

# ITALIAN GRAPE ALE

HISTORY, DEFINITION, APPROACH

by LUCA GIACCONE

# ABOUT MYSELF

I'm a librarian, I was born and raised in **Cuneo**, a small town North-West of Italy, not so far from the famous **Langhe** district (Barolo, Barbaresco wines).

And near the village of Piozzo, the headquarters of **Baladin**, one of the first micro-breweries in Italy (born in 1996).



# ABOUT MYSELF

I'm a consultant for **Slow Food Publishing House**:

- Author of *Il piacere della birra* (2017);
- Author of *I Paesi della birra. Belgio* (2023);
- Editor - since the first edition of 2008 - of the Italian beer guide *Guida alle birre d'Italia* (next edition: 2024).



# ABOUT MYSELF

I'm also an international beer judge:

- **Birra dell'anno** (since the first edition, 2006);
- **IGA Beer Challenge** (since the first edition, 2021);
- **European Beer Star** (since 2010);
- **Brussels Beer Challenge** (since 2014);
- **World Beer Cup** (since 2018);
- **Konkurs Piw Rzemieślniczych** (since 2023).



# ABOUT MYSELF

Finally, I'm a contributor to several magazines:

- La Repubblica
- Fermento Birra
- Civiltà del bere
- Birra Nostra



# ITALY: WINE OR BEER?

Italy has **never** been a **beer** country.

In the late XIX century, we had some **local brands**, some of them still existing (Moretti, Peroni, Ichnusa) but often owned by **multinationals**.

In 1861 - the year of national unity - **beer** consumption was **0,3 liters** (it's one glass each, per year!), while **wine** average was **102,4 liters**.

In 1901 beer was “up” to **1,2 liters** and wine **127,6 liters** per capita.

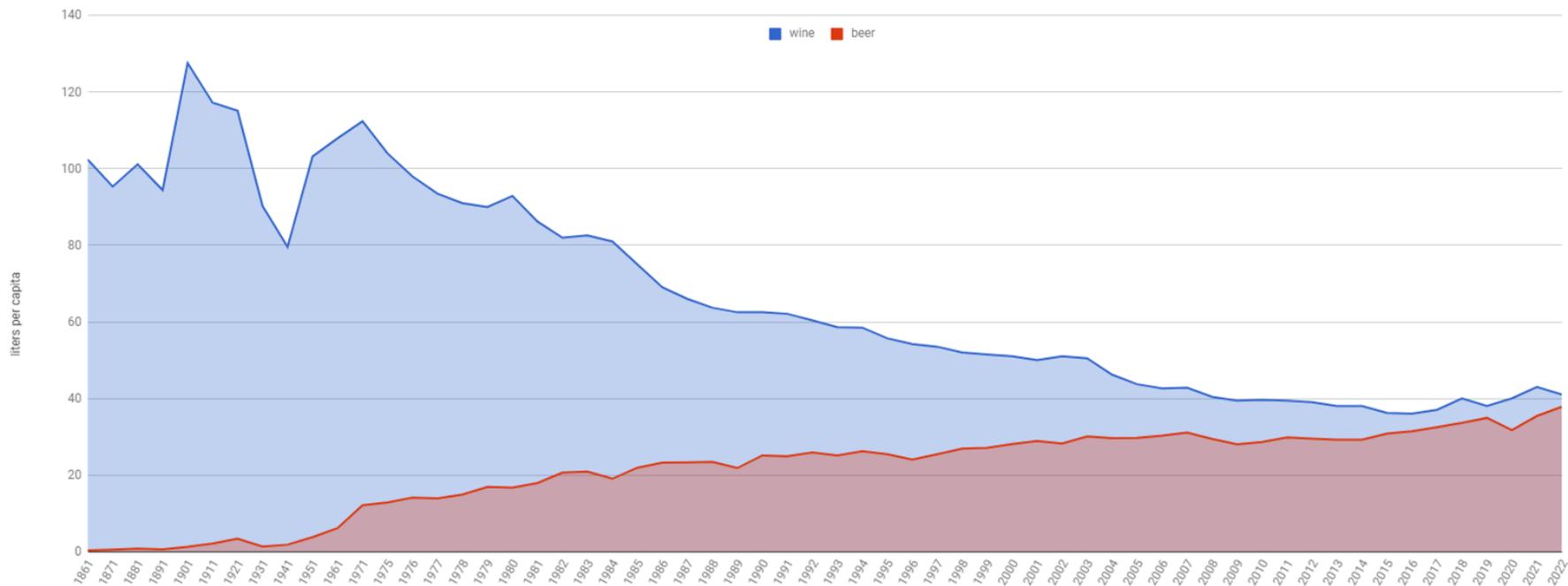
It's **35 cl** (almost half a bottle) each, **per day**. Including children.



