



SAY CIAO TO ITALIAN CHARDONNAY

In a country known for native grape varieties, Chardonnay often takes a back seat—but it shouldn't.

BY JEFF PORTER

PHOTOS BY TOM ARENA

Fiano, Grecco, Verdicchio...Chardonnay? One of these may appear out of place when listing iconic Italian grape varieties, but—surprise—Chardonnay, the world's fifth most planted grape, has a strong historic foothold all along the Italian peninsula. The diversity of Italy's terroir and climate highlights this neutral white grape's ability to adapt to its location and produce wines of place—whether the cool-climate slopes of Alto Adige or the sun-soaked hills of Sicily.

Chardonnay's history in Italy, like many grapes, is a bit fuzzy, but most attribute the grape's first plantings to Napoleon Bonaparte. Just as the Roman legions brought their most prized vines across Europe, Napoleon's armies did the same, bringing Chardonnay, Merlot, Cabernet Franc and others to what we now know as Friuli-Venezia Giulia in the late 1700s or early 1800s.

Yet, Chardonnay's modern-day story is based more on romance and innovation than on war or legacy. The examples on the following pages are just a snippet of the numerous Italian producers making Chardonnay that are not only delicious, but are unique and specific to their terroir and to their place in the pantheon of Chardonnay across the globe.

Oltrepò Pavese, Lombardia, North-Central Italy

Cordero San Giorgio “Rivone”

In 2019, three siblings, Francesco, Lorenzo and Caterina Cordero, ventured out of Piedmont and purchased the historic estate of Tenuta San Giorgio, in the rolling hills of Oltrepò Pavese in Lombardia. With vines more than 30 years old, the wines of Cordero San Giorgio have depth, complexity, and beauty. A unique winemaking technique that sets this estate apart is the division of the wine into terracotta amphorae and French oak barriques. The terracotta preserves the grape's primary aromas and flavors, while the oak aging gives the wine subtle hints of baking spice and vanilla. Both vessels provide lees contact giving texture and more complexity. Combining the two creates a wine of unique depth and specificity.

Colli Orientali del Friuli, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Northeast Italy

Ronco del Gnemiz “Sol”

Ronco del Gnemiz is a small 10-hectare estate owned by the Palazzolo family since 1964, with Chardonnay plantings dating back to the 1920s. The estate grew to prominence in the 1990s, led by Serena Palazzolo and her winemaker husband Christian Patat who are ardent defenders of Chardonnay from the Colli Orientali. The estate produces three distinct Chardonnays. The Sol bottling comes from vines that are over 60 years old and was first produced in 1981. The meticulousness with which they work cannot be understated and is one reason when asking multiple sommeliers to name their top five Italian Chardonnay, Ronco del Gnemiz is always listed. “Sol” is unique for its depth, richness and power, yet its deftness on the palate.

