



# Unoaked Italian reds

Fresh, fruity reds are ideal for spring drinking, and Italy's breadth of native grape varieties and regional knowhow makes it an exciting source for this approachable style

REPORT MICHELLE CHERUTTI-KOWAL MW

Wooden barrels have been used in the wine industry since Roman times, with producers commonly making use of local woods such as acacia, pine or chestnut. Over time, oak became the preferred material due to its tight grain and abundance across Europe. As winemakers recognised its positive influence on tannins and flavours, oak gained dominance in today's wine industry.

Ripe black fruit flavours mixed with smoky (oak-derived) vanilla equals enjoyable drinking experiences for most consumers. In the production of reds, winemakers use oak barrels or chips to add flavour and complexity, and to help soften tannins, which begs the question: don't all red wines have oak?

There are more unoaked red wines made than we might initially realise; often they're simpler, fruitier wines intended to be drunk young – Beaujolais and young Rioja being notable examples. Yet no other country has more of an association with unoaked red wines than Italy.

The decision to not use oak is based on the desire to preserve the pure expression of a grape

variety, to highlight regional terroir, or to create a fresher, more fruit-driven style. Vessels such as stainless steel, concrete vats and clay amphorae allow for minimal intervention, letting inherent flavours shine – 'wines without lipstick' is how Jason Millar described these wines; completely exposed, without any beautification.

For this tasting, 17 of Italy's 20 regions were represented. Piedmont, Tuscany and Sicily topped the list in terms of entries. Sangiovese was the most popular variety, followed by Barbera – understandable, given that they're two of Italy's most planted varieties.

The main discussion among the judges was whether an unoaked wine could be more than simple and fruity. Could it be complex and have the 'wow factor'? The top achievers were simple but also concentrated and delicious expressions – 'wines that bring an element of joy to the drinker', according to Stefan Neumann MS.

Ultimately, our question was answered. Without oak, these wines were capable of expressing purity and a true sense of place. And they certainly had that wow factor!

## THE SCORES 77 wines tasted

Exceptional 0 Outstanding 5 Highly recommended 22 Recommended 45 Commended 5

Entry criteria: producers and UK agents were invited to submit red wines of any vintage from anywhere in Italy, made from grape varieties indigenous to the region of production, either 100% varietal or in a blend containing a minimum 85% of indigenous varieties; no vinification or ageing in oak of any type was permitted

## WHAT TO EAT *by Fiona Beckett*

So varied are these wines in terms of region and grape variety that it's difficult to make a generalisation about wine matching, other than to focus on what kind of food unoaked Italian wines might successfully pair with in comparison with oaked wines. By and large they're younger, lower in alcohol and less expensive than their oaked counterparts – more for everyday or at least relaxed weekend drinking than fine dining. In regions such as Tuscany, where red wine is predominantly an unoaked wine, it often takes the place of a white – the go-to with a homely chickpea and rosemary soup, for example, or a simple plate of pasta before moving on to a more serious wine with the meat. Pizza is another obvious option, which isn't to diminish these wines – it's an underrated foil for a simple, well-made red. With their typically pronounced acidity, unoaked reds are a natural match for salumi and, perhaps less obviously, for fish. There's no reason why you can't drink a light Sicilian red such as Frappato with pasta con le sarde (with sardines), for instance, or a Bardolino with some garlicky grilled prawns.



## THE JUDGES



**MICHELLE CHERUTTI-KOWAL MW**

is a widely published wine writer, consultant and WSET educator. She is the current chair of the study program for the Institute of Masters of Wine, and is the DWWA Regional Chair for Tuscany



**JASON MILLAR**

is a writer, consultant, judge and communicator with a focus on Italy. He has a background in buying, importing and sales, and is the newly appointed DWWA Regional Chair for Southern Italy



**STEFAN NEUMANN MS**

runs his own wine consultancy, having spent many years working in the world of Michelin-starred restaurants. He also works as wine and portfolio consultant for UK distributor John E Fells, and is a DWWA Regional Chair across different categories

# Outstanding 95-97pts



## Gian Luca Colombo, Verduno Pelaverga, Piedmont 2024

**Michelle Cherutti-Kowal MW** 96

**Jason Millar** 95

**Stefan Neumann MS** 95

£36 **Swig**

Winemaker and consultant Gian Luca Colombo is known for his elegantly styled wines made with a 'hands off' approach. He makes a small amount of wine under his own name, and it's extremely sought-after. At 25ha, Verduno DOC is the smallest wine area in Piedmont, representing native variety Pelaverga. This wine is made from 100% Pelaverga and undergoes fermentation and maturation for a few months

in terracotta containers. Neither filtered nor fined before bottling.

