

Valley's Italian-style wines salute Old World

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With a winemaking culture dating back to pre-Roman civilizations, Italy is one of the oldest wine-producing regions in the world.

The country's huge number of grape varieties (there are more than 800 documented), delicious cuisine and vibrant culture have influenced a number of American wine industry pioneers such as Mondavi, the Gallos and Oregon's own Ponzi family. Today, more Willamette Valley wineries are producing Italian-style wines that salute the old world and offer distinct, newer tastes in the heart of pinot noir country.

Dick and Nancy Ponzi founded their family winery in 1970, and in 1991 planted arneis, a white grape that produces a dry and full-bodied wine in Italy's Piedmont region. One year later, they planted some of Oregon's first dolcetto, also from the Piedmont and known for its tannic and fruit-driven reds.

Dolcetto is also produced by Witness Tree, which has a 1.6-acre vineyard site. Winemaker and vineyard manager Steven Westby recommends it as a cocktail wine.

"It's exuberantly fruity with good structure and acidity — perfect for easy drinking with a variety of cuisines," he said.

Rick Mafit of Mystic Wines, who plans to make dolcetto in the future, speaks similarly about his barbera.

"It is a beautiful wine to drink with great acidity for food pairing," he said. "At Mystic, we seek a 'quaffability factor' in all the wines we produce, so barbera is a great fit."

Mafit "grew up drinking barbera" and was inspired to make it after meeting Bob Lorkowski of Cascade Cliffs, which has supplied Mystic with its Columbia Valley estate fruit since 2002.

Remy Wines also produces barbera sourced from Washington. Winemaker Remy Drabkin, a McMinnville native who for a few years lived in an Italian-American community in Pittsburgh, Pa., was introduced to the variety by her home winemaking neighbors who sourced fruit from California. Drabkin also makes sangiovese, a red grape highly regarded for chianti and brunello wines in Italy, and lagrein, a rare grape from Italy's Alto Adige producing intense red wines. Remy sources its lagrein from Illahe Vineyards' 1-acre planting in Dallas. She also will



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Cana's Feast is one of a growing number of wineries in the Willamette Valley that are making Italian-style wines from Italian grape varieties.

release Beneficio, a new dessert wine, this Thanksgiving.

Sangiovese is a popular variety made by a number of Oregon wineries including Duck Pond, Hip Chicks Do Wine, Natalie's Estate Wine, Barking Frog and Terra Vina. Apolloni Vineyards makes Soleggio, a "Super Tuscan" style blend with cabernet sauvignon and named after the Italian word for sunshine. Cana's Feast uses a grosso clone sourced from a 4-acre site at Ciel du Cheval vineyard in Red Mountain, Washington for its sangiovese.

The winery makes a number of additional wines from this variety through its Bricco brand including an off-dry, lighter bodied Rosato, Sangiovese and Riserva. Bricco's other Italian style wines include Primitivo, made from a grape genetically equivalent to zinfandel grown in southern Italy, and nebbiolo, which originated in the Piedmont, where it makes some notable wines such as barolo and barbaresco. Nebbiolo tends to be fairly tannic in its youth with classic cherry, rose petal and tar aromas. As it ages, nebbiolo becomes beautifully complex adding herb, violet, truffles and red fruit flavors.

Cana's Feast winemaker Patrick Taylor, whose grandfather emigrated from Sicily, became interested in Italian varieties while listening to his family winemaking stories. Taylor's drive to make Italian style wines has a lot to do with cuisine.

"These wines have a zesty quality — an intensity of brightness and acidity, so they pair phenomenally well with a huge range of food," he said.

Taylor said he is thinking about expanding the winery's Italian-style production as he "has his eye on arneis … and possibly aglianico," a red variety grown in southern Italy.

No discussion of Italian influence would be complete without pinot grigio, known in Oregon as pinot gris. In Italy, it is grown in the northeast and produces lemony lighter bodied, crisp wines and may be slightly frizzante or spritzzy. Oregon's pinot gris is usually darker in color and fuller in body with pear and melon flavors; at times, it also has a spicy characteristic. Apolloni Vineyards and Duck Pond make pinot grigio style wines, both sourced from the Willamette Valley.

There are additional Oregon wineries making wines inspired by Italy, including Three Angels Wine, Marchesi Vineyards and Viento Wines. Earlier this year, Cooper Mountain Vineyard quickly sold out of its inaugural 2008 Tocai Friulano, a white wine made from the sauvignon vert variety grown in northern Italy.

Wine lovers who would like to sample a good range of Italian-style wines should mark August 2010 on their calendars. Cana's Feast Winery will host its second annual "Italy in the Valley" tasting. This year's event featured 13 wineries, food pairings, and entertainment for more than 600 people.

In the meantime, sample the ever-expanding menu of wines made from Italian varieties in the individual winery tasting rooms.