



To begin this year I start with wines from two of my favorite producers, coincidentally both named Federico. These are their entry level wines, but an excellent way to see their house style without missing a mortgage payment to buy the expensive stuff.

2015 Poliziano Rosso di Montepulciano (\$18)

During my trip to Italy I found a few new discoveries, and became reacquainted with a few long forgotten favorites. One of those from the wayback machine is the stunning Rosso di Montepulciano from the acclaimed Poliziano winery. I have been a fan of this winery since the mid-1990's, and still have one bottle of their flagship, single vineyard, 1995 *Vino Nobile di Montepulciano "Asinone"* in my cellar. It is one of the greatest wines produced in Italy each year. His Rosso di Montepulciano is their entry level, but a wine that receives the same level of attention as even the great *Assinone*.

The wine region of *Vino Nobile di Montepulciano* is very old, with evidence of wine production in the region going back to Etruscan times. Poliziano began in 1961 when Dino Carletti purchased almost 50 acres of land in the commune of Montepulciano and planted it to grape vines. His son, and current owner, Federico, studied agriculture, earning his degree in 1978. For a couple of years he worked in northern Italy for a large agricultural company, but during an economic downturn in 1980 was forced to redirect his attention. With the advice of a couple of early, quality-centered advocates from the Chianti region, he took on the family business. For more than thirty years Federico has pushed Poliziano to the forefront of *Vino Nobile di Montepulciano*, with the tried-and-true recipe of sustainable farming coupled with modern winemaking.

Unlike a lot of producers in the region who produce their Rosso di Montepulciano from the grapes not considered good enough for the first wine, at Poliziano it is a stand alone product. Carletti uses the grapes that grow directly around the winery, farmed only with the intention to make their Rosso. This is because the soils in this part of the commune have a heavy sand component, on top of a layer of water retaining clay. The vines are more prolific and the resulting wine is not concentrated, or tannic, enough for their *Vino Nobile di Montepulciano*, or top wine. It is produced using the local clone of Sangiovese, called *Prugnolo Gentile*, but with the addition of 20% Merlot, which thrives in the same soils. The wine is then aged for six months in large French oak foudres, roughly 3000L each.

When you are ready to drink this wine, decant it for a half-hour to allow the bouquet to develop and the acidity to soften. The nose is an inviting combination of fresh cut red plums, fresh cherries, fennel seed, dried sage, bay leaf and a faint note of menthol. On the palate it has a restrained sense of fruit, framed by an obvious sense of acidity and well-integrated tannins. You will want to drink this wine over the next two years, or five in a wine cellar, with grilled flank steak or rich, meat filled pasta dishes.

2014 Poderi Elia Barbera d'Asti (\$20)

I consider Barbera one of the "really useful wines" like Cotes du Rhone and Rioja Crianza. Most examples display a great sense of forward fruit and moderate tannins that make them extremely versatile with food. Traditionally most Barbera is sold young to emphasize the fruit-driven nature. There are however, some amazing examples, most often aged in wood, that put the full range of this variety on display. This example from Poderi Elia is one of the finest of it's kind, and a bargain for reasons you will see.

For several years I have been a fan of the wines of owner Federico Stella. We have featured his Dolcetto in the Explorers Club, and his flagship Barbaresco has been a selection in the European Reserve Club. He is a unique producer in the Piedmont, in that he resists the pressure to pull out his old, low-yielding vines for the sake of increasing production. All of his wines come from old vines, with the grapes for this wine coming from eighty-year-old examples. They are planted on the slopes next to his Barbaresco vines (a \$65 bottle of wine), which most producers in the region consider economic suicide. In a further step of insanity, Federico also opts to use the less-impressive Barbera d'Asti designation, even though it is legally a Barbera d'Alba, because the taxation is one euro cheaper. Federico points out that he only makes 300 cases a year, and the wine is highly allocated due to it's amazing value. He sees no reason to feed his ego as the wine is going to sell out anyway.

Production at Poderi Elia leans to the modern side, although you will have a hard time tasting it in this wine. All of the grapes are hand harvested and the wine is fermented in temperature controlled, stainless steel tanks. Once dry the wine is moved to small, older French barriques, where it is aged for almost a year. He then holds the wine back for an additional year before release so the flavors can integrate.

Upon opening, I strongly recommend you decant this wine for a half-hour before serving. Barbera is a high acid variety and oxygen will help soften the tannins. I also picked up a bit of sulfur dioxide on the nose, which will blow off quickly with air. When you pour a glass you will quickly discover this is not a simple, fruity little Barbera. The nose is a bit brooding, with rustic notes of tar and roses, cooked but not sweetened raspberries and dried hibiscus flowers. Taking a sip you feel the fruit ooze across the palate, with a deep core of berries intertwined with notes of leather and truffle. The tannins are light and the acidity is well integrated. Drink over the next two to three years, or up to five, in a cool cellar. Serve with slow roasted pork belly with an Asian glaze, or wild mushroom risotto.

