

BOOK AND FILM REVIEWS

Shelley Lindgren and Kate Leahy: *Italian Wine: The History, Regions, and Grapes of an Iconic Wine Country*

Ten Speed Press, 2023, 296 pp., ISBN: 978-1984857620, \$35.00

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Is it just me, or do many of us wish we could live in Italy? And, not just because of the wine; but largely because of the wine. In a new book, restaurateur Shelley Lindgren and author Kate Leahy explore all 20 wine regions of Italy to discover “the grapes, terrain, and ancient techniques that have influenced modern Italian winemaking” (p. 1).

Leafing through the book to get an idea of the layout and its nearly 300 pages reveals that a large portion of this work is dominated by photography of vineyards, wineries and countryside, which constructs a multisensory experience by bringing vivid visuals directly to the reader. The book is broken into three parts. Part I, “Understanding Italian Wine,” looks at the history of wine in the country and offers a foundation for the reader. Part II, “The Regions,” investigates Italy’s wine regions in alphabetical order from Abruzzo in central Italy to Veneto in the Northeast, because “today, Italian wine is local wine, with each region making their own way” (p. 4). The final segment, “Resources,” provides the reader with a glossary, a recommended reading list, a grape index, and more.

In Part I, the authors write, “while wine has been made and traded in Italy since before the time of the Greeks and Romans, Italian wine as we know it today is a relatively new idea” (p. 4). In the segment entitled *Becoming Italy: A History*, the authors explore the country’s changing politics and governmental structures over the centuries, and describe Italy’s first winemakers. The authors note that “in the Italian wine world, there has always been a tension between old and new. ... But the majority of Italy’s wines evolved out of everyday life, something to drink with a meal and share with family and friends” (p. 9). After describing challenges during the evolution of Italian winemaking (including phylloxera, depression, and war), Lindgren and Leahy discuss the next generation of Italian winemakers, for whom protecting heritage is important. The authors assert the future of Italian wine is about “returning to the old ways of making wine while learning how best to showcase the grapes and land in a glass” (p. 5).

Italy’s topography, rocks, and soils also play a large part in its wine production. The landscape “defines the country, creating microclimates galore for an astounding

number of grapes [some 590 varieties] to flourish” (p. 15). In fact, “Italy makes about a sixth of the wine in the world” (p. 4). The authors recognize, though, that climate change and conventional farming practices could alter the country’s placement in the global wine industry. “For now, Italy’s adaptation to climate change focuses on native grapes and traditional farming methods. When grown in the areas where they’ve evolved for centuries, these vines tend to be naturally resilient. ... [Additionally,] more vineyards are being worked in healthier ways” (p. 19). These strategies should allow for continued success in the country’s production of wine and maintain Italy’s place in a competitive global market.

According to Lindgren and Leahy, “all these aspects – the land and the grapes, the farming methods, and climate change – help us to better understand what’s in a bottle of Italian wine” (p. 20). And that’s helpful to the novice wine drinker because Italian wine labels can be confusing. Some wines are named after the grape, while others are named after the region. For example, “with Chianti Classico, you need to know that Sangiovese is the main grape and that Chianti Classico is the area in Tuscany where the wine is made” (p. 23). After an explanation of Italian wine laws and quality rankings, the authors introduce a tenet of Italian eating and drinking: What grows together, goes together. The adage expresses “the idea that food and wines that evolved together also complement each other at the table” (p. 27), and serves as a wonderful segue to the next part of their book.

In Part II, the authors separate the Italian landscape into regions and varietals to provide a manual for better understanding the Italian wine industry. “If you pick up a bottle of wine from a region and want to learn more about it, you can flip to that section and read about its history, land, wines, and grapes” (p. 6). This strategic approach guides the reader through the complexities of the country’s winemaking countryside.

