

Untold Italy Episode 238: Liguria - A Small But Mighty Wine Region

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 238.

Ciao a tutti and Benvenuti to Untold Italy, the travel podcast, where you go to the towns and villages, mountains and lakes, hills and coastlines of Bella Italia. Each week your host Katy Clarke takes you on a journey in search of magical landscapes of history, culture, wine, gelato, and, of course, a whole lot of pasta. If you're dreaming of Italy and planning future adventures there, you've come to the right place.

Katy Clarke:

Ciao a tutti! Welcome, Benvenuti. Today we're paying a visit to one of my favorite Italian regions - Liguria - to learn about the local wine made from grapes cultivated in really very challenging conditions. Our friends Olivia and Andrea from Italian Wine Tales are here to give you the inside scoop on a region that has been making amazing wine for centuries but not in great quantities so it's rare to be able to buy it outside of Italy.

If you're not familiar with the Liguria region it is where you'll find the famous Cinque Terre villages. But, as you'll hear, there is much much more to this wonderful area that hugs the coastline from France in the north to Tuscany in the south.

Before we get started though I wanted to mention a new resource we have available for podcast listeners. With over 230 episodes it might be difficult to know where to dip in and out of or even find episodes on the places you want to visit or topics you're interested in. For some reason, none of the podcast apps enable searching within a podcast for specific topics so we've created a podcast guide where you can find what you're looking for whether that be information on Rome or what to eat in Puglia. Head on over to your podcast app or the show notes where you'll find the details on how to access the podcast guide.

Well, all that is thirsty work so I'm now starting to think of a nice glass of wine. Are you ready? Let's get sipping shall we?

Katy Clarke:

Bentornati. Welcome back to the Untold Italy podcast, Olivia and Andrea.

Olivia Windsor:

Ciao, Katy. Ciao everyone.

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Katy Clarke:

Oh, it is obviously so lovely to have you back on the show. And it's the first time since your wedding, Auguri! it was spectacular. I was there and it was really fun. I hope you had a good time too.

Olivia Windsor:

Grazie. Yeah. We had the best time. Yeah. 2 months ago now it's crazy how fast time flies, but yeah, we had a beautiful time.

Katy Clarke:

Oh, yeah. And it was very lovely just to be there with your family and friends. It was just beautiful. Now, how are things in Rome these days? I know we're recording this in August and I think it's pretty hot.

Olivia Windsor:

It is stifling. It's like being inside an oven. So all I would say is make sure your accommodation has good air conditioning. If you're coming in July and August, it's still quite busy obviously with tourists in the center, but the locals really empty out. And this week is probably the worst week to be here, the week of Ferragosto, which is 15th August because everything's closed except for the very, very center. You'll find restaurants, obviously, but all the kind of local neighborhood spots are all closed because everyone's at the beach, rightly so.

Katy Clarke:

Oh, good for them. Good for them. Okay. So before we dive into the wonderful wines of the region of Liguria, I'd like you to give everyone a quick rundown on who you are and let them know why you're so passionate about Italian wine.

Olivia Windsor:

So we are Andrea and Olivia, and we're the founders of Italian Wine Tales, which is an online resource that we created for people to find out more about Italian wine in a really fun and approachable manner. I moved here about 5 years ago. I'm from Australia, as you can tell by my accent, and Andrea is a local.

Andrea Mitti Rua:

Pretty much Italian. Yes. I come from Turin in the northwest, and we've been always passionate about wine. Liv and I, in fact, met because she was working in a winery. She was doing the harvest, the Vendemmia, and that's the period when we met. I was working in a restaurant, and from there on, our passion about wine blossomed. And we're now taking the Sommelier course. We're on the second level of it, and it's really interesting to share this passion together.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah. It's great. Well, I think you're half-Australian now anyway, aren't you?

Olivia Windsor:

By marriage. Exactly. We'll blame that.

Katy Clarke:

You won't escape us? So today we're going to a region whose wine perhaps isn't that well known, but it's actually one of my favorite regions, and that's Liguria. Can you take us there and give us a little virtual tour?

