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What You Should Know About Italy's Cooperative Wines



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Food & Drink

The what, where, when of wine, with special attention paid to Italy.



The winery of Italian cooperative Cantina Tramin, which specializes in Gewurztraminer wines, in Alto Adige, Italy CANTINA TRAMIN

Every so often, the world needs a reminder: for a while now the wines of Italian cooperatives have been more than just a good bet on quality. As sum products of small growers, they're also reliable translators of place, tradition and culture, wines of *territorio* that include — for example Aldo Adige's cantine [Terlan](#) (143 growers, founded in 1893) and [Tramin](#) (290 members, founded 1889) — some of the highest expressions of Italy's lands. "A thriving relationship between production and territory," writes Stefano Micelli in *The Modern History of*

Italian Wine, about Italy's winemaking industry generally. For the co-ops, that mechanism serves, by definition, as basis.

Today Italy is home to 484 *cantine cooperative* — an older term is *cantine sociali* — with **140,700 winegrower members**. There is “a coexistence of different management models: in our country, cooperatives and privately held companies exist side by side,” writes Micelli. Recently there are several reminders of the first's success: “Co-ops represent a vital part of [Italy's] national wine industry and, happily for the wine lover, offer myriad wines of fantastic value and quality,” wrote Simon Reilly in *Decanter* **earlier this year**. This past autumn “the **Oscars of cooperative wine**,” recognized the top wines of 11 co-ops, including **Cantina di Carpi e Sorbara** (1,600 grower members in Emilia, the western side of the northern region Emilia-Romagna) for best rendition of identity and tradition for its take on the area's austere, pale red wine from the **Lambrusco Sorbara** grape variety.

A particularly important new force for Italy's cooperative wineries is **Vi.Vite**, an annual festival that was launched in 2017 to showcase these wines. It is held in Milan, two times so far, in November and sponsored by the **Agroalimentari** sector (from wine to fruit and vegetables to cheese, eggs, rabbits, beef) of the **Alleanza delle Cooperative Italiane**. The festival is headed by **Ruenza Santandrea**, head also of the alliance's viti/vini section and who is a longtime insider of Italy's *cantine cooperative*: **until 2017** she led Italy's 13th-largest one, the **Gruppo Cevico** (4,500 members, founded 1963) in Romagna, the eastern side of Emilia-Romagna. I spoke with her by phone about the festival, and the details — how Italy's cooperative wineries came to be and what part they play in the nation's wine scene — that lie behind it. Based on our conversation, here are five insights into Italy's cooperative wines.

The beginning

Italy's oldest cooperative wineries were founded more than a century ago, but this production-financial structure became far more common starting in the 1950s as a response to the devastation left by the Second World War and then to the exodus of farmers to industrializing cities. Today a *cantina cooperativa* is likely to be 60 to 70 years old. “Italy is a special case,” Santandrea says: almost 60% of the wines the country produces is made by co-ops — **52% at DOP level, 65% at IGP**. “And this is a bit strange compared with the rest of the world.” What is now a 4.5

billion euro sector was born from what seemed a disadvantage at the viticultural level: in Italy, the average size of plots of land planted to vineyards is less than 2 hectares per grower ([compare with](#) France's 11 hectares/grower, Australia's 25 per, the US's 27), making many winegrowers' ability to produce wine compatible — bottled, branded — with marketplaces' demands difficult, especially when it came to selling abroad.

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“It was born from poverty,” says Santandrea, “in the sense that cooperatives were born from winegrowers who banded together, and started without money; they weren’t backed by a family or wealth that allowed them to grow quickly, to create a brand, publicity. Above all they sold their wines in bulk, *sfusi*.” Working together both helped immediately and laid the ground for a future for these growers, giving them “an economic certainty, that before the co-ops didn’t exist.”

The spirit of cooperation kept going, that security growing via an entrepreneurial outlook that allowed winegrowing groups access to important resources like marketing and technology: smaller co-ops began to merge under umbrella organizations, a trend which took off in earnest ten years ago and which continues to this day, for greater quality throughout the sector — “because they could hire agronomists, enologists and structure themselves well.” Today co-ops create jobs for around 9,000 people. “Some of these companies that started out small have become the largest Italian wine producers,” Santandrea continues. Italy’s largest producer is [Cantine Riunite & Civ](#) [1,700 members] with more than [500 million euros](#) a year in revenues. It’s also the largest European wine producer. Italy’s second-largest producer, [Gruppo Caviro](#) [12,500 members] with more than 300 million, is a co-op, too. “If we look at the growth trend that has marked the sector consolidation process in recent years, we see that there is no single winning model. Cooperatives. . . . have shown over the years that they are able to keep up with private business models,” writes Micelli. Those mergers also gave growers a chance to create brands that speak to export markets, bringing what is perhaps Italy's most celebrated product to global audiences. Cooperative