**Michelle Cherutti-Kowal MW** Profound aromatics, with tart red fruit, spice and anise. Same on the palate. Crisp acidity supported by smooth tannins.

**Jason Millar** Great energy and vibrancy, tense without being lean, linear without being simple. A wine that seems to give you energy. Joy in a glass.

**Stefan Neumann MS** Lively, fresh. Fun but serious. Cherry and cranberry, elements of great Pinot Noir and Sangiovese. Just lovely. **Drink** 2026-2030

**Alcohol** 13.5%



Gian Luca Colombo



## Les Crêtes, Mon Rouge, Valle d'Aosta 2023

**MC** 95 **JM** 94 **SN** 95

£19.50 **WoodWinters**

Les Crêtes was founded in 1989, owned and operated by the Charrère family, who established themselves in Valle d'Aosta at the beginning of the 19th century. Now in the hands of the sixth generation, the property focuses on preserving local varieties that represent the valley's essence. They have 24ha of vines in all, across many sites in the valley, grown at 600m-1,000m. Mon Rouge 2023 is a blend of local varieties Cornalin, Fumin, Vuillermin, Gamay and Petit Rouge, aged

for a short period in stainless steel before bottling.

**MC** Good aromatic intensity of raspberry and cranberry, with a savoury edge. Vibrant acidity, tannins rounded and smooth, in balance with the light body. Lingering finish. Delightful.

**JM** Bright, almost grapey nose. Sweet, delicate red berry fruit and light tannins. Chilled on a hot day this would be a perfect wine bar wine, served with a plate of charcuterie.

**SN** Light and fragrant, showing good, clean red fruits with a nice lively finish. Serve lightly chilled.

**Drink** 2026-2030 **Alc** 14%



## Mandarossa, Nero d'Avola, Menfi, Sicily 2024 **£**

**MC** 95 **JM** 96 **SN** 95

£14.75-£16 **Broadway Cellars,**

**Carruthers & Kent, Dovecote Cellar,**

**Liberty Wines, Lockett Bros,**

**NY Wines, Sarah's Cellar, Valvona**

**& Crolla, Vin Neuf**

Mandarossa was the result of a 20-year study by Cantina Settesoli, mapping Sicily's terroir and grape varieties. Its goal is to emphasise the distinct aromas and flavours of both native and international varieties grown in Menfi, Etna and on the island of Pantelleria. This organic wine is made from 100% Nero d'Avola grown at elevations up to 400m and influenced by sea breezes;

it's fermented and aged for up to five months in stainless steel.

**MC** Aromatic wine with notes of aniseed, black fruit and a hint of pepper. Richness on the palate, ripe rounded tannins balanced by acidity. Good length.

**JM** Rosemary, blackberry and dark cherry, then a primary palate with blueberry and black cherry, some liquorice and bay leaf. Fruit purity and well-judged aromatics and extraction.

**SN** Good dark fruit spectrum, juicy mid-palate with some weight and power. Refined and layered. Great potential here.

**Drink** 2026-2030 **Alc** 13.5% ▶



## Santa Tresa, Rina Russa Frappato, Vittoria, Sicily 2024 **£**

**MC 95 JM 95 SN 95**  
**£10.50-£11.99** Booths,  
**ND John, The Wine Society**  
 In the commune of Vittoria, southeast Sicily, the 50ha Santa Tresa estate includes 39ha planted with vines. The Santa Tresa contrada has been known since 1697 – the Girelli family from Trentino, northwest Italy, realised its potential in the early 1990s and began reviving the winery from 2001. Rina Russa means ‘red sand’ in the local dialect, reflecting Vittoria’s trademark soils. Organics and sustainability are at the forefront of the winery’s philosophy, with minimal intervention practised wherever possible. Fermented in stainless