Andrea Mitti Rua:

Yep. Of course. So Liguria is in the northwest of Italy. So you probably know Tuscany, which is the region where Florence is. If you move northwest from Tuscany, you will find Liguria, which is a little, narrow strip of land, nestled between the Apennine Mountains and the Ligurian Sea. It borders with France on the west and with the Piedmont region in the north. As I said, it's a narrow strip of land, and its peculiarity is that there is very, very tiny, pieces of flat land because the Apennine mountains basically ends up directly into the Ligurian sea. So you will see a lot of, steep hills.

Andrea Mitti Rua:

And this is very important especially for the wine harvesting and winemaking in the region because, we'll talk about it more later, this gives birth to the peculiar way they have in the region for how they cultivate their grapes.

Olivia Windsor:

It's a beautiful, really beautiful region, but agriculture is quite difficult. As Andrea was mentioning, it's a tiny thin strip of land, so it's more, here about quality rather than quantity. It is not one of the biggest wine-producing regions by any means, but it's very, delicious wine, the wine that they do make.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah. And I imagine they don't export very much either. So if you want to taste it, you got to go there.

Olivia Windsor:

Exactly. Half the charm. Perfect with all delicious seafood.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah. And it's a beautiful region. So I guess most people would know the Cinque Terre towns and they don't really explore further. And it always baffles me because I do love Liguria a lot. It's one of my favorite regions.

Olivia Windsor:

Yeah. And I went there every holiday growing up because it's very close to Piedmont and he's got family from there.

Andrea Mitti Rua:

My family comes from there. And, as she said, it's a typical holiday spot in summer if you come from the north, especially from Turin where I'm from. Liguria is so close by, and so you always go there if you wanna go to the beach.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah. And it's just gorgeous. And it's a very different culture, isn't it? To like the south and the Amalfi coast. It's a little bit more refined. Everyone's, the towns are very colorful still. Like you just have all those colorful towns and there's so many cute little places along that coastline. Like I think it's a real shame (well, I quite like that they're not so busy), but, it's really sort of unknown to me why they are popular with Europeans.

Katy Clarke:

That's true.

Olivia Windsor:

But it's true. Yeah. You go to the Cinque Terre and everyone's packed like sardines. And don't get me wrong, Cinque Terre is obviously beautiful, but there's so much more besides the Cinque Terre if you just hop on the train as well. That's the other thing. It's a great region to travel by train. If you don't want to drive, it's perfect and you just go past all these beautiful little beach side towns. They've all got the colorful houses, so it's exactly the same as the Cinque Terre towns, but way less crowds, great food, great wine.

Katy Clarke:

What's not to love? Yep. And what about that? When we went to Liv, when we were in Genoa, we went just, I think it was 20 minutes on the train to Nervi. Yep. So nice.

Olivia Windsor:

Gorgeous.

Katy Clarke:

We loved it. Didn't we? Yeah.

Katy Clarke:

Walking along the lungomare sniffing in those sea breezes. Just gorgeous.

Olivia Windsor:

Stunning.

Katy Clarke:

Okay. So what are the main wines and what can we expect?

Olivia Windsor:

So the most famous wine in Liguria is one that you would have heard of and it's Vermentino.

So this is a dry white wine. Going back a second, most of the wine produced in Liguria is white. There are some red wines, but it's a real, white wine region. Yeah. Which makes sense. You know, it goes perfectly with all of the seafood given it's a coastal region as well. So Vermentino is dry.

Olivia Windsor:

It's got aromas of like grass and field flowers. It's quite fruity as well. So you can imagine a light sensations of golden apples and peaches. Perfect for summertime drinking, I think. And it goes really well with all of that seafood as well as some of their pasta dishes, which, of course, you would have heard of pesto, so the pesto pasta. And they also use a lot of walnuts in their cuisine and sauces made with walnuts and pasta. So that's a really great one to try that with. Vermentino is, yeah, delicious wine, the most typical.

