

Niklas Bergqvist: the Italian wine in Sweden

scritto da Federico Gallo | 24 Settembre 2021



We interviewed Niklas Bergqvist, Italian Wine Expert, educator and sommelier based in Stockholm. We talked about his career in the world of wine and the current situation of the Swedish market, where the restrictions caused by the pandemic were lighter than in the rest of Europe.

First, we would like to know more about your passion for wine and your job in the sector.

As a child I was always very interested in food and loved the concept of going out to eat in restaurants. When I got into my teens, I chose to go to a restaurant school to learn professional cooking. After I graduated, I took the advantage of working in the Alps during the winters. Skiing has always been a big interest too. I spent most of the evenings reading about wine. Eventually I decided to stay in Stockholm and get a fulltime job. I took a sommelier education as I thought it

would be interesting to learn more about combining food and wine. I totally fell in love with wine, and when I broke my leg badly in 2009 and couldn't work in a kitchen for more than a year, I decided to continue studying. I took university courses and then the WSET Diploma, which I finished in 2012.

As a lot of other people in the wine business I have many different jobs. My main employer is **Vinkällaren Grappe**, a member's club for wine collectors in central Stockholm. My main responsibility there is holding tastings, education and advice our members about their wine collections. Since 2015 I have also been teaching in Sweden's oldest sommelier school, **Restaurangakademien**. It is loosely based on WSET 2 and 3, with an option of continuing with the Diploma at a later stage. I teach Italy, sparkling wine, fortified wine and parts of France at all of the different levels and also take care of the WSET assessment. I also do some occasional wine writing for Swedish magazines and write a newsletter for the members of Grappe where I review most wines that are released in the monopoly stores.

You are an Italian Wine Expert, can you tell us something about this path?

I love food, wine, skiing, history and opera. All those roads might not lead to Rome, but certainly to Italy. I spent some months working in a restaurant kitchen in San Gimignano when I was learning cooking in my teens, and Italian wine is also one of my main responsibilities at Restaurangakademien.

When I saw that a friend of mine who works in Italy had attended the Vinitaly Academy (VIA) course I thought it seemed like a good way to get to learn more about the less famous grapes and wine regions of Italy.

I hadn't quite grasped the level of ambition for the programme and didn't realize that I was supposed to study before the course days until it was almost too late. It became a race

against time in the last two weeks, but I managed to pass as an ambassador. Afterwards I decided that going for the expert was a good way to encourage myself to do some more slow-paced, thorough and enjoyable studying. I re-took the exam and the course days the next year and managed to pass the expert level.

I think **Stevie Kim** and her team has done a great job with both the VIA programme and the associated events. **The VIA community is a great mix of people from all over the world** including many Italian ex-pats, all of which have little in common except for the love of Italian wine. The result is something quite unique and fuelled by curiosity and open-mindedness rather than the snobbery focused on a small niche of the world's most famous wine labels that tends to become predominant when you gather a lot of wine people that don't know one another very well.

I would recommend the course to anyone in the wine business that is interested in or is working with Italian wine. I do suggest, however, that you get plenty of experience and education before taking the programme, and to make sure that you start studying well ahead of the exam.

How the past year of restrictions due to pandemic affected wine market in Sweden?

The restrictions in Sweden have been quite limited – almost non-existent before fall 2020. Despite that most Swedish people have followed the recommendation to try to isolate themselves as much as possible to try to limit the spread of the virus. Most numbers that I have seen indicate that the **imports have been roughly the same as usual, perhaps even a bit larger in terms of volume as well as value.**

The situation have had a major impact on the consumption pattern, however. **While the monopoly has seen increased sales there has been an equivalent decrease of sales in the on-**

trade. This means that some importers have been doing better than ever whereas most importers that are focused on the on-trade as well as the restaurants themselves have had a very hard time. Many have gone out of business, but some have done reasonably well. The line between success and failure has been very much about which part of Sweden (as well as part of the cities) where you operate and what kind of clientele you have. For the restaurants, managing to compensate for having fewer guests by making each spend more has been critical. Take-out food has been important too, but because of the monopoly situation restaurants are not allowed to sell alcoholic beverages as take-out.

Can you describe how Italian wine is perceived in Swedish market and what is its positioning?

Italian wine has dominated sales in Sweden for the last 10 years. It typically accounts for 25-30% of the volume of sales. The majority is bag-in-box from Southern Italy, often made in a very international style and labelled so that it is not entirely clear that the wines are Italian. It is a lot about Zinfandel and American Oak and very little about origin. Except for a few successful white wine brands in the bag-in-box segment, I would say that the Swedish people think of Italian wine as being red rather than white. The number of white wines in the premium segment is very depressing and that is true for the off-trade as well as in the on-trade.

At higher price points **Amarone** and **Super Tuscans** were dominant for a long time, but especially **Barolo** and to some extent **Barbaresco** and **Brunello** have become **much more in vogue during the last 10 years**. At Vinkällaren Grappe we can see that the **younger generation** (in this context meaning those that are in their forties or early fifties) **are often much more interested in Barolo than Bordeaux**, that used to be very dominant.

There is a much wider selection of less famous grapes and

origins to be found in restaurants and on the monopoly shelves these days, but they are mainly of concern for a very small clientele at this time.

Can you give some suggestions to Italian producers willing to export their wines to Sweden, which customer segment to address, strategies to follow, channels to use?

I think that it is very dependent on the size of the winery. For medium to large size producers finding a good and experienced importer means that you can sell a large volume of wine to the monopoly without a lot of work if you are lucky. If you are a smaller producer and especially if you are making wines from less famous varieties and origins, you will need to find an importer that is very passionate about your wine. While the monopoly might buy small volumes you are much more likely to succeed by getting into the right end of the restaurant market.

Unfortunately, there are a lot of importers in Sweden that are only importing wine as a part time job because they like wine. They are unlikely to have the time and contacts to get you into the restaurants that matters, and that is what you will need as it is the likeliest way to succeed in building up demand for a wine style that the Swedish wine consumers are currently unaware of.

With the current legislation it should also be possible to use "agriturismo" to build up a base of loyal buyers that are interested in buying straight from the source, so that you can ship the wines straight to Sweden. There is however a fair bit of paperwork that needs to be solved in advance to avoid the risk that the wines get stuck at the border.