(picture from: Michele Airolti - Antiche birrerie italiane)

# ITALY: WINE OR BEER?

Wine and beer consumption in Italy



# ITALY: WINE OR BEER?

“The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry in Italy has authorized over 350 different grape varieties but there are over **500 different kinds of grapes** in circulation within the country. In comparison, almost 100% of France’s wine only comes from about 60 different grapes”

(source: crushwinexp.com)

“Between 2018 and 2021, the number of **wineries** in Italy decreased steadily reaching a total number of **37,298** as of the latest period. In 2018, the total number of wineries in the country was much higher, at 45,730. Italy is the world's top producer of wine”

(source: statista.com)

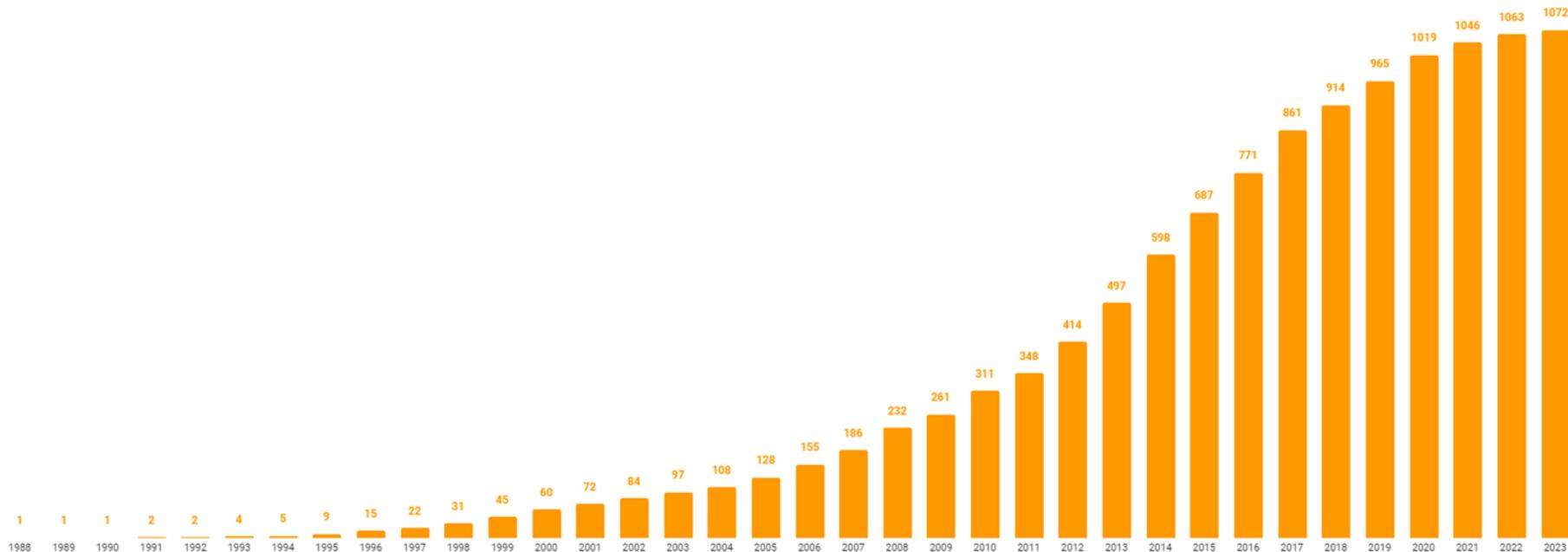
# ITALY: WINE OR BEER?

