



Malvasia (left) and Ribolla Gialla (right) from Quealy Wines on the Mornington Peninsula and Mencia (centre) from Oliver's Taranga in McLaren Vale

PUTTING DOWN ROOTS

Why a range of Italian grape varieties are flourishing in Australia's soils, and what the future holds for them

STORY TOM KLINE

How long is a piece of string?' quips Michael Dal Zotto of Dal Zotto Wines in Victoria's King Valley wine region (pictured on p63) – a pithy yet fitting response to a big question: What's the next big thing for Italian varieties in Australia? 'I have a personal preference for Pinot Bianco,' he adds, 'but Fiano and Montepulciano are definitely appealing to the consumers we show them to.'

These are just a few of the Italian varieties flourishing in Australian vineyards – and ultimately in Australian wine glasses. To many outside the country, however, this evolution might come as a surprise. The global perception of

Australian wine still often defaults to two extremes: inexpensive, fruity bulk wine and bold, premium Barossa Shiraz. And while these styles are undeniably significant within the context of Australian wine's journey, they simply don't reflect the full spectrum of the country's ever-evolving wine landscape. Today, Italian varieties flow through the veins of Australian wine, having found an eminently comfortable home while exemplifying the country's growing diversity and adaptability.

But this shift didn't happen overnight. Italian varieties have only gained serious traction in Australia over the last three ►



Corrina Wright (see p62), winemaker at Oliver's Taranga, helping out at harvest time

decades – following more than 170 years of dominance by French grapes. Over its rich vinous history, Australia has finely tuned iconic French varieties such as Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah (Shiraz) and Chardonnay, often rivalling the best from their Old World counterparts (much to the chagrin of the French). Yet, this historical focus on French grapes belies the significant cultural influence of Italian immigrants on Australian life.

La dolce vita

Italians were among Australia's earliest European immigrants, arriving in waves during the 1850s gold rush era and again after World War II as part of government programs such as the 'Populate or Perish' initiative. Having introduced the hedonistic notion of *la dolce vita* into the Australian psyche, their culinary contributions – from espresso and pasta to pizza and prosciutto – are now deeply embedded in Australian daily life to the point of ubiquity. Over the past 30 years, Italian grape varieties have joined this legacy, bringing a youthful, exploratory spirit to the Australian wine scene.

'So far, the rise of Italian varieties has added to the allure of wine,' says Kathleen Quealy of Quealy Wines, also in Victoria, and a pioneer of Pinot Grigio in Australia. 'The fun and accessibility of Prosecco, the understated style and pleasure of a premium Pinot Grigio, a fresh Fiano, the power and natural acidity of Sangiovese.' These wines offer consumers a break from the usual suspects, catering to a wider range of preferences.

Victoria's King Valley region is considered the home of Italian wine styles in Australia. Italian immigrants initially farmed tobacco and hops in the area, before declining demand and the introduction of government regulations restricting the cultivation and sale of tobacco in the 1970s and '80s forced them to pivot toward grape-growing. Inspired by the success of regional leader Brown Brothers, these producers began to plant Italian varieties, in the process reconnecting with their heritage. Now, pioneering families such as Dal Zotto, Pizzini, Politini, Sam Miranda and Cavedon have established the region as a hub for high-quality wines made with Italian grapes. One of its key offerings is Prosecco (a synonym for northern Italy's Glera grape, permitted as a grape name within Australia), with various brands

'THE RISE OF ITALIAN VARIETIES HAS ADDED TO THE ALLURE OF WINE'

Kathleen Quealy, Quealy Wines (right)

experiencing considerable success, in keeping with the enormous global growth of Italy's sparkling Prosecco category.

Home from home

Australia's varied climate replicates the similarly wide-ranging climate of Italy, thus accommodating any and all Italian varieties. Fiano and Aglianico, for example, thrive in warm, coastal regions reminiscent of their southern Italian origins. McLaren Vale in South Australia is a prime example, now with more than two decades of experience cultivating Italian varieties.

'I think it has, at the very least, brought us white varieties that fit our climate so much better,' says Corrina Wright of Oliver's Taranga in McLaren Vale (pictured, p61). 'Drought tolerant, high natural acidity, thick skins, disease tolerant, later ripening – especially Fiano. It has also widened our smorgasbord of red varieties – with Aglianico, Nero d'Avola and Montepulciano leading the way.'

In fact, according to a 2023 article published online by the McLaren Vale Grape Wine & Tourism Association, Fiano is McLaren Vale's third-most planted white grape variety. 'Not only do Fiano wines work climatically, holding their acid, but they suit our coastal foodie lifestyle so well,' continues Wright. 'Plus, stylistically they can go from super-tight sparkling wines all the way through to uber-textural expressions of deliciousness.'