Olivia Windsor:

Some of the other white wines that aren't as well known, you might have heard of Pigato because it also grows in other regions. But this is grown along the province of Imperia and Albenga, so along that west coast. It's dry, fruity, mineral. I mean, all of these white wines are gonna have that mineral quality just for the sheer fact that they grow along the coast. So it's, the sea, you know, and the breeze is all imparted into into the soil and into the grapes. A little bit different though to, to Vermentino, the Pigato's more aromatic, herbal, incense. Again, all that minerality that I really love in a white wine. And then, especially because people might be familiar with or have been to the Cinque Terre, Cinque Terre is famous for their wines, and it's been famous for their wine for a very, very long time.

Olivia Windsor:

In fact, even in the Middle Ages, wine was a really important part of Liguria's economy as a maritime republic with Genoa. And the wines of the Cinque Terre were well-known and even enjoyed by Popes. So today, you'll be happy to know you can also enjoy the wine of Cinque Terre if you visit.

Andrea Mitti Rua:

You can drink like a Pope.

Olivia Windsor:

Exactly.

Olivia Windsor:

And their white wine, it's a mix, a blend of some of their indigenous grapes. So Bosco, Albarola, and Vermentino, and it's produced in Monterosso, which is the biggest town in the Cinque Terre, Vernazza and Riomaggiore, which are other towns in the Cinque Terre, as well as La Spezia, which is that kind of transport hub gateway into the Cinque Terre. And that's a delicious wine. Herbal notes again, mineral, obviously, dry. It's best drunk young though. So this isn't really one that you're probably going to be keeping in your cellar. You can crack it open straight away and enjoy with some fresh fish.

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Katy Clarke:

We actually, one of the very first episodes that we did, was with Amy who's from he lives in Riomaggiore. And yes, she was, she was telling us all about a special project that they had. This was right before Covid and, it was a really special crowdfunding project actually, where they were trying to, restore some of the grape terraces, the vine terraces. Cause they're very special, aren't they?

Olivia Windsor:

Yeah. They are. And that's a peculiarity about the region too, the way that the grapes are growing.

Andrea Mitti Rua:

Yeah. It's called Viticoltura Eroica, which literally means heroic

Olivia Windsor:

Viticulture.

Andrea Mitti Rua:

Yeah. Thank you. Because, since the terrain is so steep and uphill, everything needs to be done by hand. The harvesting, the cultivation, everything that you would do with machines.

Olivia Windsor:

Even the pruning.

Andrea Mitti Rua:

Even the pruning, yeah. Everything you would do with machines on a flat terrain needs to be done by hand going up and down the hill multiple times. So it's very hard to cultivate, and this is why it's called Heroic Viticulture.

Olivia Windsor:

And the thing that really impressed me too is because you hear a lot about, you know, handpicking the grapes and especially for organic wineries or biodynamic wineries. But the thing that really impressed me about Liguria is it's not just handpicking. They also have to transport those crates of grapes by hand because they can't get the tractors up there on those, you know, those steep cliffs. So it's just incredibly hard work.

Andrea Mitti Rua:

You know what? Now that we think of it, it reminds me when we visited, I think we were in Monterosso. They showed us, pictures of it. Sometimes they have these rails built in the hills, and they put the the crates full of grapes on these rails so that they can transport them quickly from the top of the hill to where the wine is harvested and produced. So you can see sometimes these little trains, but they're not full of people but full of grapes that are going to be transformed into wine.

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Olivia Windsor:
Oh, that's one way to do it.

Katy Clarke:
They'd be pretty heavy. Wouldn't they?

Olivia Windsor:
Super heavy? I remember when I was doing the harvest, I couldn't carry the crate by myself.

Katy Clarke:
Yeah. It's a real testament to the fact that they really just want to make something amazing. I mean, it's a lot of effort, isn't it? I just, that's what I love when I come to Italy. People bother to take the hard way rather than the easy way. You know, it's, and it's worth it.

Olivia Windsor:
I think as well, something that's so nice about Liguria is, well, we discovered that before the phylloxera bug, which kind of ravaged Europe during the 19th century and really destroyed a lot of the grapes. But before that, Liguria had 300 indigenous grape varieties, which is incredible. And for such a tiny land, it just blew my mind when I discovered that. And today they've only got about 30, but they do have lots of little projects, that obviously, you know, need different funding and that kind of thing. But lots of projects to rediscover some of these indigenous varieties. And I love, I love that. I find that so, I mean, the amount of work that goes into that and it's really a passion project, isn't it?

