

Interview Matt Paul Vino Italiano in Melbourne, Australia

www.vinoitaliano.com.au

Vino Italiano is the brainchild of Italian wine specialists Matt Paul, Michael Trembath and Virginia Taylor, each of whom has extensive wine industry knowledge and experience. Every year sees the group spending a combined three months in Italy, with the focus on exploring new regions, revisiting the old, soaking up the cultural climate, visiting our wineries, tasting new releases and seeking out new wines to bring to Australia.

Some information about you Matt: when and why begun you history with wine? What was your formation about wine in Australia?

I was working in a restaurant and still learning about Australian wine when I met Michael Trembath and Virginia Taylor (now business partners in Vino Italiano), who introduced me to Italian wine. The first two Italian wines I tasted were Brancaia Il Blu 1994 and Hofstatter Pinot Nero Barthenau 1994. Although I was familiar with these grapes, I was amazed at how different they were to what I'd been drinking.

What is the history of Vino Italiano?

It's a short history so far. We launched the website in 2011 as a direct to consumer sales point for our Italian imports.

Why you decided to begin a wine importer in Australia and why you decided to begin a specialist of Italian wines? Why Italian wines and not French or Spanish wines? Where and when begin your interest for Italian wines?

I like French and Spanish wine but I simply love Italian wine. With wine, you are always learning a new vintage but with Italy, there are so many grapes and regions to discover as well. Since those first two wines, it's been a wonderful journey and I cherish the friendships I've made with our wineries. I couldn't just go and sell French wine instead, my heart wouldn't be in it.

What kind of wine Australian people prefer? They prefer wine from Australia New Zealand and New World producers or tend to choose also wine from other wine countries like Italy?

Of course Shiraz is our most popular red and New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc our most popular white but, times are changing. Australia is re-discovering its regional diversity, the only way forward in my opinion. Winemaking has changed too, average alcohol levels are down, oak reduced and there is greater emphasis on 'drinkability'.

Can you describe the wine scene in Australia after economic crisis? What is the situation now for Australian wine industry?

We didn't suffer as badly as other countries during the economic crisis and although people were spending less per bottle, they were still spending. The Australian wine industry is going through a big change. We are looking to many 'alternative' varieties like Negromaro that better suit our hot climate and our challenge is to show the world that we are capable of much more than export fruit bomb wines.

The economic crisis have changed the situation of the market of the wines in Australia? The people who like to buy and drink wines now are available to pay the same high prices for a bottle that pay before the crisis?

Our market has bounced back well and a strong Australian dollar means there is real value in imported wine. But, the global economic situation is still volatile, especially in Italy, and we are cautious. I think the biggest challenge to pricing will be competing with emerging markets such as China.

Can you give me an idea of what is the medium price people pay for a bottle of good wine in a wine store or in a restaurant in Australia?

\$25 in a wine store and \$60 in a restaurant.

People in Australia prefer to drink wines at restaurant or at home? The domestic consumption is more important and growing that consumption at restaurant?

Wine has been replacing beer as our drink of choice. Australians can find a wine to drink with just about anything – Riesling with Thai food, Pinot Noir with Japanese, Shiraz with Middle Eastern etc. We are very multicultural as a people, but also in our food and wine choices. Visit someone's house for a bbq and you will find a combination of food and wine styles. In restaurants, wines by the glass are very popular and more restaurants are pouring a sommeliers selection.

What are the foreign wines preferred by Australian wine enthusiast and what is the place for Italian wines?

Sauvignon from New Zealand, Champagne and Burgundy from France and Spain too is also growing. Italian wines will always have a strong presence owing to the link between Italian food, which is very popular here, and Italian wine. In addition, Australians love to travel to Italy and they often look for wines they might have discovered on vacation.

In your portfolio we find wines from different Italian wine region. Wines by Umani Ronchi Marcarini Conterno Fantino Franz Haas Tenuta San Leonardo Pieropan Poggio Antico San Giusto Felsina Rocca di Montegrossi Jermann Ronco dei Tassi Bellavista Costaripa Villa Matilde Boscarelli Costanti Elena Fucci Poderi Colla,etc. What is your principle for choose Italian wines and Italian wineries? Your taste, the possibilities on Aussie market, or what elements?

We do have to consider the market, especially our sell price because taxes on wine are very high in Australia. There are three main considerations: wines that we love to drink, wines that speak of their place, and wineries where we can establish a great working relationship because after all, it is more of a partnership. We have been working with Leonildo Pieropan and family for twenty years and when we begin with a new winery, we look to develop the same long term relationship.

As a specialist Italian importer, I also think that we have a duty to represent the diversity of Italy. Two years ago, when there was no quality Lambrusco available in Australia, we started working with Lini910. Trying to change the markets perception of Lambrusco from what it was in the 1970's is challenging, but also rewarding.

What is the situation now in Australia for Italian wines? What is the image of the Italian wines in Australia?

This may surprise you but we have a lot of Italian varieties planted in Australia (and some are pretty good!). The most popular are Nebbiolo, Sangiovese, Glera and Pinot Grigio, but also Sagrantino, Montepulciano, Negroamaro, Vermentino and Fiano. This is a positive thing for Italian wine as it opens new doors to consumers who might not have discovered an Italian wine before.

Generally, Italian wines are very well received although there is more work to be done. The French are well ahead of Italy on promoting their regions and crus and I look forward to talking about Barolo, Chianti and Brunello in the same way we do for Burgundy.

One of our biggest challenges is the confusion surrounding DOC/G laws which, in my opinion, have become a real mess. I tell my customers to focus on one thing: producer, producer, producer.

Australian people know Italian wines or you must work as a missionary to present the richness (of grapes, appellations, terroirs, name) of Italian wine?

A little bit of both. The market knows the most popular wines such as Chianti, although their perception might be of the 1970's 'in fiasco' wine. Lesser known regions and grapes need time to establish themselves. We open the bottles, get people to taste them and tell the story of where it is from and who made it. There is no overnight success, it requires years of educating the consumer.

What elements Australian people agree in Italian wines? They prefer Italian wine from international grapes or they agree also wines from Italian native varieties?

Mostly they want to taste something different. We make good Cabernet in Australia so from Tuscany, for example, they usually want Sangiovese. The main difference between Italian and Australian wine is that Italian wines have such refreshing acidity. A wine drinker brought up on jammy, oaky Shiraz finds that challenging, until there is food on the table.

What kind of suggestion you can do to Italian wine people for present and promote Italian wines to Australian customers and wine enthusiasts?

Forget whether your wine is a DOCG and popular in New York. A good price/quality ratio is always the best starting point, and no synthetic corks please.

To sell Italian wines in Australia is a growing business or not? What you do to promote Italian wines in your shop? Do you organize tastings, presentations?

It is growing all the time. We are a big county with a small population and the market has become quite crowded. We regularly host tastings and winemakers as part of educating people about Italian wine

Matt what are your preferred Italian wines and Italian wine regions?

Nebbiolo is my favourite grape so it must be the Langhe, but I love Sangiovese. There are too many regions to choose from and it's one of the pleasures of working with Italian wine. Lagrein to Nerello Mascalese and everything in between, every day I could select something different to discover and enjoy.

What is in your opinion the future for Italian wine in Australia?

Today, Italy's wines are better than ever and although there will always be a solid market for the grandi cru – Barolo, Brunello, Amarone – as our market matures, we will further explore other regions and grapes.