

Chapter Twenty-Three

Vermentino

Mediterranean marvel



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Fundamentals

Vermentino, a white grape variety celebrated for its adaptability to coastal climates, is known for producing refreshing wines that embody a distinct Mediterranean character. While primarily cultivated in various regions across the Mediterranean, Vermentino is also known regionally as Pigato in Liguria, Favorita in Piemonte, Italy, and Rolle in France. Its growing popularity in international markets, particularly in the United States and Australia, is a testament to its versatile appeal and ability to resonate with global wine trends focusing on crisp, aromatic whites.

Bud and Ripening Behavior: Vermentino is a relatively late-ripening variety, which allows for an extended growing season to develop complex flavors while maintaining robust acidity levels. This characteristic makes it particularly

well-suited to the warm, coastal climates of the Mediterranean, where the cooling influence of the sea during the ripening period helps to temper the heat and enhance flavor development.

Yield and Quality: Although Vermentino naturally tends to produce high yields, managing these yields is crucial for crafting high-quality wines. Vineyards that focus on moderate yields typically harvest grapes with greater concentration and intensity, yielding wines with enhanced depth, complexity, and varietal expression. This approach underscores the importance of sustainable vineyard practices that balance productivity with environmental considerations.

Clonal Selection: Clonal selection in Vermentino plays a pivotal role in adapting the vine to specific terroirs and optimizing wine quality. Selecting clones that thrive in coastal climates and varied soil types, particularly those resistant to environmental stresses such as drought, is increasingly vital as growers face the challenges of climate change. These chosen clones can enhance the grape's signature aromatics and preserve its crisp acidity, contributing to the grape's resilience and consistency in quality across vintages.

Acidity and Structure: Vermentino is renowned for its naturally high acidity and medium-bodied structure, attributes that contribute to the fresh, vibrant profile of the wines. These characteristics not only make Vermentino wines appealing for their lively backbone and refreshing quality but also suitable for aging, showcasing the varietal's potential beyond young, fresh wines.

Winemaking Techniques: In winemaking, techniques such as cool fermentation in stainless steel tanks are employed to preserve Vermentino's fresh, citrusy, and floral aromas, while lees aging and the judicious use of neutral oak or acacia barrels can add complexity and a creamy texture. These methods are carefully chosen to highlight the grape's natural flavors and adapt to market preferences for wines with minimal oaky influence. Key techniques include:

- **Cool Fermentation:** Fermentation at low temperatures in stainless steel tanks is widely used to maintain the grape's fresh, citrusy, and floral aromas and flavors, as well as its crisp acidity.
- **Lees Aging:** Some producers employ extended lees contact to add depth, complexity, and a slightly creamy texture to the wines without compromising the varietal character.
- **Oak Aging:** While most Vermentino wines are fermented and aged in stainless steel to showcase the grape's purity, some producers may use neutral oak or acacia barrels to enhance texture and complexity without imparting overt wood flavors.

Flavor Profile and Integration: Vermentino wines typically feature vibrant notes of lemon, grapefruit, and white peach, accented by herbal nuances and a distinctive mineral undertone. The integration of these flavors with the grape's high acidity results in a harmonious balance, producing wines that are not only refreshing and crisp but also express the nuanced characteristics of their coastal Mediterranean terroir.

Basic Wine Styles of Vermentino: Vermentino wines are primarily produced in a dry, refreshing style that emphasizes the grape's natural acidity, aromatic intensity, and coastal influence. The wine styles, however, vary significantly depending on the region and terroir where the grapes are grown:

Coastal Tuscany & Liguria: Here, Vermentino often shows a bright, aromatic profile with crisp acidity, enhanced by citrus and floral notes. The proximity to the sea adds a distinctive saline minerality, particularly evident in wines from the coastal areas. In Tuscany, especially from the Maremma area, Vermentino displays a balance of zestiness and a rounded texture, where the influence of both maritime winds and moderate vineyard elevations contribute to a fuller body and complex flavor profiles.

Sardinia: In the northern part of the island, Vermentino di Gallura DOCG represents a more complex and structured expression of the grape. Elevated vineyards, often reaching up to 500 meters, combined with strong maritime winds, contribute to a unique terroir that allows Vermentino to develop intense ripe tropical fruit notes, herbal undertones, and a pronounced minerality, finishing with a characteristic almond note. These geographic and climatic factors help produce wines with greater depth and the potential for aging.

