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Guide to Italian Wines

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Brachetto

Article and photos © by Tom Hyland

Now that Italy has won the World Cup (sorry, you head-butting French), raise a glass of Italian wine in salute to the champions! Naturally, you'll have a lot of choices from Italy, be it a wonderful sparkling wine from Franciacorta, a spicy red from Tuscany, Piemonte or Puglia (or just about any region) or a regal Barolo or Brunello di Montalcino. But with this hot weather bearing down on most of us, you may just want to enjoy a glass of one of the most delicious - and fun - of all Italian wines, Brachetto d'Acqui.

I love discovering wines that I enjoy and aren't well known, and Brachetto d'Acqui certainly fits both of those categories. This is perhaps the most delicious, charming wine made today that few people know about. It is named for the Brachetto grape as well as the Acqui district in southern Piedmont not far from the towns of Asti and Alessandria, two other famous wine towns in this great region.

Brachetto has wonderful aromas of black raspberry and black cherry with notes of tar, clove and flowers such as violets or orchids. The wine is medium-bodied, generally with a trace of sweetness (a few are medium-sweet) and is usually lightly sparkling or what the Italians call frizzante. If that doesn't sound appealing enough, consider this; alcohol is low, usually 5.5 percent!

Combine that moderate degree of alcohol along with the fresh, fruity, floral aromas and you have a wine that is perfect with fresh fruit or chocolate - two things Piedmont is famous for - as an after-dinner treat. This is wonderful the year round, but it is especially charming in summertime. Do yourself a favor and enjoy some fresh strawberries with a glass of Brachetto.

The trick here is to drink these wines young; the 2005 vintage is current, and it's best to enjoy the freshness of this wine before that fades away. As bottles are generally in the \$16-20 range, this is not a wine you will go broke on; it seems to me that price is clearly worth the pleasure you'll derive from a glass or two of this delightful product.

I recently tried several examples of Brachetto d'Acqui from the 2005 vintage; producers range from large (**Gancia**) to very small (**Baravalle, Ca' dei Mandorli**). All of them were quite good (I have yet to taste a poor example of Brachetto) and a few were excellent. The Baravalle has lovely aromas of currant and cherry with refreshing acidity while the Ca' dei Mandorli has a bit more richness with an off-dry finish and was quite elegant.

Some of these wines are difficult to find, so look for bottlings such as the **Rosa Regale** from Banfi, which really focuses



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on the raspberry and rose-petal flavors and is a consistently excellent wine each year. As the wines from Banfi are marketed across the country, this wine should not be difficult to find (again, the 2005 is the current release).



Raffaella Bologna, Braida Winery, producer of one of the best examples of Brachetto d'Acqui.

it! So will you.

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The two finest examples of Brachetto d'Acqui I have tasted year in and year out are from **Braida** (also known as **Giacomo Bologna**) and **Marenco**. The Braida focuses on raspberries and cherries with a delicate, off-dry finish while the Marenco bottling labeled "Pineto" has wonderful richness and layers of flavor, again with an off-dry finish. Both of these wines display the complexities that can be found in the best examples of Brachetto d'Acqui. Both are imported in the United States, but will probably be found in only a few major markets such as New York, Chicago and San Francisco, so ask a trusted retailer in your vicinity.

Some producers are trying to find new ways to promote this wine; certainly the deep red color will have some thinking of Valentine's Day or Christmastime. This would be a nice finish to a holiday dinner (plum pudding or a plum tart, anyone?). You could even try one of the richer examples with turkey, goose or pork at a holiday dinner. But for me, I still like Brachetto with a bowl of strawberries. That's as simple - and as enjoyable - a wine and food pairing as I've found and I love

To contact Tom Hyland, visit his Website at <http://www.northshorewine.com>
or write him at tnapawine@aol.com

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