

WHAT MATTERS TO MEN  
**BEST LIFE**

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 —Joe Bastianich,  
 co-owner of Italian Wine Merchants

**Message in a Bottle**  
**Manhattan’s most famous wine buyer explains where to find the best deals in Italian wine**

Mario Batali and I opened our first restaurant—New York City’s Babbo Ristorante Enoteca—in 1998. Months later, the prestigious James Beard Foundation awarded us Best New Restaurant in America. A decade later, there’s still a month-long waiting list for a table. We went on to open Lupa, a Roman-themed osteria, and Esca, where we introduced Americans to crudo—the raw seafood eaten along Italy’s southern coast. The list goes on. We’ve opened a pizzeria; two Spanish restaurants; Del Posto, a Michelin-starred Italian restaurant; and Italian Wine Merchants, the first wine store in New York City to focus on one nation’s wine. That’s where I come in. I create the wine lists for our empire of eateries. Part of that duty is making sure our menus include affordable bottles, because these days, it’s common knowledge that you don’t have to spend a lot to find great wine. Even with the euro’s strength, some of the best bargains come from Italy.

The real values are found in the lesser-known indigenous varietals. These wines haven’t garnered international attention; they’ve always

been local and simple. These are ancient grapes, and the last 20 years of technological advances in modern winemaking has revolutionized them. Italy has finally arrived as a worldwide producer: Two years ago, Italy surpassed France as America’s number one supplier of wine. This international recognition is in part due to more Italian winemakers studying in places like California and France, and the influence of New World vinification styles on these old-world wines. But it’s also due to a growing appreciation for regional flavors and indigenous varietals that are heavily informed by the soil and climate that nurtured them. These wines have a strong local sensibility; the vintners don’t use anonymous grapes. These are wines with Italian names like Abdavlo, Primitivo, and Poulieze. Here are a few of my favorite bottles that give you a sense of place—a taste of terroir—and will save you a few bucks. AS TOLD TO TYLER GRAHAM

Joe Bastianich, 39, co-owns 11 restaurants with Mario Batali.

**REDS**

**Region:** Langhe **Wine:** Nebbiolo **Bottle:** Produttori di Barbaresco Nebbiolo di Langhe 2005  
 “The Langhe region produces some of Italy’s most noteworthy vines, including the grapes used in Barolo and Barbaresco. This Produttori smells of rose petals, cedar, and tobacco, and it is loaded with tannins, so it’s firmly acidic. Its great structure and length give it the perfect balance of finesse and brawn.” \$14

**Region:** Sicily **Wine:** Nero d’Avola **Bottle:** Morgante  
 “Leading the indigenous varietals on the rise, this Sicilian native’s fruity accessibility never betrays its complex terroir. There’s stewed fruit on the nose, ripe blackberries on the palate, and a long finish smoothed by fine, soft tannins. Both experts and new connoisseurs can enjoy and appreciate this wine.” \$16

**Region:** Puglia **Wine:** Primitivo **Bottle:** Torricoda Tormaresca (pictured)  
 “The best place for value in Italian reds is the south. Negroamaros and Primitivos are the varietals grown here, because they can stand the heat and give up the goods. Sun baked and extracted, these are rustic wines. This Torricoda will complement full-flavored foods and give the luscious palate coating fruit people look for in southern reds.” \$22



**WHITES**

**Region:** Piedmont **Wine:** Arneis **Bottle:** Vietti  
 “Arneis stands tall in the deep forest of Piedmontese reds. This indigenous wine can be a racy, mineral-driven light white or ripe with sweet green apples and tones of honey. Arneis can be a perfect match for regional soft cheeses like robbiola or with light seafood dishes such as crudo.” \$17

**Region:** Tuscany **Wine:** Vermentino **Bottle:** Costa di Giulia Michele Satta 2004  
 “Whites from Tuscany seldom achieve greatness, but this one from the coast, made from Vermentino and Sauvignon Blanc, shows us what this region can taste like. Complex and medium-bodied in structure, it really sings when paired with local seafood. It has great palate persistence and a long finish.” \$15

**Region:** Friuli **Wine:** Tocai Friulano **Bottle:** Bastianich (pictured)  
 “Although I make this wine, I can confidently say that it’s probably Italy’s greatest indigenous white varietal. Vinified simply, Tocai shows notes of ripe apricots and bitter almonds; a later harvest and more bottle time reveals white flowers, clover honey, and stewed stone fruits. Aged in your cellar, Tocai will evolve in complexity and structure, and pairs well with roasted pork or chicken and ripe cheeses.” \$16