Over the following 241 pages, Lindgren and Leahy use the same rubric across the 20 Italian wine regions (Abruzzo, Basilicata, Calabria, Campania, Emilia-Romagna, Friuli Venezia Giulia, Lazio, Le Marche, Liguria, Lombardy, Molise, Piedmont, Puglia, Sardinia, Sicily, Trentino-Alto Adige, Tuscany, Umbria, Valle d’Aosta, and Veneto), making it easy for the reader to follow and, ultimately, absorb the information therein. Each region is neatly divided into the following subfields: *Narrative*, *History*, *Land and Wines*, and *Regional Grapes* (separated by white and red). Each respective region concludes with a page or two listing *Regional Foods* and *Recommended Producers* from that area. Helpfully, in the overview of each section, the region is highlighted on a map to assist the reader.

While reviewing all 20 wine regions at once may seem overwhelming, here is a concrete example of the authors’ methodology using Italy’s most famous wine region, Tuscany. After sharing the history of San Gimignano’s famous towers, in the *Narrative* the reader learns that “nearly 90% of Tuscan wine is red and the majority is Sangiovese. Yet San Gimignano’s main wine, Vernaccia di San Gimignano, is white and has been made here since the thirteenth century” (p. 221). The authors continue, “in the past few decades, Tuscan estates have poured resources into their vineyards and cellars, researching ways to handle making wine amid a changing climate” (p. 221).

This background sets the stage for *History*, which spans the time from the Etruscans to today. “In 1398, the name ‘Chianti’ appeared in an official document that mentioned wine, and in 1565, the black rooster, which appears on all labels of Chianti Classico

today, was chosen to symbolize the wine. ... Now as the climate changes, producers are having to rethink their methods. ... In a way, things are going back to the era before industrial agriculture” (pp. 222, 225).

In *Land and Wines*, the authors explain that “nearly all the countryside [of Tuscany] is hills or mountains, and less than 10 percent is flat. ... Sangiovese comprises about two-thirds of all grapes planted in the region, and it’s essential in plenty of the region’s wine zones” (p. 225). In this section the authors describe grape planting and wine-making in Chianti Classico, Brunello di Montalcino, Montepulciano, and Maremma by highlighting local vintners and wineries.

Next, in *Tuscany Grapes*, the authors write “only 10 percent of Tuscan wine is white [e.g., Vermentino, Vernaccia di San Gimignano, and Trebbiano Toscano], ... Most Tuscan reds are marked by tart red fruits and savory, herbal flavors [e.g., Canaiolo, Ciliegiolo, and Sangiovese]” (pp. 230–231). The authors expand upon their descriptions of these white and red wines, providing background information on each varietal.

The authors assert that “what’s on the table matters, because Sangiovese – by far the dominant wine of the region – is best with food” (p. 225). Each section closes with a list of *Regional Foods* (e.g., bistecca alla fiorentina, olive oil, pappa al pomodoro) and, finally, *Recommended Producers* (e.g., Antinori, Cantine Dei, Romitorio). This wrap-up engages the reader, potentially enticing them to look for these wines at a local wine store to complement homemade Italian dishes.

In the *About the Authors* page, the reader learns that Lindgren has been knighted by the Italian government, “receiving the prestigious Cavaliere dell’Ordine Della Stella Italia (Dott.ssa)” (p. 286). After reading 296 pages, it comes as little surprise that Lindgren would hold such a title, as her knowledge and passion for Italian wine, Italian winemaking, and Italian wine regions are evident. This enthusiasm for “la dolce vita” is presumably shared by her coauthor.

As Lindgren and Leahy’s third book together, *Italian Wine* results in a mellifluous journey through Italian history and topography, as the authors’ partnership finds its cadence in their writing, which makes for enjoyable reading. According to the authors, “unfamiliar wines can be harder to grow and their wines are harder to sell. Yet Italy’s sheer diversity makes it impossible to get bored” (p. 5). And, similarly, while all readers may not have the chance to live in Italy, they can at least escape there, if only for a little while, through the fascinating and inspiring pages of *Italian Wine*.