steel and aged for six months before bottling.  
**MC** Wild strawberry and red cherry on nose and palate. Tart acidity and ripe tannins balanced with the smooth body. Good, lingering finish.  
**JM** Lovely perfumed nose with cherry, raspberry and talcy florals. Fresh and juicy with just a hint of Turkish delight, yet a bone-dry, refreshing finish. This is utterly drinkable and a complete bargain.  
**SN** Fresh and vibrant style with some delicate strawberry and cherry notes, hints of rose and a touch of spice. Delicate and refreshing. **Drink** 2026-2030 **Alc** 13%



## Tenuta Olim Bauda, La Villa Barbera d'Asti, Piedmont 2024 **£**

**MC 96 JM 94 SN 95**  
**£17.69-£20** All Greens  
**Abbeville Road, Carruthers & Kent, DBM Wines, Hay Wines, Johns Wines, KWM, Lauriston Grocers, Talking Wines**  
 Tenuta Olim Bauda was established in 1961 by Agostino Bertolino, who purchased the historic mansion in the heart of Monferrato. The name Bauda refers to the family that originally owned the property, dating back to 1220. Now in the hands of Agostino’s children Dino, Diana and Gianni, the estate comprises about 100ha in all, of which one third is planted with vines; all production is certified organic. La Villa is made of 100%

Barbera grown on mainly sandy clay marl soils, the wine fermented and aged in stainless steel tanks.  
**MC** Lovely aromas of red cherry and green tea leaf. Dense fruit concentration, tannins balanced with the acidity and body. A great glass of wine.  
**JM** Juicy, tangy and fresh, with red fruits, hints of tomato and a sour lick that’s varietally honest. Nice acids and good crunch. Digestible. Great Asti style, nice to see it do well.  
**SN** Good, soft style with some firm dark fruit grip on the mid-palate, balanced by dark plum, a hint of smoke and earth, along with a touch of spice. **Drink** 2026-2030 **Alc** 14%

# Highly recommended 90-94pts



## Donnafugata, Bell'Assai Frappato, Vittoria, Sicily 2023

**MC 92 JM 90 SN 90**  
**£32.99** Liberty Wines, The Wine Reserve  
 Strawberry and dried mushroom aromas lead into ripe cherry, plum and membrillo richness; darker blackberry depth follows. Crisp acidity keeps it lively, tannins smooth and supportive. Savoury and long. **Drink** 2026-2030 **Alc** 12.5%



## La Collina dei Cilegi, Camponi Corvina Veronese, Veneto 2023 **£**

**MC 92 JM 90 SN 91**  
**£16.25-£18.25** Drinks Direct, Hallgarten  
**Wines, Strictly Wine, The Fine Wine Co**  
 Dried herb and red berry perfume meet dark cherry, blackberry, violet and liquorice. Concentrated with a peppery lift. Firm tannins frame the fruit, bright acidity and persistent finish. **Drink** 2026-2030 **Alc** 13%



## A Mano, Primitivo di Puglia 2023

**MC 91 JM 91 SN 89**  
**£15.99** Bottle Apostle, Carruthers & Kent, Hic, Latitude Wine, Liberty Wines, Noble Green, The Vineking  
 Jammy black fruit, aniseed and balsamic spice backed by dark chocolate and smoky savour. Mouthfilling yet energetic, robust tannins give shape, finishing long on herbs and tar. **Drink** 2026-2030 **Alc** 13%

# 'No other country has more of an association with unoaked red wines than Italy'

Michelle Cherutti-Kowal MW



**Allegrini, Valpolicella, Veneto 2024**  
**MC 88 JM 92 SN 90**  
**£17.50-£18.99 Carruthers & Kent, Frazier Jones, Hay Wines, Liberty Wines, NY Wines, The Wine Reserve, Toke's, Vin Neuf**  
 White pepper, red cherry and fresh tomato set a lively, traditional tone. Juicy berry fruit, light body. Chalky tannins add grip. Bright and moreish. **Drink** 2026-2030 **Alc** 12.5%