And it's more widespread than that. Other South Australian regions, such as the Adelaide Hills, Riverland, Clare Valley and Barossa Valley, have all taken up a multitude of Italian varieties. Victoria's Heathcote region has had considerable success with Sangiovese, and Beechworth is making a name for its high-quality Nebbiolo wines. Make no mistake, however, this growth category is by no means limited to the iconic grapes. From Falanghina to Moscato Giallo, Refosco to Piediroso – Australia doesn't shy away



From left: Kim and Tennille Chalmers, Chalmers Wines

from the obscure, and the varieties now considered 'mainstream' were foreign fruits not so long ago.

Sowing the seeds

The Chalmers family has played a pivotal role in this transformation. Over the past 30 years, they have not only refined their own warm-climate viticulture and winemaking in the Heathcote and Murray Darling regions, but have also led the charge in importing Italian clones into Australia. Thanks to their efforts, varieties such as Fiano, Vermentino and Nero d'Avola have flourished, and for the right reasons.

'At Chalmers, we try to not be a part of trends, and steer away from them where possible,' says Tennille Chalmers (pictured, above), second generation and part-owner of the family business. 'We keep our focus on the grape-growing, then making wines



Michael Dal Zotto, Dal Zotto Wines (see p60)

and wine styles that scream of who we are, what we believe in, and wine that speaks of that variety, personality and the flavour from the place in which it's grown.'

A most admirable aspect of the Chalmers' ambition is their consideration of the greater good rather than it being a solely self-serving pursuit. 'We love seeing Italian varieties in Australia find their new homes where growers, winemakers and wine lovers embrace them because of their suitability to those newfound sites.'

The Chalmers family was also involved in founding one of Australia's most important wine shows, the Australian Alternative Varieties Wine Show, which is held each year in the city of Mildura. In 1999, Bruce Chalmers, well-known local chef Stefano de Pieri and viticulturist in the Chalmers' nursery Dr Rod Bonfiglioli initiated the Sangiovese Awards, which morphed into the Australian Italian Wine Show in 2000, before landing on its current name the following year. Along with providing important feedback to

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Tennille Chalmers

producers working with alternative varieties, the show has been critical in shining a light on alternative varieties as a category within Australian wine, with Italian varieties chief among them.

Mark Walpole of Beechworth-based Fighting Gully Road has been another huge proponent of Italian varieties in Australia. His work in developing Sangiovese has been critical to the grape's local rise, having imported various clones

far superior to those previously planted, ultimately resulting in much higher-quality expressions. Today, he makes benchmark examples but also excels with other alternative grapes. Recently, his 2023 Verdicchio (see p64) won a slew of awards at the North East Victorian Wine Challenge, including Wine of Show. 'It's interesting to consider "alternatives" from France,' says Walpole. 'Picquepoul, Grenache Blanc and the like are getting a bit of an airing at the moment – but I'm yet to see a wine with a "wow" factor. Italian varieties seem to be able to deliver that.'

As for the future, Quealy sees a bright one: 'The best of Italian varieties awaits Australia,' she says. 'The importation of the array of genetic material necessary to begin the time-consuming journey of matching variety to regions really only began 25 years ago.'

How long is a piece of string? Hard to say. But one thing is certain: Italian varieties have added a vibrant new one to Australian wine's bow. ▶

ITALY IN AUSTRALIA: KLINE'S PICK OF 10 LEADING THE WAY

① **Fighting Gully Road, Verdicchio, Beechworth, Victoria 2023 93**

fightinggullyroadwines.com.au

Delicate aromas of citrus blossom, sea spray, yellow apple and pastry dough, followed by almond, further lees notes of sourdough, and lemon pith. The palate balances piercing fruit and leesy richness, resulting in a mouthfeel that's both racy and textural. More of the dough and apple are followed by tense lemon juice and rind. Restrained power and texture, cut by energetic, tangy, saline acidity. A fresh, citrusy finish. **Drink 2025-2027 Alcohol 14%**

Oliver's Taranga, Fiano, McLaren Vale, South Australia 2024 92

£22 (2022) *Wanderlust Wine*

Locally known as 'The Queen of Fiano', Corrina Wright knows her way around the variety and it shows here. Gentle aromas of pineapple husk, pear, dehydrated lime, brine and cantaloupe. A lovely creamy texture and pithy structure, wrapped around yellow apple, lime, Nashi pear and a pleasant green-almond bitterness on the finish. **Drink 2025-2026 Alc 12.5%**

Pizzini Wines, Verduzzo, King Valley, Victoria 2024 92

£14.49-£17.75 (2023) *Carruthers & Kent, Fenwick, Great Wines Direct, NY Wines, The Fine Wine Co, The Great Wine Co*