Rank↕	Country	↕ Continent	↕ Quantity (1,000 hl)	↕ % of Total Production	↕
1	 Italy	Europe	49,843	19.30%	
2	 France	Europe	45,590	17.65%	
3	 Spain	Europe	35,703	13.82%	
4	 U.S.	America	22,385	8.67%	
5	 Australia	Oceania	12,745	4.93%	
6	 Chile	America	12,444	4.82%	
7	 Argentina	America	11,451	4.43%	
8	 South Africa	Africa	10,155	3.93%	
9	 Germany	Europe	8,940	3.46%	
10	 Portugal	Europe	6,777	2.62%	

(source: [visualcapitalist.com](https://www.visualcapitalist.com))

# ITALY: WINE OR BEER?

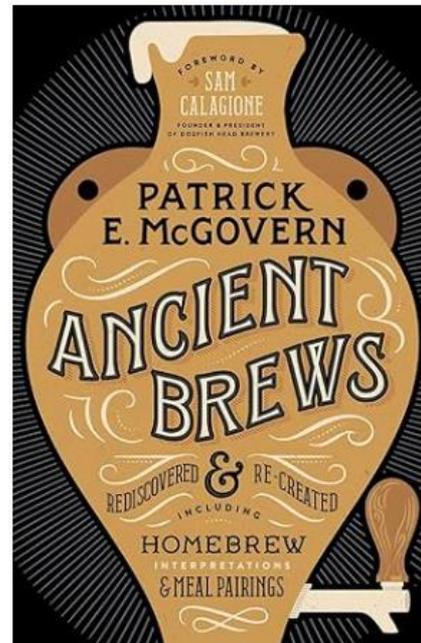
Number of active breweries in Italy (microbirrifici.org)



# A BIT OF HISTORY

According to **Patrick E. McGovern** (*Ancient Brews: Rediscovered and Re-Created*, W. W. Norton & Company, 2017), the first trace of something **between wine and beer** can be found in Italy since the **8th-7th century BC**.

Given the pieces of evidence from the **Museum of Carmignano** (Prato) and the **Necropolis of Casale Marittimo** (Pisa), the Etruscans produced a "grog", a **hybrid fermented product** that could contain **grapes** (already domesticated), honey, **cereals**, fruit, and spices.



# A BIT OF HISTORY

In more recent times, according to **Jean Van Roy**, in the valley of the Yssche (southeast of Brussels, villages of Hoeilaart, Overijse, and Huldenberg), people **cultivate grapes** in greenhouses for a very long time.

The local **lambic brewers** used to **mix grapes** and lambic, but the last one disappeared in the 70s.

In 1973, Jean-Pierre Van Roy bought from a neighbor some **grapes Petit Royal**, a table red grape coming from Overijse and he filled two 250 liters barrels. Both were very good, so good that workmen tasted too much from the barrel and developed acetic in one of them. The other was **bottled** and sold (unlabelled) at the **bar Falstaff** in the city center.

In 1987 for the first time, Cantillon used **muscat grapes** coming from **Italy**, for the label *Neuf Nations de Bruxelles / Negen Naties van Brussel*, which I believe is the first labeled *Lambic de raisin / Druivenlambik* of the modern era. It's the predecessor of *Vigneronne*, who was born between 1988 and 1989.



# A BIT OF HISTORY

The first Italian brewer to use grapes in a beer was **Teo Musso**, Baladin Brewery of Piozzo (Cuneo).

In 2000 he added **25% of grapes** from a red local variety (**Dolcetto**) to 500 liters of Noël worth (a Dark Belgian strong ale).

The experiment was repeated in 2001 (with **Nebbiolo**, the famous grape of Barbaresco and Barolo) and in 2002 (again Dolcetto).

The beer was named *Noël Perbacco*, but the 75 cl bottles were **never commercialized**, out of respect for the figure of Teo's father, a winemaker.

There are still some **existing bottles**, really interesting (on the label: *Don't touch for 10 years at least*)



# A BIT OF HISTORY

In 2003 **Nicola Perra** started his experiments as a homebrewer, already adding “**sapa**” (overcooked grape must, very concentrated) in his brews. Nicola uses sapa practically **like a spice**, adding it at the end of boiling.

In 2006 the famous *BB10* was commercially produced for the first time (with **Cannonau** sapa), and the beer was marketed in the first months of 2007.

Today the brewery in Maracalagonis (**Sardinia**) produces a very **wide range** of IGA.



# A BIT OF HISTORY

In 2006 **Riccardo Franzosi** from Brewery Montegioco (the name of a small village in **Piedmont**, Alessandria district) started to experiment with local grapes: Timorasso, Croatina, Barbera, and Muscat Hamburg.

In 2007 he released *Tibir* (with **Timorasso**) and in 2008 *Open Mind* (with **Croatina**).

Riccardo treats the grapes as he does for other fruit beers, **heating the grapes** until slightly boiling (to deactivate the spores) before adding them at the end of the fermentation of the barley must.

