

Grignolino – Piedmont’s Alluring Red Wine



Tom Hyland Contributor @

Food & Drink

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Braida Grignolino d'Asti "Limonte" PHOTO @TOM HYLAND

It's one of Piedmont's most distinctive red wines, yet it receives little attention. In fact, there are many who are familiar with the region's wines that know little if anything about it, expect that it exists, as other regional wines, such as Barolo and Barbaresco dominate the conversation. It, in this case, is Grignolino, and it's a wine that delivers great pleasure, especially when enjoyed at lunch with a regional food pairing.

Grignolino (green-no-*leen-o*) is a grape grown in several areas of Piedmont, with the majority of plantings in the Asti province. It's a unique variety, as the color is quite delicate - typically pink/garnet - with rich tannins, yet this is not a powerhouse wine in the manner of the most famous regional reds, many of which are produced from the Nebbiolo variety. Rather, this is a medium-bodied, distinctively spicy red wine that in some cases can be enjoyed with a slight chill or at cellar temperature, either upon release one or two years after the vintage, or as long as 7-10 years post harvest.

Marco Griglio of Montalbera in the Monferrato area of the province of Asti, a leading producer of Grignolino, recalls the unknown history of this grape and wine. "It used to be one of the more widely planted grapes in Monferrato, and one of the most appreciated wines from Piemonte in the 19th century/first half of 20th century. The king of Italy, when he was housed in Torino, used to have Grignolino on his table before Barolo was 'invented.' Then starting from '60s it slowly started to recede, leaving room for other 'easier' varieties like Barbera."

"I like to say 'Grignolino is different,'" says Stefano Gagliardo of the Gianni Gagliardo winery in La Morra. "The word Grignolino derives from *grignolé*, which in Piemontese means 'seeds' or 'pips.' This is because the variety has four seeds instead of the typical two. This of course means a very high potential of seed to tannin extraction."

At Braida in the province of Asti, proprietor Giuseppe Bologna comments on the grape. "It is a variety that is similar to Nebbiolo and Pinot Noir. It resembles Nebbiolo in terms of size, the pyramid shape of the bunches, the color of the grape and tannins, while it resembles Pinot Noir in terms of the compactness of the bunch, the fruits and the aromas expressed by the wine. And it resembles both in terms of the immense differences in expression that occur depending on the terroir where it is planted." For Bologna, Grignolino "prefers sunny exposures and poor, well-drained soils. Work in the cellar requires either the extraction of the grape seeds or limitation of the duration of maceration in order to balance the natural tannins to achieve an elegantly structured wine."

Gagliardo adds that "we want to make wines without too much tannin, and we want to preserve the color as much as possible. We do need tannins that are completely ripe, which means that most times we have pick with pretty high sugar. As a consequence the final alcohol may be quite high."

As for its use today, Griglio notes that Grignolino is still consumed locally as an everyday wine, especially in the summer with a light chill, while Raffaella thinks that it is "a wine for pairing with starters and rice or pasta dishes, or for drinking in summer with every course of a meal - even fish."

The quality of Grignolino keeps improving, and Bologna sees even greater success for the wine. "A vigorous search for new expressions of the Grignolino grape is underway," he remarks, "aimed at raising the quality of the wine by vinifying grapes grown in crus, late harvesting, use of *amphorae* and a return to the use of wood."

Bologna notes that in a few years, the winery will release a *riserva* offering of Grignolino. That on its own is a testament to the work dedicated to - and the new interest in - the wine. Who would have thought this possible even a few years ago for a grape few gave a second thought to?

Braida Grignolino d'Asti "Limonte" 2018 - Bright garnet; attractive aromas of wild strawberry, maraschino cherry and allspice. Medium-bodied with very good concentration. Medium-full tannins, high acidity and distinct notes of sage and oregano in the finish. This needs food, and would be best paired with salumi or a pasta with a hearty sauce. Enjoyable now, but better with time. Best in 3-5 years. **Excellent**