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Slow wine: eco-gastronomy creeps to the fermented grape

By Amy Zavatto

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What the heck is a slow wine? Is it a vino you portion out drip-by-drip? Is it anything like a sloe gin?

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Well, no. It is none of those things. But it is a new set of guidelines that might help you drink a little bit better, a little more easily.

This past week, some friends across the Atlantic – you know, the ones who know a thing or two about wine and food (think Italian, not French) introduced for the first time in English the brown, blue, and white 343-page guide, *Slow Wine 2012* (\$25, Chelsea Green).

Originally published in Italian, the compact, soft-cover compendium of wine reviews is an offshoot of *Slow Food*, the seasonally-focused, eco-friendly, flavor-centric movement.

The not-for-profit, 130,000 member organization was started by Carlo Petrini in Italy in 1989, as a step toward getting away from processed, bland, chemical-ridden foods that Petrini saw building up in his homeland (and around the world); an attempt—and a very successful one more than 20 years later—to get back to what things tasted like in Italy's delicious agricultural past.

He donned it "eco-gastronomy," and the little idea to protect the biodiversity of the land and the cultural food traditions of Italy that seemed to be getting lost in a modern world was born. Today, it has spread to more than 130 countries, with the U.S. having the second largest chapter outside of that comely, boot-shaped land.

Represented by the symbol of a snail, restaurants or products approved by the *Slow Food* get the organization's logo to display in their window or on their package—and that goes for wine, too.

"We're doing away with the point system. It's outdated and superficial. Most consumers try to pick 90-point and above wines, and miss many good wines that don't make the scores," said the Guide's Editor-in-Chief Fabio Giavedoni, pointing out that wine and food should be considered in the same light. "No one has ever asked, 'What point score does this cheese have?'"

Indeed, the purpose of the guide is to simplify a curious drinker's decision-making by doling out good, meaningful information, as opposed to what many wine drinkers are beginning to consider arbitrary numbers. And for those who just want a nice bottle of wine to bring home for dinner, simply scanning the local wine shop or grocery store's abundant shelves can be enough of a head-scratcher.

Trying to figure out if a wine is a good value and delicious and responsibly produced? It's enough to make a budding oenophile toss up her grape-stained hands and head for the beer aisle.

"We are the only wine guide that visits each winery, so the information is first-hand," said editor Giancarlo Gariglio of the 200-person staff it takes to put the guide together each year. "We visit the vineyard, the cellar, and taste with the producer."

How this translates in the book is a concise, easy-to-read entry for each Italian winery listed, telling you not just what the wines are like, but also about the owners and how they farm their land (organic, biodynamic, etc.), with special symbols that act as a quick-reference key to particular info about the producer: a bottle to indicate particularly high-quality (e.g., the equivalent of super high points); a coin, which represents good bang for your buck in both quality and price; and a snail, which means the wine at hand is engaging in farming and winemaking practices that don't just taste good, but are good all around—for you, for the earth, for the whole shebang.

"The wines in this guide have to be good, clean, and fair," said Gariglio. "They represent the cornerstone of Italian wine production."

And right now, that is who you'll find in the 400-producer, 3,000-wine condensed version of the guide (the Italian version is much larger). But just as American restaurants proudly display their *Slow Food*-approved snail, it may not be long before American vintners appear in the guide, too—snails, coins, bottles, and all.

"Our reviewers are taught about agricultural practices, so they can truly understand the *Slow* aspect of the wine. It's the same philosophy for *Slow Food*," said Giavedoni.

The French may have given us the Statue of Liberty, but unless she's about to step a sandaled foot out of New York Harbor and into your local wine ship, it may be the Italians who are pouring out a far more useful gift.

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