

The curious case of Carmenère in Italy

Long believed to be lost to the phylloxera plague, Carmenère faded into obscurity in Italy, misidentified and largely forgotten – until now.



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Credit: Inama

- Exclusive
- Highlights

Like Sleeping Beauty, **Carmenère** has long slumbered in vineyards across pockets of Northern Italy. But, more recently, it has begun to stir. More than a restoration or viticultural correction, it's a story of the revival of a variety, finally finding a sense of belonging in Italian soil.

Just as Carmenère was mislabelled as Merlot before blossoming into Chile's flagship variety, Italy has its own tale to tell of this hard-to-identify variety.

How did this **Bordeaux** expatriate find a new home in Italy's vineyards, and why is it one of the country's best-kept secrets?

The fade

Carmenère originates from the Médoc, the result of a natural crossing between Cabernet Franc and the rustic southern French variety Mouri (Lacombe *et al.* 2013). Until this recent discovery, Gros Cabernet was considered to be a parent variety.

Mentioned as early as 1784, Carmenère was never widely planted, often mixed in with Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc – and blended with them as well.

Known for its deep colour and aromas of blackberries, black pepper, chocolate, and leather, it gained popularity at the beginning of the 18th century.

However, its fate in Bordeaux was sealed in the late 19th century, when phylloxera devastated much of Europe's vineyards. Susceptible to disease and slow to ripen, Carmenère was abandoned in favour of more reliable Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon.

Yet the grape didn't vanish entirely.

Against the odds, one of the places Carmenère found refuge was along the base of the Italian Alps – around the Colli Berici in Veneto, as well as in historic vineyards at the foot of the Lessini Mountains in Trentino, with smatterings across northeastern Italy, and even in small plots that share real estate with sparkling Franciacorta.

Carmenère's arrival in Italy

The timing is debated, but Attilio Scienza, scientific advisor for Vinitaly International Academy and Professor at the University of Milan, claims that the most convincing hypothesis is that Carmenère arrived in 1820 via Piedmont – 40 years before the arrival of phylloxera.

José Vouillamoz, leading authority on the origin and parentage of grape varieties through DNA profiling, agrees. In 1820, the Conte di Sambuy – anticipating the Super Tuscan trend by more than a century – was convinced that his terroir of Valmagra (northwest of Turin) was very similar to that of Médoc, and so he purchased Cabernet Sauvignon vines directly from Bordeaux.

‘However, a few vines of Carmenère were mistakenly present among the plantlets of Cabernet Sauvignon,’ explains Vouillamoz. This mix-up was just the beginning...

In the mid-19th century, under the House of Savoy, Piedmont looked to France for direction. Napoleon III's support in liberating northern Italian territories from Austrian control only deepened the bond, making France the model not just in politics and the economy, but in viticulture as well.

‘For this reason, they began to cultivate grape varieties from France, particularly from Bordeaux,’ says Scienza. ‘In Piedmont, Carmenère was called Carmenera or Cabernella, and was valued for making good wine.’

While Piedmont had the first vines, Carmenère became more prominent across the eastern regions. But was it the soils that saved Carmenère in Italy, or was its preservation merely a result of confusion over its true identity?

According to Vouillamoz, who, in his new book, *Grands Cépages d'Origine Française*, outlines Caménere's family tree and identifies Cabernet Franc as its parent, it was the latter.

'In France, Carmenère was confused for a long time with Cabernet Franc, and it was even considered by some as a degeneration of Cabernet Franc. When introduced in Italy, the mistake persisted, and Carmenère was propagated and labelled as Italian Cabernet Franc for over a century,' he explains.

Carmenère's survival in Italy was largely due to mistaken identity, yet the country's diverse terroirs provided a lifeline. Notable is Veneto's Colli Berici, where unique microclimates, soils, and long growing seasons offered the conditions it needed, allowing for full ripening and complexity.

The result is an Italian Carmenère that minimises the vegetal notes typical of cooler regions and instead showcases its hallmark flavours of dark cherry, spice, black pepper, and cocoa.

The awakening

Its true identity blurred by names like Carmenera, Cabernella, Bordeaux Nero, and Cabernet Vecchio, Carmenère often remained hidden and confused for other varieties.

In 1903, Salvatore Mondini, renowned for his scholarly contributions to viticulture, noted that Carmenère had white shoot tips, while Cabernet Franc's were pink, but it wasn't until the late 1970s that the Experimental Institute for Viticulture of Conegliano and the Catholic University of Piacenza formally distinguished the two.

Further research and DNA studies by Attilio Scienza, Antonio Calò, Jean-Michel Bourisquot and others led to a stunning revelation in the mid-1980s: the ‘Italian Cabernet Franc’ was indeed Carmenère.