Spiced pear and white peach lead the aromas, followed by woody spice, subtle toast, quince jelly, lemon thyme and a hint of green almond. The palate has an attractively bitter tone with preserved lemon, almond and fennel dancing around a core of pear and peach before a finish framed by juicy acidity. Loads of interest here. **Drink 2025-2026 Alc 14%**

Chalmers, Falanghina, Heathcote, Victoria 2023 91

chalmers.com.au

From the Falanghina Beneventano clone imported by Chalmers. Notes of yellow apple, Nashi pear, quince, lemon peel and apple blossom, with a glimmer of almond beneath. The palate follows suit in its apple and pear opening, with a gentle twitch of citrus rind tension and piercing acidity emerging through the fruit, drawing length and freshness. **Drink 2025-2026 Alc 13.2%**

② **Brash Higgins, ZBO Zibibbo, Riverland, South Australia 2022 92**

£24.69-£28.99 (2021) *All About Wine, Hic, Islington Wine, L'Art du Vin, Vinvm*

Produced in amphorae with 150 days of skin contact, resulting in its cloudy pale yellow colour with a copper hue. Manuka honey, Turkish delight, gingerbread and graphite quickly yield to ripe peach skin and apricot with an underpinning of saline twang. The palate is dry, salty and fulsome with ripe peach, ginger nectarine skin and camomile tea commanding the mouth before a sheath of bitter tea and lemon rind-laced phenolics shapes the finish. This isn't for the faint of heart, but is deliciously interesting. **Drink 2025-2027 Alc 13%**

Quealy, Moscato Giallo, Mornington Peninsula, Victoria 2022 92

quealy.com.au

Organically farmed, oxidatively handled, basket pressed, with extended lees time in oak. Medium-gold colour. Sweet and lifted aromas of Turkish delight, rosewater and yuzu citrus quickly descend into deeper notes of ground ginger and salted honey. The palate is dry and textural, with rosehip, ginger cake and yuzu quickly encased in a lick of chalky phenolics to a savoury finish. **Drink 2025-2026 Alc 12%**

③ **Luke Lambert, Nebbiolo, Yarra Valley, Victoria 2022 94**

£46.99 *Handford*

Benchmark Australian Nebbiolo. Dark cherry, raspberry and tangerine lead the aromas before an unfurling of red rose, gentle fennel seed, subtle dried cherry and, with air, a whisper of smoky tar. The palate is lithe and bright with dark cherry, orange peel, cherry pit minerality

and red rose gliding high through the mouth before a lick of powdery red apple skin tannins and a wash of cherry acidity draw to a finish of freshness and length. Finely spun, detailed and precise. **Drink 2025-2030 Alc 14%**

Traviarti, Black Springs Nebbiolo, Beechworth, Victoria 2023 94

traviarti.com

Fermented in concrete and raised in ceramic for around 12 months. Ripe dark cherry, dark florals and raspberry lead an inviting opening, with woodsmoke and earthy paperbark beneath. A swirl of the glass unlocks a saline savouriness along with tar and gentle star anise. The palate is packed with alluring ripe red florals, dark cherry, raspberry and ripe red apple before ribbons of stacked, powdery tannins constrict the mouth for a coiled, precise and floral finish. **Drink 2025-2032 Alc 13.8%**

Longview, Jupiter Barbera, Adelaide Hills, South Australia 2021 92

longviewvineyard.com.au

Oak-derived notes of vanilla bean and cedar meld with brooding dark plum, dried violet, ripe raspberry, black tea and liquorice in a heady and open-knit set of aromas. The aromatic profile really shines as the oak blows away, allowing the wine's alluring fruit to come to the fore. Plush, velvety and ripe with notes of plum, raspberry, dark florals and dark cherry framed within fine and integrated black tea tannins and freshening acidity. From two Piedmont clones, 84 and 424, with the fruit picked and vinified separately, and the wine matured in a new Austrian oak puncheon and three- and four-year-old French puncheons. **Drink 2025-2028 Alc 14.5%**

Pizzini Wines, Nonna Gisella Sangiovese, King Valley, Victoria 2023 91

£13.50-£16.65 *Carruthers & Kent, Fenwick, The Fine Wine Co, The Great Wine Co*

Dark cherry, nutmeg, smoke and blood plum lift from the glass in a soft and attractive aromatic opening. A swirl of the glass unlocks dried herbs and a touch of pressed red florals, adding prettiness. The palate is lifted and bright, with pops of dark cherry, red rose and plum sitting above nutmeg and dried oregano before firm, chalky tannins and cherry-drenched acidity frame a juicy, fresh finish. Overall, a soft and approachable Sangiovese ideal for pizza night. Half aged for six months in stainless steel, half in oak, only 10% new. **Drink 2025-2026 Alc 13.5%**



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