

Untouchable Import

ITALIAN WINE CONTINUES TO SHINE EVEN AMIDST HEADWINDS THANKS TO A DIVERSE SLATE OF TYPES AND STYLES

BY MADELINE ENDER



The wine industry's recent downturn is affecting its biggest import categories. The Italian wine segment has been declining in the U.S. since 2021, and while it saw slight growth last year, it's unclear if the category will see a complete rebound (Maso Toresella Italian winery pictured).

Wine as a whole has been experiencing a downturn in recent years, and even the biggest import categories, like Italy and France, are feeling it. Despite its renown, Italian wine has been steadily softening since 2020 as the Covid-19 pandemic-era drinking trends waned and consumers began drinking less. For the first time since 2009, total Italian table wine imports dipped below 24 million cases to 23.84 cases in 2023, decreasing significantly from 2021's 28.33 million cases. The category recovered slightly last year, ending 2024 at 24.06 million cases. And while a behemoth wine-producing country like Italy won't be falling to the wayside anytime soon, the category has a long way to climb if it's ever going to reach the peak it saw in 2021.

"Consumption starts with education, and unfortunately, the wine industry saw a lot of talented people leave restaurants and wholesale fine wine positions during and after Covid-19," says Charles Lazzara, founder and CEO of Volio Imports, which imports nearly 40 Italian wine labels. "Pair this with a consolidating fine wine retail market, challenging economics for restaurants that have forced prices up just to keep doors open, and young drinkers with less disposable income due to inflation post-Covid, and it is easy to understand why sales are declining without blaming alcohol alone. I do not believe

that market declines are a direct result of the market restabilizing around wine because it is alcohol related—I believe the economy is the underlying factor touching all segments of our industry and hitting the consumer hardest."

But despite the category's recent hardships and declines, importers and retailers alike are feeling optimistic about the future of Italian wine and what it continues to offer consumers. "I think there are a lot of draws to Italian wine; the diversity in types and styles is so varied," says Justin Daniels, wine director at Green's Discount Beverage in Columbia, South Carolina. "It is also such a great category for culinary pairings. I do not see the category in danger in terms of falling out of vogue for the American consumer." Debbie Zachareas, owner of Ferry Plaza Wine Merchant in San Francisco, says, "The demand for Italian wine has remained strong and steady for a number of years. It might have gotten a little bit stronger because we take a strong position on it."

Brand Recognition

Some of the most recognizable imported wines come from Italy. Stella Rosa (\$15 a 750-ml.) from Riboli Family Wine Estates is one brand that rarely struggles to capture consumer attention. The brand has maintained its reputation as the No. 1 Italian import in the U.S. for several years, and 2024 was no exception. While Stella Rosa did decline last year, falling 2% to just

LEADING ITALIAN TABLE WINE BRANDS IN THE U.S.

(thousands of 9-liter case depletions)

Brand	Importer	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	Percent Change 2019-2024
Stella Rosa	Riboli Family Wine Estates	2,481	5,775	7,263	3,958	4,148	4,065	10.4% -2.0%
Cavit	Palm Bay International	3,550	3,975	3,940	3,800	3,780	3,600	0.3 -4.8%
Riunite	Frederick Wildman & Sons	1,355	1,395	1,270	1,130	1,050	1,020	-5.5 -3.0%
Mezzacorona	Prestige Wine Imports Corp.	1,040	1,081	1,085	990	950	965	-1.5 1.5%
Roscato	Palm Bay International	982	1,207	1,138	1,053	1,000	930	-1.1 -7.0%
Santa Margherita	Santa Margherita USA	584	642	752	780	760	751	5.2 -1.2%
Castello del Poggio	1821 Fine Wines & Spirits	879	967	948	853	798	750	-3.1 -6.0%
Ecco Domani	E. & J. Gallo Winery	780	745	760	745	700	710	-1.9 1.5%
Bartenura	Royal Wine Corp.	700	709	724	720	699	685	-0.4 -2.0%
Ruffino	Constellation Brands	976	911	794	757	656	515	-12.0 -21.5%
Cupcake	The Wine Group	335	360	312	288	288	355	1.2 23.3%
Bolla	Frederick Wildman & Sons	370	385	350	320	300	310	-3.5 3.5%
Total Leading Brands³		14,032	18,153	19,335	15,393	15,130	14,656	0.9% -3.1%

¹ Average annual compound growth rate

² Based on unrounded data

³ Addition of columns may not agree due to rounding.