Katy Clarke:
Yeah, absolutely. And I'm sure there's not that much money to go around. So it's worth it. The people that are doing that they're doing it because they love it and they love the culture and the wine and the history of it and to preserve that for future generations. And the other thing I find really special is that it's not, you know, you might think that it might be an older generation, but there is a lot of young wine makers and a lot of young people very much involved in this heritage, which I find really exciting as well.

Olivia Windsor:
Yes, I agree. Absolutely love it.

Katy Clarke:
Now there's another wine in, the Cinque Terre. That's very, very special, isn't there?

Olivia Windsor:
Yes. We love it.

Andrea Mitti Rua:
It's the best wine from that region, in my opinion, it's, it's just called Sciacchetra. Sciacchetra

is this wine produced with the same dry grapes that the Cinque Terre white wine is made of. It changes also in color depending on how old it is because it's golden yellow when it's young, and young means 2 to 3 years, but it can be aged for a long time up to even 20 years if you want, and the color becomes more reddish. It's very sweet, as I said, it's perfect with desserts, with even cheeses with a strong flavor. And the peculiarity of this wine, why it is so sweet, so intense, and so alcoholic as well is because once this grape is harvested, it's left to dry on rocks, until November. So this means that the grape dries up and the amount of liquid and, of course, the amount of wine that is produced, it's reduced. So there is more sugar, more alcohol, but less liquid.

Andrea Mitti Rua:

So it's harder to produce and it's more concentrated. It's delicious.

Olivia Windsor:

And you can also imagine that this is a very expensive wine

Andrea Mitti Rua:

Yeah.

Olivia Windsor:

Not least because, okay, the Cinque Terre, if you've seen that region we've described the land, it's tiny. There's only so many grapes grown in that region. And then obviously, you're not gonna see that money start flowing through the winery straight away if you're waiting at least 2 to 3 years, if not longer, to sell a bottle. So they don't produce a lot. There's not a lot of grapes to produce it, and, of course, that means that the cost is astronomical, but it's delicious.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah. I'm sure they're not free-pouring that like they do the limoncello.

Olivia Windsor:

If anyone does make sure you say yes to the Sciacchetra.

Katy Clarke:

Sciacchetra. You got to say that one, 5 times really fast, but I think I just said it quite nicely. But where is that from a bit to one of the towns or is it all along that Cinque Terre coast?

Olivia Windsor:

All along the Cinque Terre coast because they, make it using the grapes that grow in Monterosso, Riomaggiore, Vernazza. We had it for the first time when we stayed in Manarola.

Andrea Mitti Rua:

Manarola. Yeah.

Olivia Windsor:

Yeah. But wherever you stay along the Cinque Terre, you'll be able to find it. I can't guarantee that you'll definitely find it everywhere in Liguria. I mean, it's a Slow Food Presidia product of the Cinque Terre. So as I was saying, there's not like there's a ton of it to go around, but it's definitely worth trying to seek out while you're in Liguria no matter where you are. But outside of Liguria you'd be very hard-pressed to find it. I've never seen outside of Liguria.

Katy Clarke:

Sounds like one of those ones that I'd be like, oh, no, don't need to buy anything this trip. Liv and Andrea, always helping me with my purchases.

Olivia Windsor:

Happily.

Katy Clarke:

So with all these, these do they, I mean, I love a white wine because as I get older, I find red harder to process some, for some reason, some might be hormonal, which is exciting, but, yeah, so it's really nice to have those white wines and the delicious seafood dishes. And also it's a lot of vegetarian dishes there too, isn't there and pulses and lentils. And so it's actually quite yummy. Do you have any particular wineries that you can recommend that we can visit when we're there?

Olivia Windsor:

Yeah. Absolutely. So if you are gonna be in the Cinque Terre, the winery that we love is called Possa. I've always remembered them because they make very distinctive etichetta or wine labels with, kinda like cartoon drawings of all of the different towns along the Cinque Terre. So that's a really nice winery to, to go for a tasting. And, I discovered recently that they've got a really cool project where they're trying to bring back the making of this ancient passito, so sweet wine made using red grapes and an infusion in local peach leaves. So I'm dying to try that now, obviously, because that just sounds all kinds of delicious. But something that could be even cooler to do if you want to combine the hiking with the wine. You wanna talk about it?