Corsica: Known locally as Rolle, Corsican Vermentino ranges from lean and crisp to well-rounded and aromatic. The island's Vermentino benefits from both high-altitude vineyards and vigorous sea breezes, which enhance the grape's natural acidity and contribute to its mineral backbone. This results in wines with a distinct herbal and floral character, showcasing the unique interplay between altitude and maritime influences on the Corsican terroir.

Preferred Climate: Vermentino thrives in warm, sunny climates, especially those tempered by the cooling influence of the sea. Traditionally well-suited to the Mediterranean climate, where warm days and cool nights help balance sugar and acid development in the grapes, Vermentino ensures the retention of freshness and aromatic intensity. However, as climate change introduces higher temperatures and more variable weather patterns, these ideal conditions are shifting. Increasingly warmer climates are prompting vintners to explore adaptive viticultural strategies to maintain the grape's characteristic profile. To counteract the effects of rising temperatures, growers are adopting practices such as altering canopy management to provide more shade and reduce grape exposure to intense sunlight, thus protecting the grapes from sunburn and excessive sugar accumulation which can lead to unbalanced wines. Additionally, vineyard sites at higher altitudes or in northern latitudes are being sought for their cooler conditions and slower ripening cycles, which help preserve acidity and aromatic compounds in the grapes. Moreover, coastal breezes play a crucial role in moderating temperatures, but as weather patterns become less predictable, the reliability of these cooling winds is affected. In response, more precise water management techniques are being implemented to ensure vines remain hydrated and healthy without promoting excessive vigor that could dilute the grapes' flavors. This includes the use of drought-resistant rootstocks and the installation of efficient irrigation systems that can reduce water usage while ensuring optimal vine growth. These adaptive measures are essential for maintaining the high quality of Vermentino wines in the face of environmental changes, allowing this varietal to continue producing wines with balance, freshness, and aromatic intensity despite the challenges posed by climate change.

Terroir Characteristics: The terroir has a significant influence on the expression of Vermentino wines. Limestone and granite-based soils, often found in the coastal regions where Vermentino is grown, contribute to the wines' mineral qualities and aromatic complexity. The proximity to the sea also imparts a saline character and a refreshing coastal influence to the wines.

Grape Characteristics: The Vermentino grape is known for its thick skins, which contribute to the wines' robust flavor profile and potential for higher alcohol levels. The grape tends to produce wines that are aromatic and full-flavored, with varying degrees of acidity depending on the specific growing conditions and viticultural practices employed.

Viticulture and Vinification: Viticultural practices for Vermentino are focused on managing the grape's natural vigor and optimizing fruit quality. Careful canopy management, including leaf removal and bunch thinning, is essential to ensure adequate sun exposure, promote even ripening, and control yields. In the winery, gentle pressing and cool fermentation in stainless steel tanks are common practices to preserve the grape's delicate aromatics and crisp acidity. Some producers may employ extended lees contact or use neutral oak to add depth and complexity to the wines.

Maturation: While Vermentino wines are typically designed to be enjoyed young, when their vibrant acidity, fresh fruit flavors, and coastal character are most expressive, some examples, particularly those from Sardinia, have the structure and concentration to benefit from short-term aging. With time in the bottle, these wines can develop more complex notes of herbs, nuts, and a heightened mineral expression, while still retaining their essential freshness and varietal character.

Market Trends and Environmental Adaptability: As Vermentino gains recognition on the international stage, its adaptability to various environmental conditions and market demands plays a crucial role in its cultivation strategy. The variety's ability to withstand drought makes it increasingly important in regions grappling with climate variability,

ensuring that Vermentino continues to deliver high-quality wines despite changing climatic conditions. This resilience, coupled with its growing popularity among consumers seeking vibrant and mineral-driven whites, positions Vermentino as a key player in the future of sustainable viticulture.

Regions and Appellations

Vermentino, with its sun-loving nature and coastal affinities, offers a distinct interpretation of terroir through its regional expressions. The grape finds its most notable homes in the coastal areas of Italy and France, where it thrives in the Mediterranean climate and produces wines of great character and typicity.

Liguria, Italy: In Liguria, particularly in the Colli di Luni DOC and Riviera Ligure di Ponente DOC, Vermentino is the star white grape variety. The steep, terraced vineyards overlooking the Ligurian Sea provide a unique growing environment, where the grape benefits from ample sun exposure and the moderating influence of the sea breezes. The resulting wines are known for their freshness, delicate floral and citrus notes, and a distinct saline minerality that reflects the coastal terroir.

