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What You Should Know About Italy's Rare And Surprising Vineyards



Catherine Sabino Contributor @Travel



The Vigna della Regina vineyard overlooking Turin. COURTESY OF @CANTINEBALBIANO

As a country with a notably diverse landscape, Italy offers vineyards in locations ranging from the gently rolling hills of the Chianti and gravity-defying terrain of the Cinque Terre to Mt. Etna's dramatic slopes and the Alpine turf of Aosta and Alto Adige. But the most unexpected place to find a vineyard in Italy may well be within the confines of one of its famous cities.

While Italy has urban wineries and wine towns surrounded by hectares of grapevines, its city vineyards, obviously, are rare. Yet you can visit a number of these remarkable properties—located in Turin, Milan, Venice, Siena and Palermo—making it easy to take in both artistic and architectural masterpieces and historic wine culture in one convenient stop.



Luca Balbiano in the Villa della Regina vineyard. He is the president of the Urban Vineyard ... [+]

Luca Balbiano, a third-generation vintner, has been at the forefront of a burgeoning movement to revitalize urban vineyards, not only in Italy but around the world. In 2003 he and his family, who own the [Balbiano winery](#) in Andezeno (Piedmont), took on the challenge of replanting the wine-growing area on the grounds of the [Villa della Regina](#), a 17th-century royal palace that's a short walk from Turin's Piazza Vittoria Veneto.

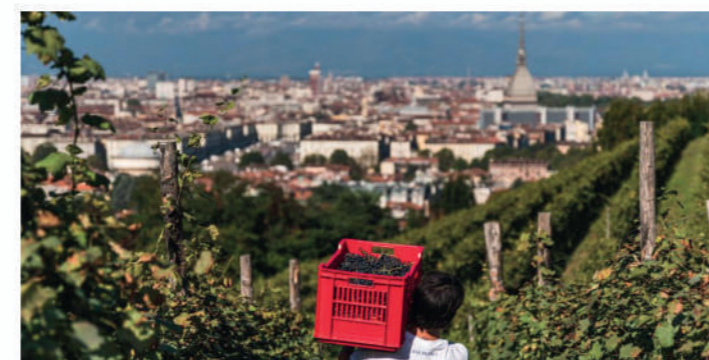
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The interior of the Villa della Regina. (Photo by Alessandro Albert/Getty Images) GETTY IMAGES

The villa, badly damaged during World War II, lay abandoned for nearly 50 years, but was restored by local historic and preservation authorities and reopened in 2006. (It is a UNESCO World Heritage site, along with a collection of other royal residences in Turin and the surrounding countryside.) Collaborating with such wine experts as University of Turin professor Vincenzo Gerbi and Dr. Anna Schneider of CNR (Italian National Research Council), and following layouts dating from the 1600s, the Balbianos planted the type of grape—Freisa—believed to have originally grown on the property. They started with 2700 cuttings, involving three historical and two experimental clones; 600 additional cuttings were added in 2015. (Freisa is a first-degree genetic relative of Nebbiolo, the grape used for Barolo and Barbaresco, says Balbiano, citing Schneider's studies.)

Working with Gerbi after the first harvest in 2009, they experimented with vinifications to produce a long-aging Freisa for wines that would be bottled under the label, [Vigna della Regina](#) (the Queen's Vineyard) with the first DOC Freisa di Chiera debuting in 2011. (Full name: Freisa di Chieri DOC Superiore "Vigna Villa della Regina.") "It's one of the few urban wines to have a DOC appellation," says Balbiano. Because of the historical layout with closely planted vines and the terrain's incline, harvests and maintenance, as in the past, are all done by hand.



Harvest time at the Villa della Regina. COURTESY OF @CANTINEBALBIANO



The Freisa grape. COURTESY OF @CANTINEBALBIANO

In addition to the successful execution of a challenging project and the opportunity to help "Mother Nature reconquer its spaces," Balbiano says that the vineyard restoration spurred an interest in linking up with similar properties both in Italy and abroad, which led in 2019 to the creation of the [Urban Vineyards Association](#). (He is now president of the group.)

"During the Villa della Regina's vineyard replanting, we would often wonder if we were the only ones who had embarked on [such an] adventure," says Balbiano. Today the U.V.A. has eight members—six are Italian vineyards, two are French—and they all offer more than intriguing wines. "It is impossible not to fall in love with with the poetry of the vineyards of Venice and its lagoon, the history of Leonardo Da Vinci's beloved vineyard in Milan, with the biodiversity of the vineyards of Siena and Palermo, the agricultural and social importance of the République des Canuts of Lyon, and the beauty of the Montmartre vineyard that towers over Paris," says Balbiano.

While the association is still young, Balbiano sees it developing a far-flung international network. In addition to France, "we're talking about countries like England, Germany, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, Greece and the United States."

Although the criteria for being designated an urban vineyard seem obvious, Balbiano says each potential member is evaluated individually. It's necessary for vineyards to be within a city's borders, he explains, and the site's historicity and cultural importance are determining factors too. "Urban vineyards are often unknown jewels," says Balbiano. "This was the main reason that brought us to create the U.V.A., to join forces in order to promote these entities that otherwise would not have the resources to make themselves known as much as they deserve."



Vignole is an island not far from Murano in Venice. It is home to vineyards that are part of the ... [+]

Another factor the U.V.A. will be addressing is distribution. "Urban vineyards have, due to their nature, a very small production," says Balbiano. At present most of the approximately 4000 bottles produced by Vigna della Regina are sold in Italy. "We're planning to export to New York, California and some other states, hopefully, in the near future," he says.

Initiatives were under way to organize tours to these unique properties—put on hold, of course, because of the pandemic, but visitors permitted to visit Italy can arrange to stop by the vineyards (write to: info@urbanvineyards.org). Even with all the changes in travel wrought by Covid-19, Balbiano says he's certain "the desire to discover the world through amazing stories—the kind that only an urban vineyard can tell—will never change."

In a period severely impacted by the health crisis, visits to wine-growing areas, particularly those with unique longevity, may have even more meaning for travelers. "If you think about it, there is no greater example of resilience and rebirth than a vineyard itself," says Balbiano.

Where to find urban vineyards in Italy

In addition to the Vigna della Regina in Turin, Urban Vineyard Association members in Italy include: Venice's [Vineyards in the Lagoon](#), managed by the [Laguna nel Bicchieri Association](#), and [San Francesco della Vigna](#); Siena's [Senarum Vinea](#); Milan's [La Vigna di Leonardo](#); Palermo's [Vigna del Gallo](#). (In France, [Clos Montmartre](#) in Paris and Lyon's [République des Canuts](#) are part of the U.V.A.)



The 15th-century Casa Atellani in Milan, once home to Leonardo da Vinci, where he maintained a ... [+]

