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## **[Vino Italiano with an Oregon twist](http://www.registerguard.com/csp/cms/sites/web/special/tastings/22018061-41/story.csp)**

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### **Italian grapes may be Oregon's new wine frontier, as vintners in the state increasingly pursue unique new expressions of varietals such as Sangiovesi and Dolcetto.**

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With winemaker names like Ponzi, Cuneo, Apolloni and Marchesi, you might think Oregon would be home to lots of Italian-style wines. It's not. It is an odd fact that while Portland is one of the largest per-capita markets in the country for imported Italian wines, historically there have been very few Italian-style wines grown and made in Oregon.

That's beginning to change.

A growing group of intrepid Oregon winemakers are experimenting with Italian wine grape varieties. The wines they are making — from familiar names such as pinot grigio to exotic varieties like Lagrein — are expanding Oregon's palette of choices for local wine lovers.

"If you go through the Willamette Valley," says Franco Marchesi, whose Marchesi Vineyards in the Columbia Gorge AVA grows Italian varieties, "you will mostly go from winery to winery tasting all the same kinds of wines; but when you tell people you have Italian wines, they get very interested."

How interested? Recently a group of local wineries held the first "Italy in the Valley" event to celebrate Oregon-made Italian-style wines. They expected, maybe, 200 attendees; more than 600 people came and the wineries were swamped with enthusiasm.

"When people try these wines, they like them and they buy them," says Gino Cuneo, whose eponymous winery specializes in Italian varieties. "It's something that's new to

them and they're excited about that.”

Alfredo Apolloni, whose Apolloni Vineyards has added Italian-style wines to their lines of pinot noir and more traditional French varieties, agrees. “For many people it’s ‘anything but pinot’ — they’re looking for something different. It sometimes takes a little education, but once they try the wines they really love them.”

### Gateway to Italian grapes

In a land best-known for French-style wines, Italian wine names can take a little getting used to. Pinot grigio, for instance, is the same grape as pinot gris, and only recently has been approved for use on Oregon wine labels. Pinot grigio wines usually are made in a brighter and fresher style than traditional Oregonian pinot gris, and often serve as the “gateway wine” that gets people interested in other Italian grapes.

Sangiovese, the great red grape famous for the wines of Tuscany, probably is the best-known Italian variety made by Oregon winemakers. “Sangiovese has great potential in the Northwest,” says Cuneo, an early and leading proponent of Italian grapes in the Northwest. “It is easy to enjoy and appreciate, it goes well with food, and it can be made in a more familiar bordelaise style.” Cuneo says Sangiovese has the potential to become a market leader for the Northwest, much as merlot and syrah have done in the past.

Sangiovese also is an excellent blending grape, forming the basis for the well-loved wines of Chianti and the class of blends often called “Super Tuscan.” This approach helps people ease into Italian wines by giving them a little of what they are used to tasting — say cabernet sauvignon or merlot — and a lot of what may be new to them: Sangiovese.

Another red Italian grape that is gaining popularity in Oregon is Dolcetto. “Dolcetto loves the climate here,” says Marchesi, “and it is producing fruity, soft and very accessible wines.” But Dolcetto planted in the cooler Willamette Valley requires careful site selection and vineyard management, says Luisa Ponzi, winemaker for her family’s Ponzi Vineyards, one of the first wineries to plant Italian grapes in Oregon. “Dolcetto is still kind of experimental here.”

### Fruitful expressions of Oregon

In a way, all Italian grapes are still experimental in Oregon, no matter where they are planted. In fact, most Italian grapes made into wine by Oregon winemakers actually are grown in Washington where there is more growing experience with the grapes — though there are more planted in Oregon all the time.

It’s that sense of newness-to-Oregon that attracts these winemakers. “I am Italian, I am in the Gorge, I love wine,” explains Marchesi, “and so this is what I want to do: make Italian-style wines.”

Note the emphasis on the word “Italian-style.” These should not be thought of as “Italian” wines.

“It would be wrong to try and replicate Italian wine here,” says Cuneo. “This is Oregon, not Italy — but that’s what’s so exciting, to see how these grapes express themselves in Oregon and the Northwest.”

