

The ambassadors of Italian wine in the world: Canada Michaela Morris

scritto da Federico Gallo | 10 Luglio 2021



We interviewed Michaela Morris, one of the 14 Italian Wine Experts in the world, the highest level of certification of

the Vinitaly International Academy. We talked about the positioning of Italian wine in the Canadian market and her path in the world of wine, which has seen her operate in various sectors: from retail to import, to become a popular journalist, educator and judge for international events.

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

My passion for wine is really a long love affair. It started when I was cycling around Europe in my early 20s. Before leaving Canada, I did not drink wine at all but when I arrived in France, wine was so entrenched in the culture I couldn't ignore it. So French wine was my first love. I returned to Canada after traveling for 3 years and started university. I supported myself by working in restaurants where my enthusiasm for wine grew. I returned to France on an exchange program. As a foreign student, I had to write a research paper on anything to do with France's culture. I chose the 'Terroir and Tradition of Burgundy'. When I visited the region I was hooked and realized that there were actually careers in wine. As soon as I got back to Vancouver, I looked for a job in the wine industry. Over the years, I have worked for a private wine store, an import company and even had my own consulting business which offered private and corporate tastings as well as cellar management to private collectors. Today I focus on writing and educating. I have been contributing to Decanter and Meininger's Wine Business International for the last 4 years and write for a Canadian based magazine called Quench. I also judge wine competitions both here in Canada as well as abroad – such as Decanter World Wine Awards, Vinitaly's 5StarWines and Australia's Alternative Varieties Wine Show.

You are an Italian Wine Expert, can you describe us how your passion for Italian wines has started and developed?

While French wine was my first love, it took me longer to

appreciate Italian wine. I really didn't understand it at first. I remember tasting my first Barolo and felt like I had hit a brick wall. At the time, I was working at a private wine store helping source wines from France. An Italian import company head hunted me to help them expand their portfolio to French wines. I took the job and ended up managing supplier relationships with the Italian producers as well. Eventually, I went on a trip to Piemonte and faced my Nebbiolo nemesis. I ended up being so captivated by this complex, nuanced grape. I wanted to explore what else Italy had to offer. Since then, I have never stopped discovering nor has my fascination waned. There is always something else to learn about. And of course, I always return to the grape that started it all – Nebbiolo.

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

The restrictions due to pandemic have above all impacted the hospitality sector. In many parts of Canada restaurants were closed for dining and at best could only offer takeout. Tragically, many restaurants have had to shut down for good. Retail stores, on the other hand have thrived – especially those that offer online sales. There have been shifts in the way people drink. Initially, consumers sought out brands they knew, looking for comfort in a time of uncertainty. But in some places, like Montréal, the trade noticed that engaged consumers took the opportunity to be adventurous and discover new wines. Also, as in the rest of the world, while entry level and ultra-premium wines are doing well, the middle layer is has suffered.

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

With alcohol distribution falling under provincial jurisdiction and evident cultural differences between provinces, each has its own trends. This means that the

position of Italian is different in each province. In Ontario, which is Canada's biggest province/market, Italian wine is 4th by volume (17% sum of market share) and 3rd by value (15%). Whereas in Québec, Italian wine is second after French wine with 22.8% of the market share by volume. And in British Columbia, the 3rd biggest province, Italy 3rd after Canadian wine & US wine with over 7% volume and 9% value (note that in BC Canadian wine is 54% vol and 47% of value.)

So in generally Italian wine is well positioned but sales are flat or declining. This is largely due to the fact that Italian wine is a mature category in Canada and there is a strong movement to supporting local wine. Nevertheless I would say that perception of Italian wine is very positive. People associate it with the culture and cuisine. There is a lot of love here for Italy. And certainly at restaurants there is a lot of interest in Italy's more niche/obscure grape varieties and regions.

Can you give some suggestions to Italian producers willing to export their wines to Canada?

Again, first and foremost, it is important to remember that alcohol distribution falls under provincial jurisdiction in Canada. So producers must not think of Canada as a single wine market. Instead, each of our 10 provinces and 3 territories are separate markets. They function differently and the culture of each is unique. This means that what works in one province – for example Québec, doesn't necessarily work in another province, let's say Alberta. And vice versa. The key is always finding an importer in each province that knows the market well and can advise a producer on the best strategy for their unique company. Bigger producers might want to seek national importers whereas smaller producers may find a better fit with a smaller importer that only works in one or two provinces. Above all, relationships are important – between the importer and the producer but also gauging whether an

importer has strong relationships with restaurant trade, government stores and private stores (in provinces that have private stores). In all provinces, with the exception of Alberta, the government liquor board owns and operates retail stores. The majority of wine is sold through these. Any producers who wants to sell in any kind of volume should find an importer who has a good working relationship with a province's liquor board. Again, this may be less important for smaller producers more focused on restaurant placements.