Source: IMPACT DATABANK ©2025

over 4 million cases, it is still outpacing its categorymates by a fair margin. The brand has experienced 10.4% average increases in the last five years and reached a whopping 7.26 million cases in 2021. As pandemic-era trends subside, so has the brand's rapid growth, but Stella Rosa remains a powerhouse in the imported wine space.

Palm Bay International offers a handful of Italian brands, including Cavit and Roscato, the No. 2 and No. 5 leading brands for the category, respectively. Both brands softened in 2024, with Cavit falling 4.8% to 3.6 million cases and Roscato declining to 930,000 cases, dipping below the 1-million-case mark for the first time since 2019. "Like the broader wine category, Italy has felt the impact of changing consumer behaviors, economic pressures, and generational shifts in how people approach drinking occasions," says Jeffrey Schiller, vice president of marketing for Palm Bay International. "Despite these challenges, Italy remains uniquely well-positioned. White wines have been outperforming the broader category, and Italy—with varieties like Pinot Grigio—has benefited from that trend."

Schiller adds that both Cavit (\$16 a 1.5-liter) and Roscato (\$12 a 750-ml.) are performing well so far in 2025, and that Palm Bay will continue to bolster its leading Italian brands. "So far in 2025, our Italian portfolio continues to demonstrate the strength and staying power of great brands that balance authen-



Palm Bay International's Cavit and Roscato (above left) labels are among the leading Italian wine brands in the U.S. Cavit recently innovated with Cavit Cloud90, a low-calorie, low-abv wine (above right).

ticity with innovation," he says. "Cavit and Roscato remain category leaders with both brands showing their ability to evolve alongside today's consumers."

Cavit in particular has been focusing on innovation in recent years with the expansion of its line. In September, Cavit launched two low-calorie, low-abv SKUs in the Cloud90 by Cavit collection (\$11 a 750-ml.). The wines, a Chardonnay and Sparkling Brut, join Pinot Grigio in the lineup, and Schiller notes that Palm Bay has seen "remarkable momentum overall for the line: up 43% over the past year, as more consumers seek lighter, more balanced wine options that fit their lifestyle." At the time of the launch, Palm Bay president and CEO Mark Taub told MARKET WATCH sister publication Shanken News Daily, "consumers are increasingly looking for wines that align with balance and moderation while still

delivering on taste and quality. With Cloud90 Chardonnay and Brut, Cavit continues to innovate and lead, offering wines that fit seamlessly into today's way of living."

Frederick Wildman & Sons, which imports 22 Italian brands to the U.S., is also tapping into the better-for-you trend with Riunite, the No. 3 leading Italian brand nationwide. Riunite recently added Riunite Zero Red Semi-Sparkling (\$10 a 750-ml.) to its portfolio to meet the demand for low-alcohol wines. The launch was backed with a campaign that promises the wine is "100% Italian. Zero Proof." Riunite Zero Red Semi-Sparkling is



Retailers report that the downturn of Italian wine has yet to be reflected in their sales. At Green's Discount Beverage in Columbia, South Carolina, the category is going strong, with sparkling Italian wines seeing particular demand from customers.

not the only low-abv addition to Frederick Wildman's portfolio, however. Maschio Zero White Sparkling (\$13) also hit the market in September, offering a sparkling white option with less than 0.5% abv. "Riunite has benefited from consumer interest in lower-abv and nostalgia-led brands reimagined for today," says Frederick Wildman president and COO Matt Munn. "We're continuing to innovate with our new non-alcoholic options from both Riunite and Maschio that are intended to meet on-the-go and health-minded drinkers."