He uses **20%** grapes in **weight** (calculated before destemming and pressing).



# A BIT OF HISTORY

Near Turin, **Valter Loverier** started using grapes as a homebrewer back in 2002.

In 2009 the brewery **Loverbeer** was born and in the same year the *BeerBera* was released.

Here the start is a (**spontaneous**) fermentation of the grape must, then when the fermentation is well underway the barley must is added.

The *BeerBera* has been recently replaced by the *Sour Sketch*.

Valter's beers are good examples of **Wild IGAs**, or Sour IGAs (I prefer the first definition, since every IGA, even with selected yeast has a bit of sourness).



# A BIT OF HISTORY

Already in 2007, **Matteo Billia** was brewing the “Moscatus” (in Scarambola brewery, now closed) for the project 1789 (now closed).

Opened in 2015, Brewery **Sagrin** (*Trouble*, in Piedmontese dialect) in Calamandrana (Asti) is now a well-known producer of IGAs.

They use **local musts** (pressed and destemmed, between 6 and 9%), added on the **second day of fermentation**, which is conducted both by beer and wine yeasts, depending on the label.

It's a good example of IGAs with a **classical approach** (controlled fermentation).



# DEFINITION

L. 16 agosto 1962, n. 1354

Disciplina igienica della produzione e del commercio della birra

The Italian law (Hygienic regulation of the production and trade of beer) says:

*The name "beer" is reserved for the product obtained from the alcoholic fermentation with strains of **Saccharomyces carlsbergensis** or **Saccharomyces cerevisiae** of a must prepared with **malt**, even roasted, barley or wheat or their mixtures and water, bittered with **hops** or its derivatives or with both.*

*Barley or wheat malt can be replaced with **other cereals**, even broken or ground or in the form of flakes, as well as with starchy and **sugary raw materials** up to a **maximum of 40%** calculated on the dry extract of the must.*

So it's **legal** to add up to 40% of “sugary raw materials”, including **grapes**.



# DEFINITION

In **2015** - thanks to the effort of Gianriccardo Corbo - the “style” Italian Grape Ale was introduced in the **BJCP Guidelines**, in the very last section:

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## Beer Style Guidelines



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# DEFINITION

In the 2021 edition, **Grape Ale** (without Italian) went to the **Fruit Beer** section while **Italian Grape Ale** stayed in the **Local Styles** appendix:

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# DEFINITION

So... it's **Italian Grape Ale** or simply **Grape Ale**?

To answer that (tough indeed), I think we need to address another question first. **What's a beer style?**

I personally like very much the definition of **Tim Webb** (lead author and curator of The Beer Styles of Europe and beyond):

*A beer style describes a cluster of beers with common features that distinguish them from all others. These may relate to their ingredients, the methods of brewing, fermenting or conditioning them, their alcoholic strength, or in a few cases, simply the way they are served. In another sense...*

*A beer style is an **informal agreement** between a brewer and a customer, expressed through a name on a label, by which the former gives the latter a **rough idea** of what they are about to buy.*



# DEFINITION

Let's **change the subject**, for a while.

I suggest a **little quiz**. What's this list?

- **Birra Alpinista** (Schilling)
- **Luppolo** (Oxbow)
- **Sfizio** (Fort Point)
- **Terrifica** (Wayfinder)
- **Agostini** (Von Ebert)
- **Alberto** (Wheatland Spring)
- **Oracolo** (Modern Times)
- **Alpi** (Hopewell)
- **Folletto** (Hop Butcher For The World)
- **Fugazi** (BlackStack)
- **Palio** (Alvarado Street)
- **Gorlami** (Branch & Bone)
- **L'Ultima Moda** (Wild East)
- **Minor in Italian** (Roadmap)
- **STS** (Russian River)
- **Pivo** (Firestone Walker)

# ITALIAN PILSNER

All the previous are names of USA-made **Italian Pilsner**.

The style was **invented in 1996** by Agostino Arioli of Birrificio Italiano.

His **Tipopils** is the first example of a **German-inspired Pilsner** (the inspiring muse was the famous Jever), brewed with **German and French malts** and **German hops** (Spalter Select, Saphir, and Polaris), but with a twist of innovation and - let's say - Italian genius.

Using the dry hopping to underline the hop aroma was the key to creating something new, now imitated and recognized around the world. It deserves the definition of **Italian Pilsner**.