Tuscany, Italy: Vermentino has established a significant presence in Tuscany, thriving particularly in the coastal areas where the Mediterranean climate favorably influences viticulture. The Maremma region and the island of Elba are prominent zones where Vermentino is cultivated. In these areas, the grape benefits from the proximity to the sea, which provides a cooling effect that tempers the warm Tuscan sun, allowing a slower and more even ripening process. In Maremma, Vermentino is often celebrated as a varietal wine that captures the essence of the region's coastal terroir. The wines are marked by a zesty acidity and vibrant flavors of citrus and stone fruits, such as peach and apricot. Herbal notes, reminiscent of the aromatic scrubland that dots the Tuscan coastline, add complexity to the palate. The texture of these wines is refined, with a mineral-driven finish that reflects the sandy and stony soils prevalent in this part of Tuscany. On the island of Elba, Vermentino expresses a slightly different character due to the unique insular terroir and slightly more granitic soil composition. Here, the wines can show a greater intensity of minerality and often a touch more body, making them stand out for their structure and depth. The blend of sea influence and distinctive island terroir fosters a Vermentino with pronounced floral aromatics and a lingering saline finish. Both regions are home to DOC designations that recognize the quality and unique characteristics of Tuscan Vermentino: Maremma Toscana DOC and Elba Vermentino DOC. These appellations ensure that the wines meet rigorous standards and often encourage sustainable viticulture practices to preserve the natural beauty and viticultural heritage of Tuscany.

Sardinia, Italy: The island of Sardinia hosts some of the most distinguished expressions of Vermentino, particularly in the Vermentino di Gallura DOCG, the only DOCG designation for Vermentino on the island. This region's granite-rich soils and the warm, wind-swept climate of Gallura are pivotal in shaping the wine's character. The high altitudes and specific microclimates within these areas allow Vermentino grapes to maintain their acidity and develop concentrated flavors, contributing to wines that are full-bodied and aromatic. They display ripe fruit flavors, such as peach and apricot, coupled with herbal undertones and a pronounced minerality. A characteristic slightly bitter, almond-like finish is a hallmark of the Vermentino grown in this part of Sardinia, making these wines distinctly recognizable.

Corsica, France: In Corsica, where Vermentino is predominantly known as Rolle, it stands as one of the principal white grape varieties. The topography of the island, including its mountainous landscapes, significantly influences the vineyards by providing varied elevations and aspects. This diversity in terrain results in a wide range of wine styles from Rolle—ranging from light and crisp to more full-bodied and aromatic, depending on the altitude and exposure of the vineyards. Corsican Vermentino typically features a vibrant herbal and floral character, underlined by refreshing acidity and a pronounced stony mineral backbone that echoes the island's rocky, limestone-rich soils. These factors together enhance the complexity and expressiveness of Corsican Vermentino, offering a unique interpretation of this versatile grape.

Other Notable Regions:

Vermentino is also grown in other parts of Italy, such as Piemonte and Lazio, as well as in the Languedoc-Roussillon and Provence regions of France. In these areas, the grape is often used as a blending component or produced as a varietal wine, contributing its characteristic freshness, aromatics, and coastal influence to the wines.

Appellation Regulations and Styles:

Each of the key regions for Vermentino has its own appellation regulations and quality designations that govern the production and labeling of the wines. These regulations help to ensure the typicity and quality of Vermentino wines from each area, while also allowing for some stylistic diversity.

For example, in the Vermentino di Gallura DOCG, the wines must be made from at least 95% Vermentino grapes and adhere to strict yield limitations and winemaking practices. These regulations contribute to the production of full-bodied, structured wines that showcase the unique character of Vermentino grown in the Galluran terroir.

In contrast, the Colli di Luni DOC in Liguria allows for more flexibility in blending, with Vermentino comprising a minimum of 70% of the blend. This enables producers to craft wines with a greater range of styles, from light and crisp to more complex and age-worthy.

The appellation regulations and quality designations across the different regions where Vermentino is grown play a crucial role in protecting the reputation and ensuring the authenticity of the wines. They also contribute to the diversity of styles and expressions of Vermentino, highlighting the grape's adaptability and potential to produce high-quality wines that reflect the unique terroir of each region.

From the crisp and mineral-driven wines of Liguria to the full-bodied and aromatic expressions of Sardinia, and the herbal and floral styles of Corsica, Vermentino offers a fascinating exploration of the Mediterranean coastal terroir and the grape's versatility. As consumers and wine enthusiasts continue to discover and appreciate the distinctive qualities of Vermentino, the grape is poised to gain even greater recognition as a leading white variety of the Mediterranean, capable of producing wines of exceptional character, freshness, and sense of place.

