

*Insight and Opinion:*

## A Comparison Between California and Italy

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WHAT CAN CALIFORNIAN WINEMAKERS learn from their Italian counterparts? What can Italy, as a whole, learn from the tasting rooms and winemaking techniques used in the Golden State?

As **Sasha Paulsen**, editor of the *Napa Valley Register*, noted, "We agree that the ties that link the Napa Valley and Italy are strong." **Piero Antinori**, one of the most important and visionary Italian winemakers, decided to invest in Napa to bring a better connection between these important wine countries. **Glenn Salva**, general manager of "Antica" (ANTInori-CALifornia) emphasized the importance of the exchange between cultures. It happens every day at Antica where two different philosophies come together and grow.

### What Italy Can Learn From California

For Italians, the first shock when looking at the California winemaking culture is how well wineries cooperate with each other; from the elegant and luxurious **Opus One** to the mass market producer, **Barefoot Cellars**. That spirit of collaboration extends to the customers as well—the wineries not only talk to their customers, but they also listen, something that rarely happens in Italy. It is well-known that to be effective, communication must be a two-way street, but it often flows only one direction in Italy—from the winery out to the public. All too often, that communication is deeply technical, and, consequently, boring. In California it is clear that the public likes to listen to stories they can tell their friends, rather than the mineral content of the soil where the grape was grown.

Perhaps what Californians understand much better than the Italians is how to build successful tourism and direct-to-consumer industries. In California, wine is sold not just as a product, but as an experience. Tourists in the Napa Valley can create their own blend with the help of a winery enologist, attend an educational tasting that includes a barrel sample, have picnics or winemaker lunches among the vines and more. In essence, they are given a unique experience that allows them to have a great story to tell their friends. Customers love this experience, this look behind the scenes, and become lifelong fans of a winery.

Every winery in Napa seemed to have a clear focus: to successfully participate in wine tourism and direct sales to the consumer. This went beyond just offering interesting experiences to the tourist. The second important strength of the Napa Valley is the great organization and professional hospitality. Before arriving in the area, it is easy to book tasting appointments, build custom itineraries with the help of a consultant or concierge and find transportation. Visitor centers are easily marked. Perhaps best of all, the hospitality staff is both professional and informal, making the tourist feel comfortable and welcome—it takes a special person to do this well. As a whole, Italy still does not invest enough in hospitality.

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## What California Can Learn From Italy

But is there a limit to this model? Certainly individual consumers evolve, as does the market as a whole. The top marketing and communication experts as well as the top producers are already working on new ideas. Is there something from Italy that they can learn?

The education of the wine consumer in food and wine pairings is something that the Italians do well. The natural food movement has evolved in the Golden State, bringing even better attention to the selection of products, and Californians are thinking like the Italians do. But they need help.

In Italy this is nothing new: it is just part of our culture, a culture that captures the sense of the good life, good food and fine wine. Wine and food pairings are always included on the back label of Italian wine bottles, and has become the theme of so many wine classes. Whenever someone describes a wine—on television, the Internet, newspapers or magazines, even in the technical sheets produced by wineries, there is always a line about the perfect pairing. And this is not to mention the tasting menus—menus which include four to 10 courses, each with the perfect pairing of a wine chosen by the sommelier and chef. These may be somewhat new in California, but the tasting menu is very common in Italian restaurants—whether elegant or casual. This is part of how wine has become part of the daily life of the Italian consumer.

Wine and food pairings should be a prerogative of not only restaurants, but wineries as well. While many wineries are making the effort to offer pairings or even weekend classes to build their consumers' educations, there are just as many that aren't. Offering a tasting of their wines paired with simple recipes, even finger food to make it easy and informal, would help build a better personality for Californian wines.

## Price Points and the Young Consumer

One reason Italian wine is so popular worldwide, even with younger consumers, is the price point. While it could be considered a less elegant feature, Italian wines are known for having a great quality-to-price ratio. Except for "Super Tuscans" or some rare wines produced in certain regions, it is possible to drink great wine for far less than 10 euros (about \$13); yet, for less than 30 euros (\$39) you can drink ancient wines made by historic wineries. Having good, inexpensive wine is critical if you want to attract younger consumers.

There is a lot of discussion in the American media about how to cater to the Millennial, but here are some of my observations. In California the weather is quite warm but Cabernet is a heavy red wine you cannot drink anytime. Tormaresca Winery in the south of Italy had the same problem—during summertime it seemed that drinkers were limited to white wines as pairings with fish or aperitifs. As a result, the winery produced "Fichimori" a light, fresh red wine to be served cold that has seen much success.



Another way to reach young consumers is to promote wines as pairings with international food: sushi, Italian pizza and pasta, Spanish food and so on. The new generation loves to experiment with different tastes and try new cuisines. Why not pair wines to these ethnic, and sometimes new, foods?

Communication about those wines should be better targeted to them as well. There are many Californian wineries guilty of promoting wine only as the most prestigious of beverages, with grand heritage and elegant serving instructions. While this may work for many of the cult brands and luxury wines, it may serve some brands well to think about advertising the wine as a part of life—something more social, more unique, that can complement and excel with new and exciting dishes.

## The Essence of Italian Wine

Last but absolutely not least, Italian style is a key element to our culture and our wines. Each winery, each wine has a different style, a unique character, because behind that wine is a family—a different tradition—with deep roots in different historical and cultural influences. And in Italy, we express these in everything that we do. This focus on beauty and style is reflected in the world of Italian wine. Here we find wineries with ancient frescos, underground wineries, castles which have become sacred places of aging, historic villas and so on.

Too often in California when visiting a winery you can have fun but most of the times the tour is impersonal. Sometimes you are part of a very large group or the tour is clearly aimed at selling more wine; often you enter very crowded tasting rooms where you do not have a unique experience. When you visit a French or an Italian winery you feel to be in the best place of the world; the staff is calm and prepared to answer each question, they show you the hidden corners of the cellar without pushing you to buy any wine and very often without making you pay for the tour.

This focus on beauty and style is everywhere in Italian wine. From wineries and wine shops to restaurants and wine bars, there is a maniacal attention to the elegant details of design and merchandising. The most striking example is the trade fair Vinitaly, one of the major events for the promotion of wine in the world (held every spring in Verona). Here each winery space is a design “studio” that stands out in terms of originality and elegance. The stands themselves are like temples to taste and refinement. It is a powerful way to communicate the essence of the winery. Each space communicates its style and brand identity. The goal is complex: the exhibit booth must appear warm and welcoming, but also slightly formal and elegant. It must be sophisticated while communicating a philosophy, an image beyond the wine itself. In Italy, this is a cultural experience; and aesthetic approach to the concept of a glass of fine wine and a plate to match.

California needs to build its own personality, not only through the production but also in its image and, in particular, each winery needs to build its own style. I understand it is not easy, as in Italy it is strongly related to our history and the tradition of each family. Instead, begin building it based on a value you want to promote rather than the tradition you do not have yet.

This is the essence of what we do well in Italy. And it while we have much to learn, it is something that we can also teach to the rest of the wine world.