

# The Rhetoric of Wine

By Giles Watson

**Just over a decade** ago, I wrote a piece on wine translation called “Notes on Notes” for *Tradurre*, the newsletter of ATA’s Italian Language Division.<sup>1</sup> It was intended as an introduction to the translation of wine descriptions and reviews, which is a relatively rich source of work requiring a bit of technical knowledge and the ability to analyze a text’s rhetoric (the force of its language) and reproduce its original intent in the target language. After working with a fair number of translators as the editor of Gambero Rosso’s *Italian Wines (Vini d’Italia)* guide every year since the article was published, I think it might be useful to highlight some areas that seem to require my editorial intervention with particular frequency. Some of the strategies discussed here can also be useful for other types of translation.

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## The language of wine has its own rhetoric.

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Before we move on, there are a few general points to be made about translating in this sector.

- First, the language of wine has its own rhetoric. As in other linguistic genres, that rhetoric is not the same in English and Italian. The main differences are culture-related and involve underlying stylistic expectations, but wine-related elements also play an important part in the choices a translator makes. Sector-specific vocabulary can be hard to spot without some prior knowledge.
- Second, it is clear that wine professionals who translate usually produce better work than translation professionals who work with wine texts. At least in my experience, the former are more confident with wine-related styles, which they already use when writing directly in the target language, while the latter tend to have a more restricted range of translation options at their disposal and are more likely to misconstrue the original. Obviously, translators improve with experience,<sup>2</sup> but neophytes often assume that “any-

thing goes,” particularly when it comes to translating tasting notes.

- Third, it is important to read translations out loud. The English should ring true, which will not be the case if the organization of thought in the Italian is followed too slavishly. Naturally, no ideas expressed in the original should be removed or added in the course of translation: equivalent content should be delivered with equivalent force.

### Format of Wine Descriptions

An important factor to keep in mind when translating is that a wine’s description follows the sequence of its sensory examination (“appearance-nose-palate” or “sight-smell-taste”). The meaning of a term can change depending on the stage of sensory examination to which it refers. For example, **the adjective** *intens-* can refer to visual examination, and is best rendered as “depth.” Here are two versions of the same passage taken from the Italian and English editions of *Italian Wines* from 2008:

**Vini d’Italia:** *La novità, che quest’anno andrà a rimpolpare la già consistente gamma dei vini prodotti, è il Monferrato Rosso Macchiaferro 2005, prodotto da uve albarossa al 90% e nebbiolo. Stupisce l’intensità di colore ...*

**Italian Wines:** This year, that range acquired even more flesh with the new Monferrato Rosso Macchiaferro ’05, made from albarossa with ten percent nebbiolo. It has amazing **depth** of colour ...

However, *intens-* can also refer to the wine’s nose (i.e., its smell), in which case, “intense” or “pervasive”

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might be more appropriate in the English translation:

**Vini d’Italia:** *Barbera d’Asti Superiore Nizza, un prodotto che ha stoffa e grande struttura, supportata da profumi intensi di frutta rossa matura e di spezie dolci.*

**Italian Wines:** Barbera d’Asti Superiore Nizza again showed very well, gaining Two Glasses. It’s a wine of great structure and substance, given a lift by **intense** aromas of ripe red berry fruit and sweet spices.

Similarly, the term *articolazione*, which refers to the clarity with which the wine’s various aromas can be distinguished, may crop up in either the “nose” or the “palate” section of a description. “Complexity” or “aroma separation” are possibilities in both cases, while “flavo(u)r separation” is an option in palate descriptions only.

The translation options for sensory evaluation descriptors suggested on my website (Watson’s Wine Glossary: [www.watson.it](http://www.watson.it)) attempt to call attention to these sensory examination-related distinctions.

### Culture-Related Differences

In broad-brush terms, Italian wine writers tend to be slightly less specific in their use of descriptors than their English peers. Category expressions

like *frutta bianca* (“white-fleshed fruit[s]”), for example, are used more frequently than in English, which tends to prefer to name individual aromatics (“apple-like,” “pears and apples”). This is one of the reasons a translation from Italian is likely to be less effective than a description expressed directly in English.

Wine writing in the U.S. also tends, or tended, to have more formal stylistic expectations and to be less linguistically inventive than writing produced in the U.K., but Internet self-publishing is blurring the edges fast. Wine writing, like many other kinds of writing, also tends to be more formal and less linguistically adventurous in Italian than in English. Of course, all of these observations are empirical: none is a hard and fast rule.

