

VIA SATELLITE
THURSDAY, AUGUST 3, 1989

THE NATION'S NEWSPAPER

USA
TODAY

NO. 1 IN THE USA...6.3 MILLION READERS EVERY DAY

USA TODAY • THURSDAY, AUGUST 3, 1989 • 7D

Raising a glass to Italy's innovative winemakers

Six of the best

Here are some of the most highly regarded Italian wines available. Prices may vary. The region from which the wine comes is listed in parentheses.

Red wines

- Antinori Solaja, 1985 (Tuscany) \$80-\$100
- Antinori Tignanello, 1985 (Tuscany), \$25
- Lungarotti San Giorgio, 1981 (Umbria), \$30

White wines

- Abbazia di Rosazzo Ronco Acacie, 1987 (Friuli), \$24
- Ca' del Bosco, Chardonnay, 1987 (Lombardy), \$38
- Angelo Gaja Chardonnay, 1986 (Piedmont), \$30

By John F. Mariani
Special for USA TODAY

Italian wines are overcoming their image problem. Long regarded as good buys only for robust reds and fruity whites, Italian wines have been suffering from a decades-old inferiority complex.

But through new technology and wine-making finesse, connoisseurs and consumers alike are now toasting Italy.

Once undistinguished chiantis, soaves and valpolicellas are currently being improved by bright, young winemakers who are also amazing collectors with stylish new wines. "The image of Italian wines took a leap forward in the 1980s as expressions of Italian culture," says Philip diBelardino, a wine portfolio manager. The new wines are winning praise usually reserved for finest bordeaux and burgundies. In the new Parker's Wine

Buyer's Guide (Fireside, \$16.95), the USA's most influential wine writer, Robert Parker Jr., rates several Italian wines the best in the world. And when The Wine Spectator rated the top 10 wines of '88, two Italian wines — Angelo Gaja's Barbaresco Sori Tildin 1985 and Castellare's I Sodi di

San Niccolo 1985 — came in at No. 6 and 7 respectively, outranking all USA contenders. Notable among them are Gaja's wines. Gaja, along with several other Italian winemakers such as Pier Antinori, Maurizio Zanella, Teresa Lungarotti and France Biondi-Santi, has given style and substance to Italian wines.

Before the mid-'70s, USA consumers showed little interest in Italian wines. "It was impossible to sell Italian wines back then," says Lucia Caputo, former Italian trade commissioner and now president of the Wine & Food Institute. But when Italians began updating machinery and methods, sales improved immediately. By the mid-1980s, Italian wines took up to 64 percent of the imported wine market. After a few years ago the Italian wine market nose-dived, vintners has sent the wine image soaring by breaking age-old, sacrosanct formulas in making new wines from grapes such as chardonnay. But the international praise is sometimes to the chagrin of those who believe Italian wines are beginning to lose their

unique regional character. "If you pull up the old varieties (of grapes) to plant cabernet or chardonnay, you lose the individuality," argues Darrell Corti of Corti Bros. wine store in Sacramento, Calif. Others disagree. "The Italians' willingness to adopt technology with centuries of tradition has resulted in a combination to be emulated," says Peter D. Meltzer, wine writer for Town & Country. Such intense interest, however newly acquired, has boosted the prices of Italian wines into the stratosphere.

"Most of the best Italian wines are from tiny estates," explains Parker. "When you have a great vintage like 1985 in a vineyard like Angelo Gaja's and a bottle of his Barbaresco costs \$30 or more, you're talking about a wine that competes with the best in the world — I don't think that's overpriced at all."