Andrea Mitti Rua:

Yeah. So there is Cantina Eroico, which organizes 3 hours long hiking tours from Vernazza, this town in the Cinque Terre to the winery. And once you're there, you, rewarded with a delicious wine tasting, which I recommend the region, by the way, if you're into tracking for this winery, of course, but also because they recently reopened the Via dell'Amore, which is this famous hiking trail, which goes along the coast, and you can visit the the whole 5 Cinque Terre, the whole five towns. I've done it when I was a kid, and it's demanding. You need to be fit. But you can do it, even taking your time. You don't have to do it all. You can do just a part of it, and it's stunning.

Olivia Windsor:

Yeah. Or yeah, you can join, you know, Cantina Eroico, you know, it's a guided hike, so they'll find the best route for you to do. And it's really amazing to do a wine tour like that because it's unique. You get to go along these really, really old hiking trails through the vineyards. You can really get an appreciation for how difficult it is to work there. But yeah, you do need to be quite fit to do that one. Or if you don't want to venture to the Cinque Terre, there is another winery in where we love nearby Levanto and a winery called Cà du Ferrà and they organize similar hiking trails with wine tasting as well.

Olivia Windsor:

So that would be a good one.

Andrea Mitti Rua:

Yep.

Katy Clarke:

Thank you for bringing up the Via dell'Amore because I believe you actually, if anyone wants to do it, you can't just head off there. They're going to be very strict about it from now on because there was a lot of damage to the trail. And I think some issues with landslides, etcetera. So I think it's very safe now, but I think you need to get a ticket. I'll put that in the show notes. Cause I did see Amy, who I'm going to try and get it back on the show - her handle is Cinque Terre Insider. And I saw her do a post about that. You definitely need to get a pass to hike that trail or you could get the tour.

Katy Clarke:

I'm sure they'll organize that for you.

Olivia Windsor:

Exactly.

Katy Clarke:

That's why we like tours, isn't it? Everything's organized. No need to do any administration. There's enough of that. So what about when we're going to go visit Liguria? What's a good time to go?

Olivia Windsor:

So I think, I mean, typically, obviously, the shoulder season, spring and fall, always really lovely. I probably wouldn't recommend going during the winter time just for obvious reasons. It's a coastal region and you know, those kind of seaside towns are always a little bit... not much happening during the winter time. Summer's going to be the busiest time of year. It is a tiny region, so you can imagine how packed it gets.

Andrea Mitti Rua:

But if you go maybe in early June or mid to late September, so the very beginning or, end of

the season, it's still enjoyable.

Katy Clarke:

Yep. I spent a, like, a week there in, I think mid to end September a few years ago. It was just magic. The weather was nice, but I do need to say though, the sea - it is a sea, it's not an ocean, but it's can get pretty choppy out there.

Olivia Windsor:

yeah, I was surprised.

Katy Clarke:

So they do cancel fairies quite a lot because it's really couldn't be quite dangerous. So you just need to be prepared that the weather can be a bit changey and the sea a little bit choppy.

Olivia Windsor:

I think other another thing to note though is that there's not huge big commercial vineyards really in Liguria for all the reasons we've discussed, so it can be quite difficult to organize a winery tour. So if you are really interested in wine or you want to have some experiences where you don't need to drive, worry about, you know, getting into these wineries, we do have our Liguria tours with Untold Italy tours. So we visit a winery, we visit farms. We do pesto making, all the things, and you don't need to think about any of the logistics, or getting in to see these tiny, you know, suppliers that just don't open up for a group of 2 or 4 people and let alone a really big group either.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah. We don't wanna talk about it that like that too much, but it's so true. You know, these people, they're working it's a working farm. They're usually small families just making their living off a really small amount of production, and they love to have visitors, but it has to be on an organized basis. So if you really want to go and experience this really small production type winery, and you know, you would have seen that actually, I don't know, Liv and Andrea, if you've seen Stanley Tucci searching for Italy. But in the Liguria episode, he did go and see some of these smaller wineries. You just you can't kind of just do that as an individual unless you're Stanley Tucci.