There are other secondary points to consider. Some English-language wine writers, particularly in the U.S., have a habit of making normally uncountable wine-related concepts countable. Let’s look at another passage from the 2008 edition of *Italian Wines*:

**Vini d’Italia:** *L’alcol è in netta evidenza e questo è forse l’unico limite.*

**Italian Wines:**

- The only quibble is an alcohol that raises its head a bit much. (American translator’s draft)

- The only quibble is that the alcohol raises its head a bit much. (Published version)

This style of writing represents general American usage, however, and is not restricted to wine.<sup>4</sup>

### Other Style Expectations

In addition to differing register preferences, Italian and English present clear differences in the way they organize ideas, and not just in wine writing. Reshuffling the order of ideas, or recasting the syntax to maintain the original order, can do much to improve readability without detracting from the accuracy of the translation. For instance, here is a sentence that appeared in the 2006 edition of *Italian Wines*:

*Vini d'Italia: È sufficiente entrare nel cortile di questa straordinaria azienda, dare un'occhiata all'anfiteatro di vigneti che la circondano, o meglio ancora essere accarezzati dal bel venticello che qui non manca mai, per essere già estasiati.*

**Italian Wines:** Just enter the courtyard, take a look at the amphitheatre of vines surrounding it or, better, let yourself be caressed by the ever-present soft breeze, and you'll be enraptured.

Here, substituting the Italian infinitives with imperatives provides a reassuring implied subject at the beginning of a sentence that would otherwise require an initial placeholder (“it”) and leave the reader on tenterhooks until the arrival of the complement two and a half lines later. Italian is one of those languages that like to ease into a sentence by prefacing the subject with one or more adjuncts. English, in contrast, gener-

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ally prefers to get straight to the point and shift secondary information to the far side of the subject and verb. Here is another example, again from the 2006 edition of *Italian Wines*:

*Vini d'Italia: In attesa della Barbera d'Asti Superiore La Cappelletta 2005, ancora in affinamento al momento delle nostre degustazioni, dobbiamo registrare il buon comportamento della Barbera Barisé, la Barbera base che si fa apprezzare grazie alla freschezza e alla vena acida, supportata da una valida struttura.*

**Italian Wines:** Barbera d'Asti Superiore La Cappelletta '05 was still ageing at the time of our tastings, but the standard Barbera Barisé showed excellently with freshness, a good swath of acidity and sound structure.

### Italian Twos and English Threes

A crucial part of making translations readable is rearranging the adjective strings that crop up with unailing frequency in descriptions of wines. Italian and English writers tend to group the ideas expressed in these phrases differently. Writers in Italian tend to prefer pairs, or pairs of pairs, and writers in English tend to favor triplets. This phenomenon is not limited to adjective strings. In general, Italian likes to base its discourse on balanced pairs of ideas (1+1) to imply solidity. Italian writers

continue to value, and their readers expect, syntactical solidity and pyramidal hierarchies, which can appear dull if transposed into English. This is why writers in English, particularly of marketing texts, tend to prefer triplets (1+1+1), often extending the final element so that the rhythm suggests pace. The rhythm of the triplet suggests something that is “moving forward.” However, the momentum of English-style triplets tends to sound agitated if overused in Italian. Of course, this is not a hard and fast rule—triplets can be found in Italian and pairs in English—but the respective baseline expectations, as well as the effect of the rhetorical device, are different. From the Italian>English translator's point of view, turning adjective pairs into triplets is one of the ways in which the target text can be reformulated to enhance musicality and facilitate comprehension. Here is an example from a 2009 issue of the English-language wine magazine *Decanter*:

**Sweet, supple, full bouquet.** Spiced black fruits with a winning freshness on the palate. **Long, clear and really persistent.** A wine of lovely abundance. (1+1+1), (1+1+1)

Note that the tonic rhythm (dum, dum, dum-di-dum) is common to many such English triplets (as in “màd, bàd, and dàngerous to knòw”).

Continued on p. 20



## References for Wine Translators

(In order of frequency of consultation by Giles Watson)

*Lexique de la Vigne et du Vin – Français – Italiano – Español – Deutsch – Português – English – Русский* (Office International de la Vigne et du Vin Paris, 1963).  
(The standard multilingual wine dictionary. It is out of print, but well worth tracking down.)

Jackson, R.S. *Wine Science – Principles and Applications, 3rd edition* (Academic Press London, 2008), ISBN: 978-0-12-373646-8.  
(This source is thorough and accessible, even to non-scientists.)

Robinson, J. (editor). *The Oxford Companion to Wine, 3rd edition* (Oxford University Press, 2006), ISBN: 978-0-19-860990-2.  
(The book's easy-to-use alphabetical organization contains a wealth of useful information.)

Bird, D. *Understanding Wine Technology – The Science of Wine Explained* (Newark: DBQA Publishing, 2005), ISBN: 0-9535802-1-0.  
(A readable account of how wine is made. It is particularly useful if your science background is sketchy.)

Eynard, I., and G. Dalmasso. *Viticultura Moderna – Manuale Pratico, 9a edizione* (Milano: Hoepli, 1990), ISBN: 88-203-1768-0.  
(A complete and accurate resource.)

