The double face of Italian wine in the Netherlands

scritto da Michéle Shah | 26 Ottobre 2015



Holland: between fast-moving consumer goods and niche market. To understand what it means, we interviewed Guus van Otterloo, a professional wine buyer for the past 25 years in the Netherlands. Guus tells us that Italian wine in the

Netherlands has a double image: on one hand Italian wine means cheap and known products, on the other hand it is identified with indigenous wines, but with a priceless heritage and uniqueness of values. The secret for success in a country like the Netherlands? According to the importer, staying close to roots and using uniqueness as a trump card to be different.

How was your passion for wine born?
My passion for wine was born in 1977 while studying musicology at Amsterdam University. The courses on wine available in Holland didnt satisfy me at all so I went to France picking grapes and tasting around with my eyes and ears wide open. In 1981 I decided music wasnt my future and went to Bordeaux to take summer-college on tasting, winemaking and viticulture. In 1989 I realized my dream and opened a wine shop combined with an enoteca (the first ever in Rotterdam) and an import/wholesale business. In 2009 I founded Terroirwijn (www.terroirwijn.nl).

Which type of wines are you searching for and where do you sell them?
I am looking for authentic wines of real quality from small (often biological) producers in France and Italy with a few exceptions from Germany, Austria and Spain. 95% of the wines are sold to restaurants in Holland with a clear focus on the Rotterdam area.
I also organize regularly several tasting groups both professional and amateur and I am often called as a wine jury member.

What are the key suggestions to give to Italian wine producers seeking to enter your market?
Stay close to your roots and use the unique things of your own terroir as, in my opinion, the world is getting more and more tired of international blends and mass-market products. If you don’t, in the end there will always be someone who makes a wine very similar at a lower price and consumers will turn away from you.

What image do Italian wines have in your country?
A split image, to be honest, but of course there are several types of consumers (and buyer’s) too. For some Italy is the land of cheap Pinot Grigio and Prosecco, nothing wrong with that, but I prefer the image of small scale, high quality producers working with autochthon grapes as natural as possible.
Everyone will understand that these two images are apart quiet far.

What actions and promotion would you suggest to Italian producers in order to improve and increase sales of wine in your country?
It all depends on what kind of product you are selling. Just be aware that nowadays you are part of a very international and very competitive market. A well organized, compact incoming is a good experience in many ways. From that point of view is great to be able to update and enlarge your knowledge of a specific region. Furthermore it’s a very efficient way to get a good idea of the characteristic of the wines of a region, from cooperatives to small independent wineries. Third it’s great to be able to talk to colleagues from non-competitive markets as everybody can talk freely and you can not only exchange ideas but also help each other finding the best producers. Last it’s always a pleasure to be in Italy and drink the wines with the local people and local food.

What are the critical and unique points of Italian wines approaching your markets?
If you produce entry-level wines there’s only one thing that matters: price. For all others stay close to your roots and use the unique things of your own terroir, as I told before. The market will pay you back.