent Cellar

Montenedoli always releases its wines later than others, adding complexity without sacrificing freshness. This delivers zestiness with an accent of bitter almonds on the finish. Yum! **Drink** 2016 **Alc** 13.5%



Fattoria San Donato 2015 89

£8.99 **Adnams**

Citrus aromas draw you in to this clean and precise wine. A pleasant palate-awakening bite provides a welcome counterpoint to its suave and ever-so-slightly creamy texture. Remarkable length for a wine of this price.

Drink 2016-2017 **Alc** 13.5%



Melini 2015 88

N/A UK www.gruppoitalianovini.com

Really clean and bright, with a bite and prickle of grapefruit peel, this wine conveys the energy emblematic of the DOCG. Its keen focus and a subtle bitter almond note make it hard to resist. Linguine with clam sauce anyone? **Drink** 2016-2017 **Alc** 13%



Fontaleoni 2015 88

£12.50 **Hennings, Pane E Vino, VinumTerra**

This overt wine has a lovely bite. Though its impact is direct, a long lemony finish adds to its allure. Excellent choice for sushi or spiced Asian fare. **Drink** 2016-2017 **Alc** 13% **D**

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