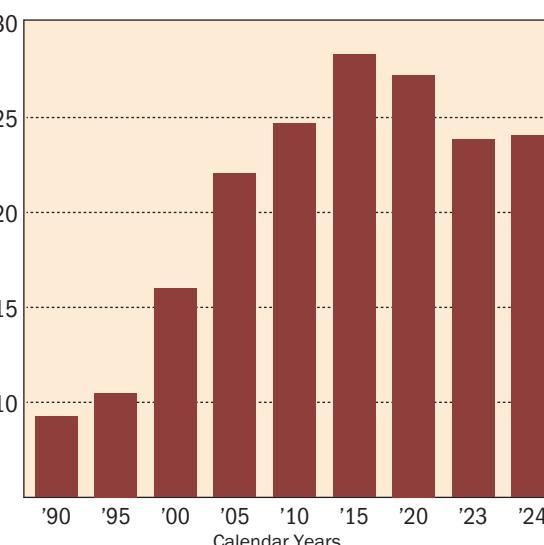
Riunite fell 3% to just over 1 million cases in 2024, but Munn says both Italian wine and the Riunite brand have strong staying power. "Despite modest declines, Italy still outperforms the total wine category but there is exciting opportunity on the horizon for iconic brands and regions to have a revival," he says. "Riunite has remained in the list of top 20 imported wines globally for the last four decades." Frederick Wildman also imports Bolla, the No. 12 leading Italian wine brand in the U.S. Bolla saw 3.5% growth to 310,000 cases last year, and Munn notes, "considering the headwinds, brands like Bolla, Riunite, and also Lamberti Prosecco are exceeding market trends in their respective categories."

Trending Opportunities

There is much room to grow in the low-abv, low-calorie wine space when it comes to Italian wine, as several retailers note the lack of better-for-you offerings in the category. "I haven't come across a ton of specific Italian better-for-you wines," says Daniels of Green's Discount Beverage. "We have seen certain brands, such as FitVine for example, that have a Prosecco SKU, but I haven't seen any Italian-specific brands." Jeff Fournier, store manager and buyer at Esquin Wine & Spirits in Seattle, notes the surprising lack of demand for low-calorie Italian wines.

ITALIAN TABLE WINE IMPORTS INTO THE U.S. — 1990-2024

(millions of 9-liter case shipments)



Source: IMPACT DATABANK ©2025

"We haven't seen much demand for low-calorie wines, but there's growing interest in lower-alcohol options," he says. "Customers are increasingly seeking wines that are balanced, food-friendly, and easier to enjoy over the course of an evening."

The strongest success story out of 2024 was Cupcake, which saw a whopping 23.3% leap to 355,000 cases. Cupcake offers a wide range of wines, including Cupcake Lighthearted (\$10 a

TOP EIGHT ITALIAN SPARKLING WINE BRANDS IN THE U.S.

(thousands of 9-liter cases)

Rank	Brand	Importer	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	Percent Change ² '23-'24
1	La Marca	E. & J. Gallo Winery	1,600	1,920	2,400	2,700	3,010	3,220	3,380	5.0%
2	Mionetto	Freixenet Mionetto USA	750	840	840	890	895	960	992	3.3
3	Cupcake	The Wine Group	620	600	700	650	642	560	425	-24.0
4	Zonin	1821 Fine Wines & Spirits	495	571	429	400	370	400	420	5.0
5	Martini & Rossi	Bacardi USA Inc.	467	456	475	542	508	440	400	-9.0
6	Ruffino	Constellation Brands	412	448	446	476	529	520	389	-25.2
7	Josh Cellars	Deutsch Family Wine & Spirits	10	32	116	195	209	246	286	16.5
8	Lunetta	Palm Bay International	287	298	310	235	230	210	195	-6.9
Total Top Eight¹			4,640	5,164	5,716	6,087	6,393	6,555	6,487	-1.0%

¹ addition of columns may not agree due to rounding

² based on unrounded data

Source: IMPACT DATABANK ©2025

750-ml.), an 80-calorie, 8% abv collection of wines, as well as Cupcake Alcohol-Removed Sauvignon Blanc (\$10), a zero-proof white wine option. “As consumer and customer needs continue to shift, it’s critical for producers across the industry to understand what offerings will resonate in today’s market,” says Collin Cooney, vice president of the premium portfolio at The Wine Group, which owns Cupcake. “At The Wine Group, we’re committed to driving innovation not just for the benefit of our own portfolio, but for the future of the industry. We’re always thinking about how to attract the next generation of wine lovers.”