And by 2007, Carmenère received official recognition in Italy’s national registry of grapes.

Trentino

A captivating story of this mix-up originates from the historic **Tenuta San Leonardo** estate in Trentino, which has been producing Bordeaux-style reds featuring Carmenère for generations.

‘Carmenère, as we know it today, has been growing on the estate since the 1940s, likely planted by my great-great-grandfather,’ says Anselmo Guerrieri Gonzaga. ‘It’s the soul of San Leonardo — authentic, rooted, and deeply connected to our land.’

However, until the late 1990s, they believed they had been cultivating Cabernet Franc.

In 1988, Anselmo’s father, Marchese Carlo Guerrieri Gonzaga, ordered vines from their French supplier and noticed differences, such as variations in leaf colour the following winter. A friendly tip during Scienza’s visit revealed they had been growing Carmenère all along.

San Leonardo had traditionally produced red blends, but Anselmo secretly created an all-Carmenère wine and gifted it to his father, claiming it was from France. After tasting it, Carlo remarked, ‘Hmmm, it’s very good, but it tastes like our Carmenère!?’

This year, Gonzaga began a massal selection on the estate’s 75-year-old Carmenère vines to capture the genetic character of their heritage vineyard.

‘It’s a long-term investment, but we believe it will bring something precious: more authenticity, more depth, and greater longevity to our vineyards,’ he notes.

Franciacorta



Ca' del Bosco's Carmenero vino da tavola in Franciacorta. Credit: Ca' del Bosco

In Franciacorta, sparkling wine producer Ca' del Bosco grows Carmenère alongside classic French varieties. In 1990, it imported what it believed were Cabernet Franc cuttings, but testing subsequently revealed they were actually Carmenère.

The winery released its first Carmenère in 1997 as a table wine, gaining Rosso del Sebino IGT status in 2008. The label, featuring a wolf shedding a lamb's fleece, symbolises the way it managed to pass for something it was not.

‘Carmenero’ comes from two organically-farmed hectares of 30-year-old vines, with special bottlings from standout vintages since 2006.

‘Our Carmenero stands out for its fruity character and light spiciness’, says winemaker Stefano Capelli, adding that Franciacorta’s morainic soils enhance the grape’s floral and fruity traits.

Colli Berici

In the Veneto, renowned Soave Classico producer Stefano Inama was motivated by his love for Bordeaux to plant a black variety. By happenstance, he discovered Carmenère.

He recalls an eye-opening moment after tasting an unlabelled Carmenère wine that his friend offered.

‘I immediately loved it!’ Inama says. ‘It turned out to be from the Colli Berici, and this is what I wanted to do.’

Inama and his family, who now own 14 hectares of 20- to 30-year-old vines, say that what started as a passion evolved into a mission. He believes Colli Berici is the variety’s spiritual home, lying close in latitude to Bordeaux.

The Colli Berici area enjoys warm days and fresh nights with microclimates influenced by nearby woodlands. These conditions allow grapes to reach ripeness, developing signature berry, spice, black pepper, and chocolate notes while minimising green herbaceous flavours.

Furthermore, Inama points to the distinctive geology shaped by underground magmatic pressure (**bradyseism**), which formed an ancient marine limestone ridge topped with cool, red, iron-rich clay. In 1997, his first Carmenère blend, ‘Bradisismo’, was named after this geological phenomenon.

In 2009, Carmenère was officially recognised as a grape in the Colli Berici DOC, with Inama’s ‘Oratorio di San Lorenzo Carmenère Riserva’ being the first DOC wine made from this grape – a milestone for Italian wine.

Inama also champions the relevance of traditional varieties in the Veneto, with Michele Milani leading the project alongside other producers. ‘Our goal is to create clarity about how varieties like Carmenère arrived in Italy, and today are being reinterpreted with quality and vision,’ says Milani.

Serendipità contro strategia

Carmenère is predominantly planted in the Veneto and neighbouring northeastern regions covering 10,503 hectares, as reported by Kym Anderson’s census (*University of Adelaide Press*).

It is occasionally discovered in field blends from ancient vineyards. In 2011, for instance, Vouillamoz performed DNA profiling on some of the oldest vines from Alois Lageder’s vineyards in Alto Adige that produce the ‘Löwengang’ bottling.

‘It turned out to be a field blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and some Merlot. It’s interesting to note that many of the oldest vines are Carmenère,’ says Vouillamoz.

Carmenère’s Italian story is less about strategy but more about serendipity.

The variety found a foothold tucked away among its Bordeaux kin in vineyards that didn’t even know it was there.

Yet those very mix-ups become part of a patchwork of wine culture, leaving Italy with its own chapter in the curious case of Carmenère.