DEVICES:

Dirt (Soil Type): The soils in which Vermentino is grown play a crucial role in shaping the wine's distinct character. In coastal regions of Italy and France, the grape thrives in soils rich in limestone, granite, and sandy deposits. These soil types contribute to the wine's pronounced minerality, which is a hallmark of Vermentino. The well-draining nature of these soils also helps to regulate vine vigor and promote balanced ripening, resulting in grapes with concentrated flavors and healthy acidity levels. The mineral-rich soils impart a sense of place to the wines, reflecting the unique terroir of each region where Vermentino is cultivated.

Environment (Climate and Weather): Vermentino is well-adapted to the warm, Mediterranean climate that characterizes its primary growing regions. The grape benefits from ample sunshine and heat, which allow for full ripening and the development of its signature aromatic profile. However, the proximity to the sea and the influence of cooling maritime breezes are equally important, as they help to moderate temperatures and preserve the grape's natural acidity. This balance between warmth and freshness is essential for producing Vermentino wines that are both vibrant and complex, with a harmonious interplay of ripe fruit flavors and zesty acidity.

Viticulture (Vineyard Practices): Vineyard management practices are critical for optimizing the quality and expression of Vermentino grapes. Careful canopy management, including leaf removal and bunch thinning, is employed to ensure adequate sun exposure and air circulation around the grape clusters. This practice helps to promote even ripening, reduce the risk of disease, and enhance the development of varietal aromas and flavors. Yield control is also important,



as excessive yields can dilute the grape's character and lead to wines that lack concentration and complexity. The best Vermentino vineyards are often managed with a focus on sustainability and minimal intervention, allowing the grape to express its natural potential and the unique characteristics of the terroir.

Innovation (Vinification and Technology): Advances in winemaking technology have greatly influenced the quality and consistency of Vermentino wines. Temperature-controlled fermentation in stainless steel tanks is widely used to preserve the grape's delicate aromatics and fresh, crisp character. This process allows winemakers to showcase Vermentino's varietal purity and the nuances of its terroir. Some producers also experiment with extended lees contact or the use of neutral oak to add depth and complexity to the wines, without overwhelming the grape's inherent qualities. Innovative packaging solutions, such as screw caps or alternative closures, have further contributed to maintaining the freshness and integrity of Vermentino wines, ensuring that they reach consumers in optimal condition.

Cuvée (Blend): While Vermentino is often vinified as a single varietal wine to showcase its distinct character, some producers choose to blend it with other complementary grape varieties. In regions like Liguria and Tuscany, Vermentino is sometimes blended with local grapes such as Bosco or Albarola to add complexity and depth to the wines. These blends are carefully crafted to ensure that Vermentino's signature characteristics—its vibrant acidity, citrus and floral notes, and mineral backbone—remain at the forefront. The art of blending allows winemakers to create unique expressions of Vermentino that reflect the diversity and richness of each region's winemaking traditions.

Elevation (Topography): The topography of Vermentino vineyards can have a significant impact on the final wine style. In coastal regions like Liguria and northern Sardinia, many vineyards are planted on steep, terraced hillsides that offer excellent sun exposure and drainage. The higher elevations and proximity to the sea create a unique microclimate that promotes slow, even ripening and helps to maintain the grape's natural acidity. These conditions are particularly favorable for producing Vermentino wines with great aromatic intensity, mineral complexity, and age-worthy structure. In contrast, vineyards planted on flatter, lower-lying areas may yield wines with a more fruit-forward character and softer acidity.

Style (Winemaking Choices): The style of Vermentino wines is largely determined by the winemaking choices that producers make. Many winemakers opt for a crisp, unoaked style that emphasizes the grape's natural freshness and varietal character. These wines are typically fermented in stainless steel tanks at cool temperatures to preserve the delicate aromatics and crisp acidity. However, some producers choose to ferment or age a portion of the wine in neutral oak barrels or acacia wood to add depth, texture, and complexity. The use of malolactic fermentation is also a stylistic choice, with some winemakers embracing it to soften the acidity and enhance the wine's mouthfeel, while others avoid it to maintain the grape's vibrant, citrusy edge. The decision to age the wine on its lees, with or without stirring, can also influence the final style, contributing to a richer texture and a more complex flavor profile.

Terroir (Integration of All Factors): Vermentino's expression is a testament to the integrated effect of soil, climate, vineyard practices, and winemaking techniques. Each region—from the saline-tinged wines of Liguria to the robust, herbal notes of Sardinian Vermentino—reflects a distinct sense of place. This integration ensures that Vermentino not only showcases its versatility but also its deep connection to the Mediterranean terroir, illustrating the dynamic interplay between nature and human influence.