wine as ambassador. And Santandrea reminds me of the most visible ones stateside: Mezzacorona (founded in 1904; 1,500 members) with Pinot Grigio, [GIV](#) (Gruppo Italiano Vini) offers [Bolla](#). [Cantina di Soave](#) (2,300 members, founded 1898), Rocca Sveva. [Gruppo Cevico](#) sends Lambrusco di Medici Ermete.

Strength in numbers

These cooperatives grew above all in the north and there, especially, they also grew in size, Santandrea says. "We have them in all of Italy, from Alto Adige to Sicilia [[Cantine Ermes](#) at [63 million euros](#)]." There's [Cavit](#) [4,500 members, founded 1950] in Trentino. [Tollo](#) [50 members, founded 1960] at [41 million euros](#) and [Citra](#) in Abruzzo, [San Marzano](#) [1,200 members, founded 1962 with 19] in Puglia. "The strongest, most structured ones tend to be in the north," Santandrea says. Relying on cooperation is a trait that's strong in agriculture in general, and Italy's ideas on cooperatives sprang from the agricultural sector, she points out — wine, fruit, grains, and then spread to other sectors, construction, supermarkets.

Important to remember, too, that in the mid-20th century, after the turn-of-the-century's emigration wave, a second round of depopulation hit the Italian countryside, as farmers left for jobs in the cities, especially the quickly industrializing north. Banding together was one of the few options available to those who stayed. "The history of Italian cooperative wine comes from the laborers, who would head to the market each day and hire themselves out," she explains. "They got together and built these cooperatives, and then started to rent land and began working for themselves. From there, they slowly grew, bought those rented sites, and began helping to build other co-ops."

Over the past five years, cooperatives' exports have grown by 44%, to Italy's general wine export growth of 27%: eight of the top performing 15 wineries in Italy are co-ops, eight of the top European co-ops are Italian, as reported by Italian newspaper [La Repubblica in November](#). The wineries provide each member with agronomic, economic, enologic support, helping with vineyard management and with vinifying and blending the many parcels of land. "The pieces of land are very small so to use them coherently, to produce well-made wines, you need to be highly organized," notes Santandrea. The members receive advances throughout the season, which they settle when they bring their grapes to the cooperatives at the end of the agricultural year, which begins on September 1 and ends on August 31. And where the coops work well, "especially the large,

structured ones," she says, they pay above market price, 15 to 20 percent higher. "So as a type of firm, the cooperative is a bit of a special case, one that starts out already knowing that part of its objective is that it has to pay more than other firms for its primary materials. It's a very ethical kind of company when it works well."

There are new cooperatives, but not a lot of them. These days "there's a lot more work done on merging the existing 484, which is a very high number," says Santandrea. "In fact we're trying to push, where it's possible, to merge together. In Italy we have a problem of parochialism where every little town has its own church, and each is better than the other. But instead it's important in this sector to merge and to have a structure that's compatible with investment because otherwise it's not possible to go forward." The merging goes on: as of November, five cooperatives in central Italy's Umbria are an [official unit](#), named UMBER.

Sustainability four ways

Throughout its winemaking history, Italy has tended to think grapes first, territorio second, a fact tempered by that it has been happening repeatedly at small scale and locally, so that grape varieties, viticultural habits, resulting wine styles are by default tied to a territory. "The network makes it possible to construct a sophisticated story, . . . capable of transmitting the values and specificity of smaller vintners," writes Micelli, again on Italy's winemaking ways, and an observation, again, that hyper-applies to its cooperatives' work. One of a co-op's greatest strengths is that it can offer winegrowers guaranteed participation in the industry. "I always say that the cooperative is small when it needs to be and large when it needs to be. In the sense that the member has only 2 hectares, 5 hectares, of vines, but it's clear that he's very close to his property in a certain way," explains Santandrea. "And working together with other local growers and bottling together, he's now in the position of reaching the international market with his wines."