Saracco, C., G. Gay Eynard, M. Castino, and A. Gozzelino. *Manuale pratico del viticoltore e del cantiniere* (Edagricole – Edizioni Agricole de Il Sole 24 ORE Edagricole S.r.l., 2002), ISBN: 88-506-0079-8.  
(A general text with a good section on vine diseases.)

March, J. *The Winemakers' Essential Phrasebook* (London: Mitchell Beazley, 2004), ISBN: 1-84000-782-6.  
(A source for process-related phrases in several languages.)

*Dizionario Veronelli dei termini del vino [a cura di Masnaghetti, A.]* (Bergamo: Veronelli editore, 2001), ISBN: 887250-068-0.  
(Contains brief explanations in Italian of a wide range of wine terms.)

There are also good English and Italian translations of a standard French work on wine and tasting, which may be useful, especially when you are starting out:

Peynaud, E. *The Taste of Wine – The Art and Science of Wine Appreciation, 2nd edition*. Translated by M. Schuster (Wiley Chichester, 1996) ISBN: 0-471-11376-X.

Peynaud, E. *Il Gusto del Vino, edizione italiana a cura di L. Paronetto* (Brescia: Edizioni AEB, 1983), ISBN: 88-7027-026-2.

And finally, VinotoWine (V2W: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/vinotowine>), the Yahoo! group originally set up for *Italian Wines* translators, is still active. To join, request an invitation through my website ([www.watson.it](http://www.watson.it)) or write to me at [gileswatson@gmail.com](mailto:gileswatson@gmail.com).

Here are two pairs from a 2006 issue *Vini d'Italia* that were redistributed as one attributive plus a predicative triplet in *Italian Wines*:

***Vini d'Italia:*** È un vino dal colore dorato carico, dai profumi opulenti di confettura d'albicocca, fichi secchi ed erbe della macchia mediterranea, che in bocca è **grasso e intensamente dolce, misurato e godibile come sempre.** (1+1), (1+1)

***Italian Wines:*** Its dark gold introduces opulent aromas of apricot jam, dried figs and the herbs of the Mediterranean scrubland. The **well-judged** palate is **rich, intensely sweet and as enjoyable as ever.** (1), (1+1+1)

Often, the close of a pair, or string of pairs, in Italian is signaled by a pair within the second element of a pair.

Here is an example from a 2011 issue of *Italian Wines*:

***Vini d'Italia:*** Ci convince di più il Pinot Nero Brighhof '07, fresco nei profumi e snello e scorrevole al palato. (1+[1+1])

***Italian Wines:*** The '07 Pinot Nero Brighhof is more convincing with its fresh nose and slim-bodied, supple palate.

If translated literally, sentences like the ones above will seem clunky (try reading “fresh on the nose and slim and supple on the palate” out loud). However, the pattern is very common, to the point where at times editing *Italian Wines* seems to consist mainly of removing conjunctions from, as well as rearranging, paired adjective strings.

The following example, taken from a 2011 issue of *Italian Wines*, features a triplet in Italian with comments arranged in the three stages of **tasting**. The adjective pair in the nose section (*marasca matura e liquirizia*) is followed directly by another pair describing the palate (*morbido e succoso*), which is a pattern that would sound weak if copied in English. In this case, the solution was to tweak the rhythm by turning one of the adjectives into an adverb.

***Vini d'Italia:*** Il Refosco '07 ha un colore vivace, profuma di marasca matura e liquirizia ed è morbido e succoso al pari dello Schioppettino '07 ...

***Italian Wines:*** The '07 Refosco's vibrant hue frames ripe morello cherry and liquorice while the palate is every bit as juicily soft-textured as the '07 Schioppettino ...

## Tooling Up

If this brief overview has whetted your appetite for wine translation, the box on page 19 lists some references you might enjoy as you leaf through some of the many English- and Italian-language wine translations.

## Notes

1. Watson, Giles. “Notes on Notes,” *Tradurre* (November, 2001).
2. Translating in a new sector is a little like foraging for mushrooms: make your initial expeditions with someone who knows more than you do; catalogue your finds carefully; only use what you are absolutely sure of; and remember that training and study are life-savers.
3. *Vini d'Italia* and *Italian Wines* are published respectively by G.R.H. S.p.A. and Gambero Rosso, Inc.
4. Here is another example of making uncountable concepts countable. It was googled more or less at random and sounds odd to U.K. ears: “Our nonprofit customers receive a five-dollar value for every dollar they invest in our services.” Taken from the Community Development page of the Federal Reserve of St. Louis website (<http://bit.ly/StLouis-Federal-Reserve>).

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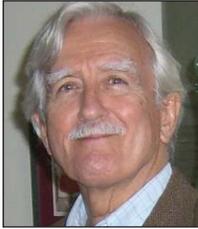
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