Olivia Windsor:

Exactly.

Andrea Mitti Rua:

You're not Stanley Tucci listening here.

Katy Clarke:

But I'm Katy Clarke. Don't you know who I am? Like, no one knows me. That's fine. But it's, you know, seriously in all seriousness, you really need to have a go and they may, and actually

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even in that region, the English is probably not as fluent as you might get in Tuscany or, you know, some of the other regions. So you need someone to help you out there. Yeah. But I mean, is amazing. And as you said, Liv, even though you can have a look, I refuse to drive in Liguria because it's scary.

Katy Clarke:

You could have a car, but, I think the train is nicer.

Olivia Windsor:

Yes. I agree with you. Definitely. I don't like those tunnels.

Andrea Mitti Rua:

Ligurian roads. Ligurian roads are not my favorite, but sometimes you just have to do it from point a to point b.

Olivia Windsor:

Do it for the wine.

Andrea Mitti Rua:

Exactly.

Katy Clarke:

Do it for the wine. Come on. Yeah. So no. I feel like you can easily just get around by train because it's very convenient. Just hop on and off.

Katy Clarke:

And there's some of my favorite places that they're Sestri Levante, Camogli. And they're just, even before you get to Genoa, all of these places. Beautiful. So, wow. I love Liguria. I love the wine. It's so interesting to see how they've adapted their techniques and adapted them to take into account the local terrain and conditions. And I think, you know, we like sometimes in our modern era to take a brute force approach to getting things done, but clearly that wouldn't work with the one making in Liguria.

Olivia Windsor:

Exactly.

Katy Clarke:

And thank goodness for that. There's a very nice, elegant wines that go well with the seafood. And so I can't think of anything better than a nice summer's day with a plate of seafood and pesto pasta and a nice glass of Vermentino. And I'll be very happy.

Olivia Windsor:

Sounds like heaven. Beautiful.

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Andrea Mitti Rua:
Yeah.

Katy Clarke:
So Liv in Andrea, if our listeners are keen to learn more about the fascinating wines of Liguria, how can they stay in touch with you and Italian Wine Tales?

Olivia Windsor:
You can log on to our website or Instagram. So italianwinetales.com. And we also have a Facebook group, Italian Wine Lovers. If you want to ask for quick recommendations or share what you're drinking at the moment or any wine tours that go on in Italy.

Katy Clarke:
Thank you so much again for sharing your knowledge about this delicious Italian wine with us on Untold Italy. And I can't wait to talk to you again about another amazing wine region.

Olivia Windsor:
Thank you so much. It's always a pleasure to chat.

Andrea Mitti Rua:
Thank you Katy.

Olivia Windsor:
Thanks for having us, Katy.

Katy Clarke:
Thank you.

Katy Clarke:
You know I can always be tempted back to Liguria. I've spent a lot of time there over the years and it has such a unique culture and beauty, plus all of those amazing wines. As a dedicated white wine lover, not all areas of Italy have a great selection of those but they do in Liguria and there is actually nothing I like better than a long long seafood lunch with a glass or two of crisp white wine and a glorious coastal view.

If you'd like to join us on tour in Liguria we have a couple of spots left on our 2024 trip in late September. Otherwise you'll need to wait until 2025 to experience the lesser known corners of this truly special Italian region complete with pesto making and tasting, some of Italy's most beautiful villages and ornate palazzi that will make your jaw drop to the ground.

You can find out all about our Liguria tour on our Untold Italy Tours website and we've put a link to the tour in our show notes also at untolditaly.com/238 . You'll also find a list of the wines to try and where to try them and much more

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Thanks to all our wonderful listeners for your ongoing support of Untold Italy. I hope you enjoyed today's show. If you did then it would be amazing if you gave us a rating or review in your favorite podcast app. That helps us reach more Italy-loving travelers just like you.

On next week's episode, we're headed to another beautiful part of Italy to explore and uncover unique experiences in the Untold way.

But until then it's "ciao for now".