



Article Archive Vintage Profile

Italy: Vernaccia di San Gimignano

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San Gimignano is synonymous with ambition. Nothing illustrates this more clearly than the skyline of this medieval town in Siena province, Tuscany. Thanks to the town's fortuitous positioning on the Via Francigena trade route, San Gimignano grew in prosperity and influence in a relatively short period time during the Middle Ages. It became a celebrated resting point for the hordes of pilgrims traveling along this corridor on their way to Rome to seek indulgences from the Pope. Thanks to this hurried influx of capital, the ruling families of San Gimignano suddenly found themselves at a loss on how to spend their cash. This situation led to the most testosterone-driven, my-tower-is-bigger-than-your-tower building frenzy ever seen in the history of Italian landscapes. Guidebooks often refer to San Gimignano as Italy's medieval Manhattan. At its height, the town saw 72 towers (up to 70 meters tall). Why did they build the towers? Because they could. It really was that simple. Today, fourteen towers in varying states of conservation remain standing.

I always think of those beautiful towers - those sophomoric symbols of human aspiration - when I taste Vernaccia di San Gimignano. The celebrated white wine of the region is certainly characterized by similar moxie and spirit. You may mistakenly think of Vernaccia as a simple and one-dimensional wine. Not unlike the San Gimignano skyline, Vernaccia di San Gimignano is a wine of soaring ambition that would like to touch the sky.

Vernaccia di San Gimignano is the first Italian white wine to be awarded DOC (Denominazione di Origine Controllata) status in 1966. In 1993, it became a landmark DOCG wine. The area has 1,500 hectares planted to grapes, of which 750 hectares represent Vernaccia vines. Vineyards range in altitude from 120 to 300 meters above sea level. Soils are characterized by clay and sand with fossil-rich Alberese limestone rocks. The grape, Vernaccia, is said to have obtained its name from the Latin *vernaculus*, which translates roughly as "from this place." It enjoys 1,000 years of recorded history and is mentioned in Alessandro Manzoni's *I Promessi Sposi* ("The Betrothed"). Although the grape is very clean from a genetic point of view, recent studies have suggested links between Vernaccia and the Fiano grape that is now commonly planted in southern Italy. The taste profile of the two grapes is remarkably similar.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Vernaccia is that it is virtually the only Italian white grape that doesn't put crisp acidity on the top of its sensorial wish list. Vernaccia di San Gimignano is often a soft and creamy white wine that can be served a few degrees warmer than your standard Italian white. Instead of freshness, Vernaccia is identified by its inner minerality. These wines exhibit delineated tones of brimstone and flint that add clean contours to classic aromas of stone fruit, pear and honeydew melon.

Vernaccia's most ambitious promise to consumers is its potential for aging. A bottle of quality Vernaccia di San Gimignano can easily evolve in the cellar for up to ten years. This sets the wine apart from most Italian whites that count on near-term drinking windows. Over time, Vernaccia shows more pronounced mineral tones with beautiful background notes of saffron and toasted pine nut. In fact, the Riserva category was born because local vintners instinctively set their best bottles back to age a bit longer before release. You will notice that I extended the drinking dates on many of the 80 Vernaccia di San Gimignano wines reviewed in this report.

Growing conditions in San Gimignano are not that different than nearby points in Tuscany including Chianti Classico. The 2011 vintage was hot and dry throughout spring and most of the summer. Hillside vineyards fared well thanks to nighttime temperature dips. The wines show a leaner, finer structure overall. Harvest started early during the last week of August. The 2012 vintage was also characterized by heat and yields were much lower than average. Harvest started the first week of September. The wines are very soft in texture with lower crispness and thicker concentration. Cooler conditions returned with the 2013 vintage. This year showed balanced temperatures with ample rains in June and a longer growing season. The wines are rich, expressive and beautifully aromatic. The 2014 vintage was a very difficult one with wines that taste thinner in constitution and less intense in terms of flavor.

—Monica Lamer

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