With that land-and-growers image in mind, "this year we based Vi.Vite on the idea of sustainability," she says. "Normally the conversation is about environmental concerns, But sustainability isn't just this. For what we're doing at the global level, it includes more aspects. There's economic sustainability, there's social, ethical sustainability." These four themes were the basis for as many [talks at the festival](#), titles loosely translated as: The conscience of wine; Planet earth

calling wine. The economic sustainability of wine: between romanticism and realism; Cooperative wine: quite good.

"If we speak of ethics and culture in the agricultural world, a cooperative shows other possibilities, too," says Santandrea. While most co-ops are based on having vineyards, there are those that produce wine for other reasons. "We have [Libera Terra](#), that works lands taken from organized crime figures [it grows everything from olives to wheat and honey; for its wine, look for the [Centopassi label](#)]. And [San Patrignano](#), which is a community of recovery for 2,000 [young people who are addicts](#), and that teaches them to work in the vineyard and make quality wines, which have received the tre bicchieri rating from Gambero Rosso." Also under culture: "Reaching this size, hiring specialized technicians in the vineyard as well as in the winery, which are state of the art, modern, gives that community an opportunity for an important cultural growth." From the economic point of view, "the possibility to have a payment above the market price may not seem like much, but often market prices aren't compatible with the winegrower living normally," says Santandrea.

And then there's the social, maybe even historical, aspect, because in the territories where the co-ops exist, "the land is safeguarded, isn't abandoned, above all in the hundreds of small, remote, hillside towns throughout Italy," she says. "Where there aren't co-ops, in Italy, the vineyards disappear, so there's a value in maintaining in small cities, and especially in the hills, this diffused viticulture, these hills dotted with vineyards." Italy's agriculture wouldn't be what it is are without cooperatives. "So this is our sustainability."

Defenders of native wine grapes

"Look, even in this subject it's a special case," says Santandrea. Italy famously counts more than 500 registered native grapevines, with hundreds more somewhere in the [recuperation process](#) from identification efforts to still being searched for. "Cooperation in this case has been very important, not because of competence, initially." Ten, 20 years ago, many winegrowers turned to planting international grape varieties. "But, understand that a grower with 2 hectares is used to planting a certain type of vine and they give him good quality and a security in regards to the health of the plant and so on, and so he kept on planting as he always had," explains Santandrea. "And so initially it happened that the viticulture of the cooperatives remained that of the autochthonous vines.

But wasn't a virtue, I want to be very honest. After, the cantine took it upon themselves to tell the growers to keep working with their native vines, because they were convinced that this biodiversity in Italy was disappearing in the vineyard." Local varieties and viticultural habits were "preserved like this because there were traditions and then was awareness in the cooperatives who officially decided to go forward working with native vines."

It's a position that now in 2018 has clearly placed Italy among the world's most exciting, ongoingly, sources of wines. "Defending the autochthonous vine does not mean international closure, but rather international extroversion, dialogue with other cultures, the quest for legitimacy and comparison with other territories," writes Micelli.

The future

"We've started Vi.Vite because in Italy cooperative wine isn't known for what it is; for its quality, for its history, for its stories," says Santandrea. "We understood that the Italian cooperatives weren't being thought of in the right way. And so we started bringing wines to the public." They chose Milan, "because there's a wonderful young and curious audience there. We thought that since our wineries participate in numerous wine festivals all over the world, it would be nice if they participated as a visibly united force." The festival gives curious consumers a chance to approach the wines this way, a genre with a specific history, working method and relationship with its lands.

"Italy, agriculturally, was once politically divided," Santandrea explains. But things have changed and the focus now has shifted to what it means to be a cooperative winery. Through Vi.Vite ("the theater of the cooperative," Santandrea succinctly, intriguingly frames the festival) these wineries come to form a new group, centered on what cooperative wines look, taste, like throughout Italy. "We could begin to tell our story. There was this idea that cooperative wines were antiquated, not good, so there was a need to make understood that the quality of these wines was at least equal to the quality of private producers. Today cooperative wines win Gambero Rosso praise, but that's not yet acknowledged by the market. It's still a part of the market that's misunderstood. It also offers a high median quality," she says. Built in support of a place and its people, many, many hit the mark. Those are the ones modeled on inclusiveness, guided by a mission to involve the many people of an entire territory, while never losing sight

that each member, each tiny hectare, contributes a unique piece of that special taste of place. "The discovery of local specificity," writes Micelli of Italy's wine industry today, "the enhancement of [which] has always been accompanied by an experimentation and innovation that have maintained strong roots in the culture of belonging." It would be a major oversight to not consider, *drink*, its cooperative wines as well.

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