**Avignonesi, Da-Di Rosso, Montepulciano/Cortona, Tuscany 2023**  
**MC 90 JM 90 SN 89**  
**£24-£25 Liberty Wines, NY Wines**  
 Scented dried herb and tart cherry aromas turn gently candied. Bright acidity gives lift, tannins are fine and supportive, leading to a clean, savoury finish that has vibrancy. **Drink** 2026-2028 **Alc** 14%



**Bindi Sergardi, Al Canapo Chianti Colli Senesi, Tuscany 2023**  
**MC 90 JM 88 SN 91**  
**£17 Vinatist**  
 Ripe red plum, cranberry and dried rosemary lead into blackberry and dark cherry. Fresh acidity keeps it vibrant, chalky tannins add grip. Rustic, savoury yet neatly defined finish **Drink** 2026-2030 **Alc** 13%



**Cascina Lantarotti, Arbuté Langhe Nebbiolo, Piedmont 2023**  
**MC 92 JM 89 SN 89**  
**£21.95 The Modest Merchant**  
 Dried red cherry and cranberry mingle with truffle, fig and membrillo. Bright strawberry and rose petal notes add charm, Supple, polished tannins and a lively, lingering finish. **Drink** 2026-2028 **Alc** 13.5%

'The top scorers are wines that bring an element of joy to the drinker'

Stefan Neumann MS



**Castello Tricerchi, IuLi'o Sangiovese, Montalcino, Tuscany 2024**  
**MC 91 JM 89 SN 90**  
**£19.25-£19.75 Cornelius Beer and Wine, Once Upon a Vine, Valhalla's Goat**  
 Red cherry, sage, cured meat, fresh tomato. Tightly wound concentration, lively acidity and fine tannins, finishing on herbs and savoury spice. **Drink** 2026-2028 **Alc** 13%



**Cos, Frappato, Sicily 2024**  
**MC 87 JM 94 SN 90**  
**£24-£27 Bottle Apostle, Buon Vino, EW Wines, Hare & Moon Provisions, Les Caves de Pyrene, Sip, The Vineking**  
 Cherry compote, basil and sage meet thyme, pepper and star anise. Bright, dark fruit and earthy smoke follow; grainy tannins add structure, and the finish is rustic, meaty and joyful. **Drink** 2026-2028 **Alc** 11.5%



**Domenico Clerico, Capisme-E Langhe Nebbiolo, Monforte d'Alba, Piedmont 2024**  
**MC 88 JM 92 SN 90**  
**£38.99 Dovecote Cellar, Liberty Wines, The Solent Cellar**  
 Fragrant aromas show rose, dried rosemary and sage over red cherry and strawberry. Juicy and delicate with sandy tannins, and a fresh, persistent finish. **Drink** 2026-2028 **Alc** 13.5%



**Feudo Antico, Tribùm Montepulciano d'Abruzzo, Abruzzo 2023** £  
**MC 90 JM 89 SN 90**  
**£15.45 Amp's, Panzer's, Park Shop Banchory, Talking Wines, The Beer Cave, The Solent Cellar, Totnes Wine Co**  
 Dried cherry, cranberry and savoury mushroom bring depth to ripe plum, red cherry and blackberry. Juicy, vibrant. Crisp acidity. **Drink** 2026-2030 **Alc** 13.5%



**Guerrieri Rizzardi, Delara Montebaldo Bardolino, Veneto 2023**  
**MC 91 JM 88 SN 90**  
**£19.95-£21.50 (2022) New Generation Wines, Roberts & Speight, Secret Bottle Shop, Wadebridge Wines, Wines with Attitude**  
 Plum jam, spice, earthy savour, cherry, violet and liquorice. Fruit pastille. Lively core, bright acidity. **Drink** 2026-2028 **Alc** 13.5%



**Il Molinaccio, Il Golo Rosso di Montepulciano, Tuscany 2024**  
**MC 90 JM 88 SN 91**  
**US\$41 Solano Cellars**  
 Vibrant red berry and dried rosemary flow into juicy intensity, touched by smoky earth. Fresh acidity keeps it energetic, tannins youthful but smooth. Finishes long, floral and bright. **Drink** 2026-2028 **Alc** 13%



