

# Japan's soft spot for Italian wine

The Japanese have become great connoisseurs of Italian wine, and no economic crisis seems to be able to make them abandon the idea of savoring a glass of Brunello, Barolo or Valpolicella.

Sales increased by 6 percent in terms of volume during 2008. The Japanese market along with many other Asian markets is allowing Italian producers to overcome the effects of the global economic decline. While exports to countries in the European Union registered a 10 percent decrease last year, the good news coming from Singapore (+17 percent) and Hong Kong (+29 percent) has rewarded the tenacity of Italian wine promoters.

For several years, many public organizations and professional associations have been investing time and money to encourage the discovery and appreciation in East Asia of all of the subtlety and bouquet of vintage wines refined under the sun in Tuscany, Veneto and Piedmont, the three wine-growing regions that are the most popular among Japanese enthusiasts.

Buonitalia SpA, a company founded in 2003 by the Ministry of Agricul-

tural, Food and Forestry Policies, is one of the organizations that insures the promotion of Italian food products abroad. In partnership with the Foreign Trade Commission, Italian Chambers of Commerce Abroad, Unioncamere and the embassies, the company performs the important work of coordinating all parties involved in the international presentation of Italian agro-alimentary products.

“Wine makes up around 40 percent of our total agro-alimentary exports to Japan. Global sales in the wine-producing field reach around 13 billion euros, 3.5 billion of which is exported. It is our flagship product,” explains Walter Brunello, chairman of Buonitalia SpA.

The agro-alimentary sector as a whole represents alone around 15 percent of Italian GDP and each year clears a comfortable budget surplus that is due as much to powerful multinationals as to a myriad of small businesses.

“Japan is an important market for our food in general and, in particular, our wines. If Italy is today the second-largest supplier to the Japanese archipelago, it is, of course,

due to the excellence of its products, but also due to the tireless work of the Japanese importers. Day after day they send the key message about the quality of our wines to the market and restaurant owners,” affirms Brunello.

It underlines the respect that the Japanese professionals in charge of promoting and distributing Italian wine demonstrate for the product; bottles are often found in the best places and there has never been a price war to tarnish their reputation in the eyes of the consumer.

“Our wines are not the most economical. Therefore, it is absolutely necessary to justify the price difference to the Japanese public. Sommeliers can be precious allies in this enterprise. They are in direct contact with the consumers in the restaurants and they have the opportunity to be able to explain the distinctive characteristics of the different Italian wine-growing regions, the origin of the flavors, the slow processing of the wine, the traditional manufacturing methods... Many of the elements that are reflected in the final price,” continues Brunello.

“Therefore, Buonitalia

decided to share maximum knowledge with the Japanese sommeliers to counterbalance somewhat the French training that many of them have received, a situation that objectively favors wines from Bordeaux and Burgundy.

“We are convinced that we must perform at this level. That is the reason why we have had our second-level courses for future Italian sommeliers translated into Japanese. We have brought this project to fruition in partnership with the Italian Sommeliers Association. This will eventually open into a greater presence of Italian wines on Japanese tables, and will lead more and more Japanese to be interested in Italian specialties. Wine is an easy means for popularizing all of our gastronomy,” clarifies Brunello, who adds that sommeliers have an equal influence on the purchases of restaurant and hotel owners each time they need to restock their wine cellars.

According to the organizers of Vinitaly, the most important wine and spirit fair in Italy, which has been held since 1967, exports to Japan could still increase substantially; they are banking on a 9



With 45 million hectoliters, 14.2 million of which is of high quality, and A.O.C. and A.O.C.G. certified, Italian wine production leads the world market.

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percent annual increase in wine consumption in Asian countries until 2011.

“We are one of the main beneficiaries of this deep-seated trend since our country strengthened its standing as the second-largest supplier to the Japanese, behind France but ahead of the United States,” exults Giovanni Mantovani, managing director of Veronafiere, the company that manages the Verona exhibition park where Vinitaly takes place.

Italian wines have reached 18 percent of the Japanese market. Performance is better yet for sparkling wines, at 20 percent, now neck and neck with their Spanish counterparts, which have always been their great rivals.

“Japan has always giv-

en an excellent welcome to quality products made in Italy and, among those, wine undoubtedly holds a choice position. For many years Vinitaly has been attended by Japanese food professionals and gourmets whose opinions are greatly communicated in the media. We expect around a thousand this year,” assures Mantovani, who reminds us that the 2009 edition of Vinitaly will be held from April 2 through April 6. Some 4,300 exhibitors from more than 30 countries participated in the 2008 edition, which was visited by more than 150,000 professionals from 110 countries!

Veronafiere recently signed a partnership agreement with Isetan luxury stores; wines whose qual-

ity received a medal at the International Enological Competition, one of the important headlines of the Vinitaly fair, will find themselves well placed in the aisles of the famous establishment. For that matter, all of the wines promoted by Vinitaly see an increase in their sales. Each year, in October, the Isetan stores organize an Italian Fair that introduces hundreds of thousands of people to the numerous wonders of Italian cuisine. In 2008, sales increased by 106 percent in the corner reserved for the wines selected by Vinitaly.

The figures compiled during the 2004-2006 period show that 17 percent of world wine production

comes from Italian wineries. The total value of Italian wine exports reached a new record in 2008, surpassing the 3.5 billion euro mark. Japan plays an increasingly more important role in this international success.

The acknowledgment of Italian professionals has only today equaled their promotion efforts. According to the special event “Italy in Japan 2009” scheduled in autumn, Buonitalia SpA, together with other Italian institutions, in particular the Italian Institute of Foreign Trade, the Italian Embassy and the Italian Institute of Culture, have programmed a series of initiatives that will promote Italian wine and food in Japan.