Come and Cross the Bridge!

L. A. (November 25, 2015)



A conversation with Michele - the soul of the wine department at Jerry's Homemade-Gourmet and More. "In the last 15 years, in every single region in Italy, there has been a revolution in the world of wine," he tells us. "Local varieties were rediscovered and several provinces learned how to make wines that intensified their products' unique flavors"

Across the Washington Bridge, in the city of Englewood, there's one place New York's wine connoisseurs can't miss out on. It's the wine department of the famous Italian goods store known as Jerry's Homemade [2], founded by Neapolitan Jerry Turci.

We've mentioned this little slice of authentic Italy before. We've described Jerry's personal story, the piazza-like vibe of his store, the smell of salamis and cheese wafting about.

We've also regaled you with stories of Peppino, who dazzles customers with his handmade mozzarella and offers us fistfuls of his wonderful burrata whenever we stop by. Which happens frequently, since Jerry is, alongside our mutual friend Giovanni Colavita, one of i-Italy's major distributors. And every time we drop in with copies of the magazine it turns into a party. Well, you should go too and check out their wine selection. You'll find it hard not to keep coming back. For several reasons.

The relationship between price and quality-despite the 14 bridge toll-is one sure draw for Manhattanites. As is, more importantly, the surprising selection of wines on sale. Even experts are taken aback by the excellent, little-known labels from all over Italy that Jerry carries. Yet another reason is the chance to be led around by an amazing guide.

At Jerry's Gourmet Wines you'll be met by Michele, an expert sommelier from Conegliano Veneto, a small city of 40,000 inhabitants near Venice. Michele offers up his services as a serious "wine companion." We at i-Italy recently paid him a visit and this is what he had to say.

Veneto to Englewood
Michele attended the University of Enology in Udine. But he quickly realized he did not want to be the classic enologist. He wanted to travel abroad to talk to people about wine. In 2007, he settled in Englewood. Happily.

"When I first came to Jerry's, there was only a small, slightly haphazard space for wine mostly made up of famous and commercial labels," says Michele.

So he decided to re- brand the store, adding a touch of personality to the place, especially its wines. "I decided to concentrate on Italian wines. A lot of customers complained that the wines weren't divided by region, and didn't feature lesser-known labels. In fact, they mostly found bottles from companies already famous in the US, from Tuscany to Veneto to Piedmont." Michele knew he could improve the selection by branching out, even without ditching the more famous wines.

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A true Wine Revolution
One example of how the winemaking industry in Italy has changed is the story of Montepulciano d'Abruzzo.
"It was considered a good variety to be mixed with other varieties," says Michele.

"That's no longer the case. Now it's one of the most widely available wines in Italy, like Pinot Grigio. The same goes for Primitivo Pugliese. It used to be unknown. Now it's totally famous...But there are many quality Italian wines that are still unknown and deserve attention and should be distributed. I myself am shocked by how many I keep discovering."

We ask Michele to choose a region, and the young sommelier from the northeast of Italy humbly picks a region from the southwest. (Italy's north- south divide may just be a hoax promulgated by politicians and demagogues.)

"The region I've been most taken with recently is probably Campania. It's producing really interesting wines, redandwhite.Whites like Falanghina, Greco di Tufo, Fiano, and reds like Aglianico and Piedirosso-ever heard of them? They're finally gaining traction." "There's always something new to find in the Italian wine industry," adds Michele, with no small amount of pride. For Michele, wine not only represents the job he loves. It's also a constant adventure.

"There are 2,000 local varieties in Italy and about 500 are currently commercially viable," he says. "I'm always trying to keep up. I follow the best wine bloggers, especially, for example, the journalist Luciano Pignataro's blog [3] about Southern Italy." His research never ends as he tries to keep pace with the many new products coming out of Italy.

United Wines of Italy
Jerry's Homemade may be the only place in the US to carry certain wines. "A client recently asked me if we had Malvasia Puntinata," says Michele. "I said, of course we do!" Finding interesting new products for his clients has become a mission and a challenge for Michele. "Different kinds of grapes are what make Italy stand out as far as its wines go, and it makes me proud to sell them." You can hear a little of the historic "NJ vs. NYC" throw-down in the words of this young sommelier who immigrated only 10 years ago.

"Wine sellers in New York usually have to buy large shipments, which creates logistical and budgetary constraints and gives him less wiggle room. So they take fewer risks. Our selection, on the other hand, tends to make room for smaller enterprises. Just like in Italy. It can happen that some of our clients tasted a particular wine in Italy or at a restaurant in Manhattan that they can't find at retailers. So they come here. And they find it!

We have over 750 Italian wines right now. Obviously, that's not including our selection from around the world."

The romantic side of wine
I watch Michele interacting with new customers. First and foremost, he tries to understand his customers' needs, screening them to figure out which direction to point them in. Of course, he also likes to promote his home turf, and he's not ashamed to admit it. The clients ask him about organoleptic attributes and food pairings, and he answers them expertly. The phone rings; someone's on the line looking for some hard to find wines. Sure, he's got them! In a moment, he's back to his customers. "They're usually drawn to the history, the cultural context, even the romantic side of Italian wine. There's a lot of interest in those aspects.

When attaching a description to a wine, it's best to pique their curiosity. I've noticed the romantic side fascinates our customers-and Italians have a lot to say on that topic. So then: good folks of Manhattan, cross the bridge!" We could talk for days with Michele. But for now, we'll leave you with a few recommendations for the holidays: "off the beaten path" wines you'll find in the insert opposite.

Michele Recommends
A few holiday suggestions to avoid the usual juice

Northern Italy
Raboso Veneto is an excellent, little known wine made with the oldest red grape in Veneto and produced just outside Conegliano, Michele's hometown, an area better known for Prosecco.
Central Italy Rosso Piceno and Rosso Conero come from Le Marche and are made with Montepulciano d'Abruzzo grapes. It's interesting to note how the same grape produces different flavors depending on where it's grown. Montepulciano d'Abruzzo is medium-bodied and fruity, whereas in Le Marche it has a richer flavor, an earthy aroma and greater acidity.

Southern Italy
Puglia's Primitivo has finally garnered the world's attention. It got its name thanks to the premature grapes used to produce it. It has an elegant, very fruity bouquet. Another very interesting wine is Susumaniello from Salento: drier, more austere and less jammy.

Sicily
Important developments have recently taken place in this region as well. Just three years ago no one had heard of Etna Rosso! The wine is made with Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Caputo. It's similar to French Pinot Noir—medium-bodied, elegant and with wonderful minerality.

Sardinia
Reds dominate the region. Cannonau Sardo is still the most popular label in the US and has been championed for its health benefits as well, given its abundance of the antioxidant resveratrol. A brief

mention on a TV show was all it took for demand to suddenly spike. Two other, lesser known Sardinian wines are also worth noting: Cagnulari and Carignano del Sulcis.

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