Without Italian ingredients, such as a **Belgian Scotch Ale** has nothing to do with Scotland and a **Grodziskie** can be brewed anywhere away from Grodzisk Wielkopolski (and without any Polish raw materials).



# ITALIAN GRAPE ALE

My point is that this distinction made by the latest edition of the BJCP makes little sense:

## X3. Italian Grape Ale

December 7, 2021

For uses outside Italy, see 29D Grape Ale.

I believe that the **paternity of IGAs** could have continued to be acknowledged by **Italian brewers**, even when the beer is made abroad, without the use of Italian grapes.

But I also think that **no battle is useful** and that Italy can remain the reference for this typology, however is called Italian Grape Ale or only Grape Ale.

# ITALIAN GRAPE ALE

Anyway, in Italy, the **style is growing** fast and it's now something really important, for the national (and not only) beer scene.

The **IGA Beer Challenge** is an international **competition**, with judges from Belgium, the Czech Republic, Spain, and Japan.

It has been held for the first time in **Turin** in **2021**, then again in **2022**, the next edition will be in **2024** (we'd love to have Polish beers!).

The organizer also manages a **census** of all Italian Grape Ale produced in the national territory (the website is **italiangrapeale.org**).

There are listed **262 beers** (for **155 breweries**).

In the database, there are **109 different** uses of **grapes!**



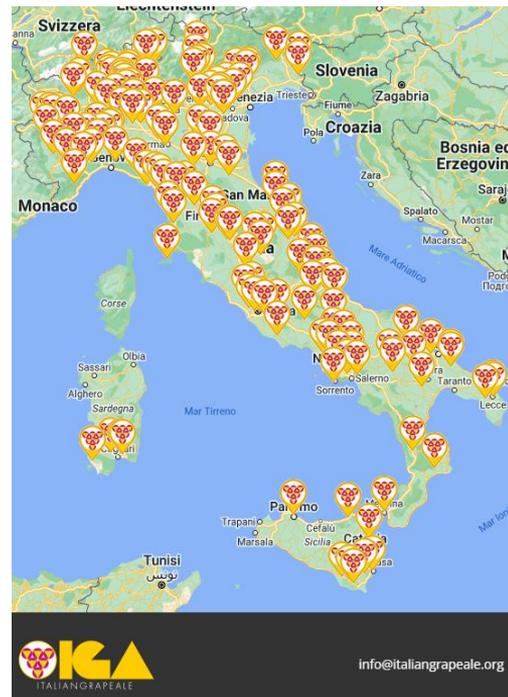
# ITALIAN GRAPE ALE

Most used grapes:

- **Moscato Bianco** (20)
- **Sangiovese** (12)
- **Nebbiolo** (10)
- **Montepulciano** (9)
- **Barbera** (8)
- **Malvasia** (8)
- **Trebbiano** (7)
- **Vermentino** (7)

Declared uses:

- **Fresh must** (184)
- **Fruit** (24)
- **Cooked must** (24)
- **Stabilized must** (10)
- **Pomace** (9)
- **Pasteurized must** (7)



# ITALIAN GRAPE ALE

In the competition (**IGA Beer Challenge**) beers are divided into four categories:

- **Non-acid, low alcohol content** (less than or equal to 7%)
- **Non-acid, high alcohol content** (above 7%)
- **Acidic, low alcohol content** (less than or equal to 7%)
- **Acidic, high alcohol content** (above 7%)

In my opinion, this clearly demonstrates the **objective difficulty in categorizing** this type of beer.

The grapes are **so different** from each other, the starting beer style can be any, and the result can cover wide chromatic ranges, alcohol content, intensity, acidity, and balance.

This is why making (and tasting) an IGA is **anything but simple**.



# GRAPES

As we already saw, grapes can be used in different ways:

- as a **fruit**;
- as pressed and destemmed **must**;
- as **pomace** (in Italy we usually make Grappa with that);
- as **sapa** (overcooked must).

Must can be:

- **fresh** (rich in spontaneous yeast);
- **pasteurized** or microfiltered (no yeast active);
- **frozen** (usable all year round).

Grapes (or must) can be used:

- in the **mash** (very rarely);
- in the **boil** (the most common phase) or **whirlpool**;
- during **fermentation**;
- before **bottling**, as *liqueur d'expédition*.



# YEASTS

Of course, yeast is very important.

