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Expert's choice: Verdicchio

The Marche region nestles on Italy's central Adriatic coast, and its Verdicchio wines offer some of the country's best value for quality dry whites. Michael Garner picks his current favourites.



Michael Garner
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Since the idea of fine Italian white wine first took hold in the 1970s and '80s, Verdicchio is a variety that has gone from strength to strength. In 1980, Burton Anderson claimed in his book *Vino*, '...the standard here may be as high as for any popular white wine in Italy at the moment'. Nearly four decades later, Ian D'Agata maintained in his *Native Wine Grapes of Italy* (University of California Press, 2014) that 'Verdicchio is arguably Italy's greatest native white grape variety'.

It is highly versatile, making very creditable passito and sparkling wines thanks to naturally high levels of acidity, but it's the still, dry versions that stand out. Two areas of the Marche region have DOC or DOCG status. The first comprises the rolling coastal hills of the Castelli di Jesi (with its Classico sub-zone), while the second is further inland: the higher, north- to south-facing valley of the Esino river by the town of Matelica.

While the Jesi wines are typically more approachable and show the grape's rounder, fleshier and more sensual side, those from Matelica tend to be leaner and crisper, with even greater evidence of its notable mineral tones. Delicate, youthful fruit characters are common to both, as are floral notes. With age (anything from five to 20 years, depending on the individual winery) the wines can develop an impressive depth of aroma and flavour yet still maintain a remarkable freshness and vitality. Modern winemaking methods and a more enlightened approach to viticulture (particularly lower vineyard yields) have done much to confirm Verdicchio's current status as one of the country's top whites.

Two recent trends have accelerated that progress. A proliferation of small producers has emerged in the 40 years since Anderson's book. They have tended to favour single-vineyard or 'cru' wines made in small lots, and some are really pushing back the boundaries. Caveat emptor, however. The DOCG Riserva category in particular, which calls for extra ageing and a higher alcohol content, can be something of a minefield, and quality is not always consistent. Some producers are simply trying too hard: in aiming for a wine which is all about richness, power and noteworthy ageing potential, they can compromise the elegance, freshness and energy that is one of the variety's truly outstanding features. Over-extraction brings a heaviness, bitterness and viscosity that does Verdicchio few favours.

The other positive development is the rise to stardom of the Matelica area. Though still overshadowed by the Castelli di Jesi in terms of numbers (2.5 million bottles from Matelica against some 17m bottles from Jesi per annum), quality is usually extremely reliable, and those classic high-altitude characteristics of zingy freshness and minerality are sought after by consumers. Castelli di Jesi, it seems, has a worthy rival these days, which can only be of benefit to Verdicchio's reputation and future success. Wine lovers everywhere are the real winners.

Michael Garner's top Verdicchio wines



Provima, Matérgea Riserva, Verdicchio, di Matelica, 2017

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A scented and floral riserva from a reliable cooperative, Matérgea maintains great freshness and charm with understated jasmine and pear notes and a lilted, waxy and perfumed finish.

Points 94

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