Mushroom Farrotto

Although risotto is seen as a quintessential Italian dish, it is Farro that is the historic grain of the people. Rice did not come to Italy until Marco Polo returned with it in the late 1200s. Farro is far older on the peninsula, being consumed by the Romans and possibly their predecessors. It is also substantially healthier for you, containing considerably more protein and fiber than even brown rice, and with none of the issues of containing arsenic. Serve this as a main dish with either of the features this month.

This recipe starts with a simple, but revolutionary step, of breaking the farro down slightly to release the starch. Avoid quick cooking or pearled versions, as they have been stripped of the flavorful and healthy outer coating.

1 ½ cups whole farro
¾ ounce dried porcini mushrooms, rinsed
6 cups water
4 tablespoons unsalted butter
12 ounces cremini mushrooms, trimmed and sliced thin
Salt and pepper
½ onion, chopped fine
1 garlic clove, minced
2 teaspoons minced fresh thyme
1 ½ ounces Parmesan, grated (¾ cup)
2 tablespoons minced fresh chives
2 teaspoons sherry vinegar

1. Pulse farro in blender until about half of grains are broken into smaller pieces, about 6 pulses.
2. Microwave porcini mushrooms and 1 cup water in covered bowl until steaming, about 1 minute. Let sit until softened, about 5 minutes. Drain mushrooms in fine-mesh strainer lined with coffee filter. Transfer liquid to medium saucepan and finely chop porcini mushrooms.
3. Add remaining 5 cups water to saucepan and bring to boil over high heat. Reduce heat to medium-low to maintain gentle simmer.
4. Melt 2 tablespoons butter in large Dutch oven over medium-low heat. Add cremini mushrooms and ½ teaspoon salt and cook, stirring frequently, until moisture released by mushrooms evaporates and pan is dry, 4 to 5 minutes. Add onion and chopped porcini mushrooms and continue to cook until onion has softened, 3 to 4 minutes. Add garlic and stir until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Add farro and cook, stirring frequently, until grains are lightly toasted, about 3 minutes.

5. Stir 5 cups hot water into farro, reduce heat to low, cover, and cook until almost all liquid has been absorbed and farro is just al dente, about 25 minutes, stirring twice during cooking.

6. Add thyme, 1 teaspoon salt, and ¾ teaspoon pepper and continue to cook, stirring constantly, until farro becomes creamy, about 5 minutes.

7. Remove pot from heat. Stir in Parmesan, chives, vinegar, and remaining 2 tablespoons butter. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Adjust consistency with remaining hot water as needed. Serve immediately.

Pasta Carbonara

I had this dish several times while in Italy and each time, when I queried the cook, was surprised to learn it was made without cream. This version, which is very close to the best I tasted in Italy, is amazing.

There are two caveats for this dish, which is at the heart of good Italian cooking. First, buy pancetta, do not substitute bacon. The Boars Head pancetta available at any Publix is good enough and far better than bacon. Second, buy good, bronze or brass cut pasta. The microscopic, rough edges of the pasta extruded through metal will cling to the sauce better than commercial brands passed through teflon dies.

3 oz. pancetta, chopped fine
1 ¾ cups of water
6 large egg yolks
2 tsp cornstarch
6 oz. Pecorino Romano, finely grated, plus more to serve
12 oz. spaghetti (see my note)
2 tbsp kosher salt
2 tsp ground black pepper

1. In a 10-inch skillet over medium, cook the pancetta, stirring, until crisp, about 5 minutes. Using a slotted spoon, transfer to a paper towel-lined plate. Measure out and reserve 3 tablespoons of the rendered fat; if needed, supplement with olive oil. Set the pancetta and fat aside.

2. In a large pot, bring 4 quarts water to a boil. Meanwhile, in a large saucepan, whisk the water, egg yolks and cornstarch until smooth. Add the cheese and stir until evenly moistened. Set the pan over medium-low and cook, whisking constantly, until the mixture comes to a gentle simmer and is airy and thickened, 5 to 7 minutes; use a silicone spatula to occasionally get into the

corners of the pan. Off heat, whisk in the reserved pancetta fat. Remove from the heat and set aside.

3. Stir the pasta and salt into the boiling water and cook until al dente. Reserve about ½ cup of the cooking water, then drain the pasta very well. Return the pasta to the pot and let cool for about 1 minute.

4. Pour the pecorino-egg mixture over the pasta and toss with tongs until well combined, then toss in the pepper. Let stand, tossing the pasta two or three times, until most of the liquid has been absorbed, about 3 minutes. Crumble in the pancetta, then toss again. The pasta should be creamy but not loose. If needed, toss in up to 2 tablespoons reserved pasta water to adjust the consistency. Transfer to a warmed serving bowl and serve, passing more pecorino and pepper on the side.