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HEAD SOUTH FOR THE SUMMER

Ah, Italy! Home of more wines than any normal person can imagine. Land where every other field grows grapes to make wine—well, it seems like that.

The sheer number of choices is confusing, as is the system for naming them: sometimes the wine is named after a place, sometimes after a grape variety; sometimes they just make something up. It's hard to keep track.

And here I am, about to make things a bit worse by telling you about a part of Italy you may not

have discovered before—the half that's south of Rome.

You know about the wines of Piedmont—Barolo, Barbaresco, Barbera. You know about the wines of Tuscany—Chianti, Brunello, Vino Nobile. These are the crown jewels of Italy's wine world. They're all in the northern half of the country.

But the most exciting new wines are coming from places such as Sicily, Apulia, and Campania—all regions that are south of Rome. The town names are strange, the grape names are new, and the producer names ... well, they should become part of your wine collection.

One important tasting note: because these grapes are grown in a very warm area, you will find ripe, even overripe flavors in just about all of them. Look for lush plums and prunes in the flavor profile, spice and a bit of wild herbs too. They're different from the flavors you'd expect from temperate vineyards, but very seductive once you taste one or two.

At a recent blind tasting of 12 top wines from the best producers down south, I found that they were uniformly impressive—my lowest score was a more-than-respectable 87 points. Some of my favorites:

Okay, this one's a cheat—it's a French grape, syrah, which has no place in Sicily. But it sure does taste good. It was my highest-scored wine of the evening and the group of tasters I was with concurred. The **2004 Planeta Syrah** from Sicily is \$45, but worth every penny: dark and rich, with a smoky, concentrated flavor of sweet fruit and a touch of wild, fresh herbs.

Also from Planeta comes an outstanding example of the traditional grape of Sicily: nero d'avola. I love this varietal for its distinctive earthy, spicy, plummy flavor profile—think Rhône wine with a touch of Port: **2004 Planeta Nero d'Avola "Santa Cecilia,"** \$45.

From Calabria comes the **2001 Ceraudo "Petraro,"** \$41, a complex, earthy wine that's unmistakably Italian but with a hint of Bordeaux dried herbs; with a bit of time in the glass, it opened to show bold flavors.

The **2002 Regaleali "Rosso del Conte,"** \$43, carries the family name on the label; look for Tasca d'Almerita in big print. Whatever the name, it's a style you'll love: very dark, with a hint of Port, lush, long and full.

Sardinia keeps producing ever-more-impressive wines; here's a delicious example: **2004 Argiolas "Korem,"** \$43. Initially the taste was of Bordeaux, but very dark and leafy. An intense wine, it seemed sweeter as it sat in the glass, with an increasingly lingering finish. The **2002 Argiolas "Turriga,"** \$73, may be even better, incredibly dark and sweet, with concentrated fruit and impressive length.

We tasted the top-end of southern Italian wines, and I would encourage you to try any one—or all—of them. But all of these producers—Planeta, Ceraudo, Regaleali and Argiolas—have at least one example in the \$10 to \$15 range that are well worth trying. (Look also for Morgante from Sicily and Di Majo Norante's "Don Luigi.") Their spicy, ripe fruit flavors harmonize beautifully with foods—Italian or good old-fashioned American, especially the grilled/barbecued fare we love in the summer. Explore!

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The red carpet we roll out
comes sizzling medium-rare.
- RUTH

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