Cooney also notes the popularity of Italian sparkling wines, which Cupcake offers in several variations: Prosecco, Sparkling Rosé, Moscato d’Asti, Peach Moscato, Classic Mimosa, and Mango Mimosa. “In general, Italian appellated wines have performed in line with the total category, gaining share of the sparkling segment, while losing share in Pinot Grigio. Sparkling wines have become the major driver of growth in the Italian wine segment with items such as Prosecco and even Moscato d’Asti leading the segment over the past ten years,” says Cooney. “Sweet, flavored wines have also seen significant growth in this space, with The Wine Group’s Cupcake Signature Sweets line delivering on this consumer trend. Overall, however, there has been some pullback in this segment over the past few years.”

Price Diversity

Whether or not the Italian wine category is premiumizing at the rate that other import categories are is debated by retailers like



The top Italian wine brands are tapping into the better-for-you trend. Stella Rosa Rosé V.S. (above right) is a low-abv option, while Riunite Zero (above left) is a completely non-alcoholic option.

Zachareas of Ferry Plaza Wine Merchant, who says the Italian wines at her shop are between \$15-\$27 a 750-ml., and Fournier of Esquin Wine & Spirits agrees, saying, “the core of our Italian wine business sits between \$20 and \$60.” However, Fournier notes that he has noticed specific areas of the category are premiumizing as of late. “That said, we’ve seen strong growth in premium tiers—particularly Barolo and Super Tuscan wines—as customers trade up for special occasions or cellar-worthy bottles.”

Meanwhile, Daniels at Green’s Discount Beverage says premiumization hasn’t fully hit the Italian wine category yet. “I don’t think the category has experienced the same premium up-tick that France has,” he says. “There are still so many categories under the general Italian umbrella that are value driven. Take Chianti, for example. While there are plenty of highly rated

Riserva and Gran Selezione options, there is still a portion of the customer base who feels that Chianti should come in a straw basket and cost \$6.” Daniels adds, “there is still plenty of demand for the higher priced wines of Piedmont and Tuscany, but that pales in comparison to the everyday \$10 Pinot Grigio.”

On the importer side, executives say premiumization is a focus for many of the largest Italian brands. “We are absolutely seeing premiumization in our Italian wine portfolio,” says Frederick Wildman’s Munn. “The \$16-\$20 segment for Italian wine continues to trend up, even more so for sparkling and white wine which we are seeing in the results of our Lamberti Prosecco, Formentini Pinot Grigio, and Sauvignon Blanc.” And at Palm Bay International, Schiller says,



“when it comes to pricing, we don’t see a single ‘sweet spot’ for Italian wines. Instead, growth comes from delivering unique and compelling brand propositions across multiple price points, always backed by wine quality.” Despite this, Schiller adds that the data points to the fact that consumers are trading up. “Sales of Italian wines priced over \$15 have been robust, growing 2% in the last 52 weeks according to Circana, showing that consumers are willing to invest in wines that offer a meaningful experience.”

While 2024 was not the strongest year in Italian wine’s long history, the message from both retailers and importers is a positive one as 2025 nears its end and a new year is on the horizon. “Italy’s unmatched diversity of varietals and regions keeps consumers curious and engaged,” says Fournier of Esquin Wine & Spirits. “There’s truly something for every palate—from crisp Alpine whites to rich, age-worthy reds. Interest in Italian wine continues to grow, and we expect that momentum to keep building for years to come.” And at Ferry Plaza Wine Merchant, Zachareas notes, “There are so many styles in price points to admire that I think the strength is in the incredible diversity for great tasting wines.”

Schiller of Palm Bay says a rebound is imminent for the Italian wine category. “History shows that the wine category moves in long cycles of growth and restraint, so a rebound is inevitable—but the brands that succeed will be those that find innovative ways to engage consumers and communicate



When it comes to cost, retailers are divided on whether the Italian wine category (winery in Bolgheri, Italy pictured top) is premiumizing. At Ferry Plaza Wine Merchant (above), owner Debbie Zachareas says the Italian wines on her shelves sit between \$15-\$27, noting that Italian wine offers a lot of diversity when it comes to pricing.

unique value.” When it comes to the palm bay Italian portfolio of brands, and the category as a whole, Schiller says the future is looking bright. “Looking ahead, we are optimistic about the long-term prospects for the category. Italy has a unique ability not only to weather the challenges facing the wine industry but to help shape its future. By showcasing the full breadth of Italian wines and their stories, we believe the category will continue to grow and remain a vital part of the American wine landscape for years to come.”

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