

Wine Spectator

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The Flavors of **ITALY**

Six Top Chefs Offer
Delicious Dishes, With
Matching Wines



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Italy in America

Six chefs interpret the rich diversity of regional Italian food and wine

By Thomas H. Johnson / Photos: David LaPointe/Photo: David LaPointe



Among the columns and
wines detailed in the
following pages are Aceto
Dolce and Etna Rosso
valley Etna-Romano and
Lombardy's white wine.

and friends but also to steep in the way of life: "If you don't understand the culture, then the dish—I don't care if it's new or old—will not work."

Rigatoni Alla Norma

5 tablespoons olive oil, divided
2 garlic cloves, chopped
5 cups heirloom cherry tomatoes, about 1 3/4 pounds, quartered
1 bunch fresh basil, destemmed, large leaves torn in half
1 teaspoon dried oregano
1/2 cup fresh eggplants, about 3/4 pound
1/2 cup olive oil
1/2 cup fresh thyme, chopped
1/2 cup small rigatoni (preferably Latini)
1/2 cup grated Parmigiano-Reggiano
1/2 cup chopped mozzarella di bufala
1/2 cup milk mozzarella
1/2 cup fresh basil leaves, for garnish

1. In a large pot, add 4 tablespoons of olive oil and cook over medium heat until the garlic has a golden brown color. Add the tomatoes, basil, and oregano. Season with salt, pepper, and a pinch of sugar.

2. Using a vegetable peeler, peel the eggplants, reserving the peels. Cut the eggplants into 1/2-inch rounds. Coat with olive oil and season with salt and pepper.



UNDERSTANDING SICILIAN REDS

CHEF'S PICK: Antichi Vinai Etna Rosso Petralava 2010

Red wines are a forte of Sicily, the large island that sits off the toe of Italy's boot. The best versions are made from the indigenous and widely planted Nero d'Avola grape, which excels in the region's hot, dry climate, and boasts big flavors of spicy plum and wild berry. But there's also a lighter side to the island's red wine spectrum that features wines that are just as compelling and worth exploring.

Over the past decade, winemakers have revived the old, terraced vineyards surrounding Mount Etna, an active volcano located on the island's east coast. Wineries here are making some of Sicily's most exciting wines, based on the Nerello Mascalese grape. The vineyards, 100 years old or more, are planted 1,300 to 3,200 feet above sea level and feature a combination of mineral-rich volcanic soils and large diurnal temperature variation.

The late-ripening Nerello Mascalese makes for crisp yet tannic reds that deliver a mix of pure cherry, earth and spice notes, often drawing comparisons to Burgundy's Pinot Noirs.

Less than 100 miles south, the Cerasuolo di Vittoria appellation is known for fruit-forward, medium-bodied reds. Traditionally, Cerasuolo, which means "cherry red" and should not be confused with the more rosé-like versions made in Abruzzo, is a 60-40 blend of Nero d'Avola and Frappato.



Sicilian vineyards in the shadow of Mount Etna

pellation are planted approximately a combination of warm and cool climate varieties.

WHAT IF YOU DISCOVERED THE WINE THAT DISCOVERED MARLBOROUGH?

SICILIAN RENAISSANCE

Celestino Drago: Drago Centro, Los Angeles
Rigatoni Alla Norma: Pasta and Tomato-Eggplant Sauce, With a Sicilian Red

Celestino Drago was born and raised in Sicily, and his first years cooking in Los Angeles were chaotic. He simply could not get the raw materials to cook as he had at home. By 1961, when he opened Celestino Beverly Hills, a sweeping change had occurred: "We could get great ingredients. Wild mushrooms, and I built from there."

Today he runs four restaurants, a bakery, catering business. Each offers a different level of formality. Where Il Piatto serves predominantly northern cuisine and Eno has a number of pizzas, downtown's Eno serves a pan-Italian menu in a modern setting.

Wine has always figured prominently in Drago's restaurants. Centro boasts a display with a list of 330 selections and 3,800 bottles. "Italian cuisine—food and wine together—is thousands of years old," Drago says. "You have to respect that above all." You was part of his Sicilian childhood, though he does not offer Italian bottlings exclusively. Drago does hold to one simple matching rule: "Regional dishes are best with regional wines."

The dish below, rigatoni alla Norma, has its roots in eastern Sicily. "Norma is an old, from the eastern Sicilian town of Catania," Drago points out. "But if you go to any restaurant, you get 10 different dishes."

"Come, what is this? It's good, but it's not Norma," he says. "But it's still the classic flavors. We don't want people to forget the old dishes."

Not the old grapes, Drago is bullish on the state of Italian wine at the moment.

"Barolo is great, Brunello is great, super Tuscans are great," he starts, "but also look at all these great wines that are less expensive and very interesting. It's so exciting right now. There are so many great quality wines with different grapes—people are going back to basics and finding these old vines."

He describes the Antichi Vini Etna Rosso Petralava 2010 as "so good, Burgundian style." The blend of Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Cappuccio has some tannins, but is also a pretty foil for the tomato edge in the dish.

The vineyards are in the vicinity of Mount Etna, which is not far from Catania. Drago visits every year, partly to see



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Chef Celestino Drago was born and raised in Sicily, and his first years cooking in Los Angeles were challenging. He simply could not get the raw materials to cook as he had at home. By 1985, when he opened Celestino Beverly Hills, a sweeping change had occurred: "We could get great ingredients. Wild rocket, 40 varieties of basil. It was a great success, and I built from there."

Today he runs four restaurants, a bakery that supplies his and other businesses, and a catering business. Each offers a different level of formality: Where Il Pistaio serves predominantly northern cuisine and Enoteca has a number of pizzas, downtown's Centro serves a pan-Italian menu in a modern room.

Wine has always figured prominently in Drago's restaurants. Centro boasts a display cellar with a list of 530 selections and 3,500 bottles. "Italian cuisine—food and wine together—is thousands of years old," Drago says. "You have to respect that above all." Wine was part of his Sicilian childhood, too; his father made wine every year. And though he does not offer Italian bottlings exclusively, Drago does hold to one simple matching rule: "Regional dishes are best with regional wines."

The dish below, rigatoni alla Norma, has deep roots in eastern Sicily. "Norma is an old dish, from [the eastern Sicilian town of] Catania," Drago points out. "But if you go to 10 different restaurants, you get 10 different Normas." At its most basic, the dish includes pasta with fried eggplant, tomato and cheese. Though it can be baked, his version is served straight from the stovetop.

He lightens the dish, and leaves the flavors more distinct than the traditional version, which tends to have more sauce. The flesh of the eggplant (Drago uses the smaller Japanese versions because they are less bitter) is pureed, and the skin slivered and fried for a crisp topping. "If I made this dish for my mother or father they'd say

'C'mon, what is this? It's good, but it's not Norma.'" he says. "But it's still the classic flavors. We don't want people to forget the old dishes."

Nor the old grapes. Drago is bullish on the state of Italian wine at the moment.

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