Luisa Ponzi agrees. “There is definitely an Oregon style to the Italian varietals here: you can’t get away from that really bright and beautiful Oregon fruit.” She even takes her Italian grape wines back to Italy and shows them to winemaking friends there. “They are always struck by the amount of fruit we have in our wines.”

### Growth potential

Oregon’s experience with Italian grapes is still in its infancy, but most everyone agrees that there is tremendous potential. “I’ve learned that it takes a lot of time to get the best out of the vines,” explains Marchesi. “When you start from scratch with these grapes you need to take your time and let the vines adapt to the soil and the microclimate.” Only then, he says, will they begin to show their Oregon-formed character.

As Oregon winemakers gain experience with their Italian grapes, there is bound to be improvement in the quality and growth in the variety of styles made here. Already people like Cuneo are applying Italian winemaking techniques — such as cold-drying grapes for months at a time after picking — that are never used for Oregon’s traditional wine styles. And others including Remy Drabkin at Remy Wines are introducing new grapes, such as Lagrein, that have never before been grown in the Northwest.

“What I’m really encouraged about,” concludes Apolloni, “is that the people making Italian-style wines in Oregon are really committed to making good wine. They’re investing the time, making it in small lots — just like Oregon has always done. It’s great for the future that we’re focusing on quality.”

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### Italian-style Oregon wines

Here’s a guide to the Italian grape varieties that are being turned into wines in Oregon, including specific examples:

#### Sangiovese

Italy’s most widely planted red grape is also the Northwest’s most planted Italian variety. Known for cherry, strawberry and spice flavors, it also takes on different characters depending on where it was grown and how it is made.

Gino Cuneo Cellars '07 Tre Nova Bonatello, \$16

Barking Frog '06 Sangiovese, \$28

Zerba Cellars '06 Columbia Valley Sangiovese, \$30

Cana's Feast '06 Bricco Sangiovese, \$30

Oregon also makes flavorful rosé versions of Sangiovese, including those from Viento, Cuneo Cellars and A to Z Wineworks.

### Barbera

A red variety from Piedmont known for high acidity and an ability to produce fruity wines of varied styles. It used to be rare in Oregon, but new examples are cropping up more and more.

Marchesi Vineyards '07 Achille Barbera, \$27

Zerba Cellars '06 Columbia Valley Barbera, \$30

Mystic Wines '06 Barbera, \$26

### Dolcetto

An increasingly popular red variety from Piedmont, Dolcetto produces fruit-forward and plush wines that are ideal for early drinking.

Abacela '07 Southern Oregon Dolcetto, \$20

Ponzi Vineyards '07 Willamette Valley Dolcetto, \$25

Marchesi Vineyards '07 Natal Dolcetto, \$24

### Arneis

This aromatic white grape from Piedmont delivers delightful pear and dried herb flavors.

Ponzi Vineyards '08 Willamette Valley Arneis, \$20

### Nebbiolo

A red grape from Italy's Piedmont region, especially famous for Barolo and Barbaresco wines. It ripens late, needs a lot of heat, and makes ageable wines with great aromatics and complex flavors — rare in the Northwest.

Cana's Feast '06 Columbia Valley Bricco Nebbiolo, \$30

## Lagrein

A red grape from the Trentino-Alto Adige region of Italy that is very rare in the United States.

Remy Wines '06 Willamette Valley Lagrein, \$55

## Vermentino

A pleasing aromatic white variety primarily grown in Sardinia and Liguria, Italy.

Troon Vineyard '08 Applegate Valley Vermentino, \$18

## Blends

Italian “Super-Tuscan” blends often combine Sangiovese or other Italian grapes with non-traditional (for Italy) varieties, such as cabernet sauvignon.

Apolloni Vineyards '06 Sologgio, \$25

Gino Cuneo Cellars '06 Tre Nova Secopassa, \$40

Marchesi Vineyards '07 Cereja Red Wine, \$25

Zerba Cellars '06 Columbia Valley Equilibrio, \$45