**Isola Augusta, Schioppettino, Trevenezie, Friuli 2022**  
**MC 90 JM 89 SN 90**  
**£19.45 The Modest Merchant**  
 Ripe red plum and cherry meet dried herb and gentle earth, then glide into dark cherry and blackberry. Lithe and energetic, tannins soft yet present, finish long and composed. **Drink** 2026-2030 **Alc** 12% ▶

†Ex-UK stockist, see note p119



Librandi's Tenuta Rosaneti estate



Librandi, Segno Librandi Cirò Rosso Classico, Calabria 2023 **£**

**MC 88 JM 91 SN 90**  
**£13.50-£15.15 Carruthers & Kent, L'Art du Vin, Vinvm**

Ripe red fruit, dried herb and tomato paste lead into crunchy cherry and dried strawberry. Tangy acidity energises the palate, firm tannins giving a papery grip. Savoury and long. **Drink** 2026-2030 **Alc** 13.5%



Maccario Dringenberg, Posau Rossese di Dolceacqua, Liguria 2023

**MC 87 JM 90 SN 92**  
**£45 Swig**

Plum and dried rosemary meet leather, bay leaf and savoury spice, brightened by red flowers. Lively acidity drives the palate with fine tannins. The finish is bright and moreish. **Drink** 2026-2028 **Alc** 13%



Petrolo, Boggina A, Val d'Arno di Sopra, Tuscany 2022

**MC 91 JM 90 SN 89**  
**£59.59 Armit, House of Decant**

Tart red berry and a lift of sage, then ripe cherry depth and dusty liquorice. Chewy texture feels confident, with firm tannins shaping the mouth. Acidity fresh, finish earthy and persistent. **Drink** 2026-2030 **Alc** 13.5%



Produttori di Manduria, Acid Crab Negroamaro, Puglia 2023

**MC 89 JM 90 SN 91**  
**£15-£17 Widely available at independent merchants via UK agent Alliance Wine**

Ripe blackberry and black cherry feel classic, hinting at sweetness and a velvety texture. Gentle acidity. Supple, long, fleshy and dark-plummed. **Drink** 2026-2028 **Alc** 13%

'The top achievers were simple but also concentrated and delicious expressions'

**Michelle Cherutti-Kowal MW**



Sordo Giovanni, Verduno Pelaverga, Langhe, Piedmont 2023

**MC 89 JM 89 SN 92**  
**£26 WoodWinters**

Fresh red berry and dried herb aromas lead into juicy strawberry charm, touched by rose and spice. Tangy acidity keeps it brisk, gentle tannins. Lively and effortlessly drinkable. **Drink** 2026-2028 **Alc** 13.5%



Tenuta Buon Tempo, La Furba Sangiovese, Montalcino, Tuscany 2022

**MC 950 JM 86 SN 90**  
**£45 WoodWinters**

Ripe plum and cherry mingle with dried herb, mushroom and cured meat savour. A candied red fruit lift adds charm to firm tannins and driving, bright acidity. Long and characterful. **Drink** 2026-2028 **Alc** 13.5%



Tenuta il Finale, Dolcetto Delicata, Monferrato, Piedmont 2024

**MC 90 JM 90 SN 90**  
**£19.60 Winederful**

Fresh cherry and plum sparkle with black pepper, backed by Dolcetto blueberry, blackberry and violet. Grainy tannins frame the fruit, cut by bright acidity, finishing with a breezy lightness. **Drink** 2026-2028 **Alc** 12%



The Wine People, Rupe Secca Nero d'Avola, Sicily 2024 **£**

**MC 92 JM 87 SN 90**  
**£10.75-£12 DBM Wines, Great Grog, Gusto Wines, Haynes Hanson & Clark, House of Townend**

Black plum, blackberry and fennel. Juicy fruit feels vibrant and pure, fresh acidity keeping it nimble. Tannins ripe and smooth, persistent finish. **Drink** 2026-2029 **Alc** 13%