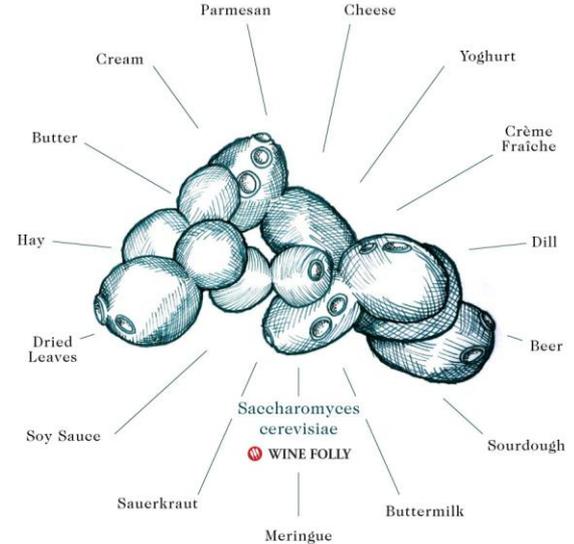
You can use **selected beer yeast** (mainly Belgian strains, but also neutral ones like US-05) or even bottom-fermenting strains (despite the name of the style!).

It's also rather common to use **selected wine yeast**.

Or you can go “wild” and give the stage to the **spontaneous fermentation** of the grapes, like in natural wines.

It's the path chosen, for example, by **Luigi Recchiuti** (the man in the previous page, pictured while pressing grapes with his boots) of **Opperbacco**.

He lets the grapes start a spontaneous fermentation - using the ***pied de cuve*** technique - and then he adds the beer wort.



# HOPS

I believe that hops deserve a separate study.

Yeasts are certainly fundamental, but **hops** may be more **important** than you think, obviously for the aromatic part.

The **fruity** and **floral** notes of many varieties create very interesting **synergies** with the aromatic notes of the grape, exactly as happens with the interactions between yeasts and hops, an object of many studies in the world of India Pale Ales.

It is a subject that is still very much at the beginning of analysis, but I am convinced that it will be able to bring decidedly concrete results.



The hops pictured are called *White Grapes...* (!)  
The grapes are the famous *Nebbiolo*

# BREWING IGAs

How to build a great IGA?

**Start from the grape**, choose an interesting variety, and possibly source it locally (I can't see the point of using a Tuscany Sangiovese if you're in Piedmont).

Taste the grape, taste the wine, talk to winemakers, and try to understand which are the **peculiarities** of the **fruit** itself and of its **fermentation** (a grape can be pretty different from the wine made with it).

Then figure out which kind of beer style could make a successful marriage with that kind of grape.

- **Color?**
- **Maltiness?**
- **Alcoholic strength?**
- **Fermentation esters?**
- **Aromatic notes of hops?** (anyway bitterness should always be rather low)



Cuneiform tablet depicting beer allocation  
2351-2342 BC  
From Girsu. Uruinimgina King  
British Museum. London

# KEY POINTS

What do we look for, when we approach an IGA?

First of all: **it has to be a beer**. Using grapes can be tricky and we must avoid the risk that the vinous part completely takes over the cereal part.

Second: **balance**. The vinous part should be there, and the base beer style must be appropriate to the characteristics of the grape. You can't use delicate Muscat grapes in a strong Imperial Stout, for example.

Third: **originality**. A good IGA must tell something new, and arouse new emotions in those who taste it.

It has to be beyond classic beers. In other words, grapes must contribute in a result **otherwise impossible** to achieve with malts, hops, and yeasts.



# CONCLUSIONS

As shown, there are **hundreds** of different **varieties** of grapes and several ways to use them, in distinct parts of the production. Virtually there are **endless possibilities** and combinations, there is **no limit** to the paths that can be taken.

For this reason, I believe that it makes **no sense** to try to define the style with **objective parameters**, as the BJCP tries to do.

I believe a more secular approach is more effective, more **open to contamination** coming from the world of wine, with a way of telling, serving, and pairing more similar to what normally happens for the drink of Bacchus, compared to that of Gambrinus.

And I believe that this bond between **winemakers** and **brewers** can be a stimulus and **growth** for both from a professional point of view, without neglecting the great **tourism potential**.

## Vital Statistics

<b>IBU</b>	10 - 30
<b>SRM</b>	4 - 8
<b>OG</b>	1.059 - 1.075
<b>FG</b>	1.004 - 1.013
<b>ABV</b>	6% - 8.5%

# Thanks for the attention

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