

Italian Quality Laws & Labels

Italians over the centuries have pioneered laws to control the origins and protect the names of wines. The ancient Romans defined production areas for dozens of wines. In 1716, the Grand Duchy of Tuscany delimited the zones for important wines, setting a precedent for modern legislation.

Yet only since the mid-1960s have controls been applied nationwide under what is known as *denominazione di origine controllata* or, by the initials, as DOC. There are now more than 300 DOC appellations, all delimited geographically. Wines from 21 zones have been further distinguished as DOCG, the G for *garantita* or guaranteed authenticity of wines of “particular esteem.” DOCG has expanded from the original five - Barbaresco, Barolo, Brunello di Montalcino, Vino Nobile di Montepulciano and Chianti - to cover 16 other zones around the country where wines must meet standards of typology and quality imposed by commissions of experts.

Within the DOC and DOCG zones well over 2,000 types of wine are produced. They may be defined by color or type (still, bubbly or sparkling; dry, semisweet or sweet; natural or fortified). Or they may be referred to by grape variety (e.g. Trentino has 26 types of wine including 20 varieties). Wines may also be categorized by age (young wine to be sold in the year of the harvest as *novello* or aged as *vecchio*, *stravecchio* or *riserva* or by a special subzone as *classico* or *superiore*. The term *superiore* or *scelto* may also apply to a higher degree of alcohol, a longer required period of aging or lower vine yields.

DOC applies to wines from specified grape varieties grown in delimited zones and vinified and aged following set methods to meet prescribed standards of color, odor, flavor, alcohol content, acidity, and so on. Regulations of each DOC are determined by producers in the zone (often grouped in a consortium) guided by the national wine committee.

DOC/DOCG zones may range in scale from the vineyard areas of an entire region down to a few choice plots around a remote village. DOC and DOCG wines rate the European Union designation VQPRD (for quality wine produced in determined regions).

Recent changes in the wine laws opened the way for DOC and DOCG wines to carry names of communities, areas of geographical or historical importance in the zones and names of individual vineyards of established reputation. Yet in recent times DOC and DOCG have accounted for only about 20 percent of Italy's production. The addition of the IGT (*indicazione geografica tipica*) system of recognizing “typical” wines is rapidly expanding the number of official appellations.

Curiously, up to now, some of Italy's finest wines have been referred to as *vini da tavola*, “table wines” made by producers who by chance or by choice worked outside the DOC norms. Most such wines now fall into IGT categories, such as *Toscana* in Tuscany or *Sicilia* in Sicily. Those wines must be made from approved grape varieties in blends or alone, in which case the varietal may be mentioned on labels. The aim is to increase the proportion of classified wines to a majority of national production. But it is important to remember that the most reliable guide to

the quality of any wine from anywhere is the reputation of the individual producer or estate. Certain names are worth getting to know.

Labels of DOC/DOCG and IGT wines must carry the official appellation, the producer's or bottler's name and commune of bottling, the quantity of wine contained (certified by the letter e); and the alcohol grade by volume. DOCG wines must have the official pink strip seal at the top of the bottle. Wines exported outside of the European Union must be certified by chemical analysis and labeled to meet standards of the importing nation. Wines shipped to North America carry the official red seal with the initials INE. © The Italian Trade Commission 33 E 67th Street, New York, NY 10021.