Tasting Note for Argiolas Costamolino Vermentino:

Appearance: The wine displays a brilliant, pale lemon color with subtle green reflections, hinting at its youthful character and the influence of the coastal Sardinian terroir.

Nose: The wine presents an expressive and layered bouquet, where zesty lemon, lime, and crisp green apple lead the way, intertwined with delicate white blossom aromas. As it opens, nuances of Mediterranean herbs and a distinct saline minerality emerge, adding depth and intrigue. The aromatic profile is both vibrant and nuanced, reflecting the varietal purity of Vermentino and the distinctive maritime influence of Sardinia's terroir.

Palate: Bright and refreshing, the wine is **dry and medium-bodied**, with **crisp acidity** that energizes the palate. **Citrus notes of lemon and lime dominate**, complemented by **green apple and a pronounced mineral core**, mirroring the **granite-rich soils of Sardinia**. A **subtle almond nuance** adds a delicate richness, lending complexity without overpowering the wine's **lively character**. The **texture is refined and smooth**, while the well-integrated alcohol provides structure without overshadowing the **freshness and purity of flavors**. The wine concludes with a **long, clean, and refreshing finish**, where **saline minerality and citrus zest** linger elegantly. The final impression is one of **balance and finesse**, with a **mouthwatering sensation that invites another sip**, encapsulating the **essence of Vermentino and its coastal origins**.

Quality Assessment: The wine is of very good quality.

- **Balance (5/5):** The Argiolas Costamolino Vermentino achieves an exceptional balance between its vibrant acidity, concentrated fruit flavors, and mineral intensity, creating a harmonious and captivating experience that exemplifies the finest qualities of Vermentino from Sardinia.
- **Length (5/5):** The finish is impressively long and persistent, with the complex interplay of citrus, floral, and mineral notes lingering on the palate, reflecting the wine's outstanding quality and the skilled winemaking that allows the terroir to shine through.
- **Intensity (4/5):** The aromatic and flavor intensity is pronounced, with well-defined lemon, lime, and green apple characteristics that showcase Vermentino's varietal expression and the influence of the coastal Sardinian terroir.
- **Complexity (4/5):** The wine displays a remarkable complexity, with layers of citrus, floral, herbal, and mineral notes that evolve and intertwine on the nose and palate, providing a multifaceted and engaging tasting experience.
- **Typicity (5/5):** This Argiolas Costamolino Vermentino is a quintessential expression of the grape and its Sardinian origins, showcasing Vermentino's hallmark acidity, citrusy flavors, and saline minerality, along with the region's signature freshness and Mediterranean character.

Distinguishing Factors for Blind Tasting

Vermentino:

*Light to medium-bodied with high acidity
Citrus fruits (lemon, grapefruit), white peach, and herbal notes*

*Subtle almond and mineral undertones
Crisp, refreshing, and slightly bitter finish
Usually unoaked, emphasizing varietal character and Mediterranean terroir*

Fiano:

*Medium to full-bodied with moderate to high acidity
Ripe stone fruits (peach, apricot), tropical fruits (pineapple, mango), and honey*

*Distinct nutty character (hazelnut, almond) and herbal notes
Texture can range from creamy to oily, with a long, complex finish
Some examples may have oak influence, adding depth and complexity*

Arneis:

*Light to medium-bodied with moderate acidity
Floral notes (white flowers, chamomile), citrus fruits (lemon, orange), and pear*

*Subtle almond and mineral undertones
Crisp, refreshing, and slightly bitter finish
Typically unoaked, showcasing varietal purity and Piedmontese terroir*

Falaghina:

*Light to medium-bodied with high acidity
Citrus fruits (lemon, grapefruit), green apple, and white flowers
Subtle mineral undertones, often with a saline or marine character*

*Crisp, refreshing mouthfeel with a vibrant finish
Typically unoaked, focusing on varietal purity and freshness*

Similarities:

All four wines have a refreshing character and a subtle bitter finish

*Citrus fruit notes are common in the aroma and flavor profiles
Almond and mineral undertones are present to varying degrees*

*Typically vinified in a dry style, with most examples being unoaked
Often associated with Italian wine regions*

Aging Potential: While the Argiolas Costamolino Vermentino is designed to be enjoyed in its youth, when its vibrant fruit, crisp acidity, and saline minerality are at their most expressive, the wine's balance, concentration, and structure suggest that it has the potential to remain in bottle and perhaps develop positively over the short term.