

Highlight

Sicily and the Wine Market in Denmark: interview with Thomas Ilkjaer

di: Alessia Panzeca

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We are back to Europe for our column dedicated to international markets to interview Thomas Ilkjaer who is a Danish wine writer and lecturer specialized in Italian wines. He has been writing about wine for 20 years and is currently contributing to the Danish daily newspaper Politiken. He is also freelancing for several wine magazines. He is the co-founder of and manager at Scandinavian Wine Academy – Denmark where he teaches Italian wine among many other subjects.

Q. The latest ISTAT figures (referring to year 2018) show a standstill in the consumption of Italian wine in Denmark, for the first time in many years. In your opinion, what's the state of health of Italian wines in Denmark? Is there any particular reason behind such a figure?

A. Italian wine has been growing constantly in Denmark for almost two decades and has been the leader in the market (volume) since 2009. In 2018 we find the same level (22%) as 2017. So, I do not really recognize an arrest on this trend. Italian wine has probably reached a level from where it is getting more and more difficult to grow even more but I see no change in the Danes' love for Italian wine in the near future. Living in a country without any considerable wine production of their own the Danes are curious and want to try new stuff. But since the Italian wine scene is so diverse and ever developing you do not have to turn to another wine country for new things to discover.

Q. The Danish market is considered as an atypical Scandinavian market because it is not regulated by monopolies. Are just a few actors controlling the market or is it well distributed?

A. This depends on which part of the market you are looking at. Four big companies are behind approximately 85% of the distribution of wine in Denmark. They sell mainly through the supermarkets though and are therefore primarily controlling the sales of the lower to middle end wines. For the premium wines the situation is different. Denmark has one of the highest ratios of importers per capita which means that a very high percentage of Italian premium wines can be found somewhere in the market, often at small to very small importers selling online.

Q. The most important sales channel in Denmark is the large-scale distribution system. How does the Danish consumer choose his supermarket and what could we suggest to small businesses that want to have access to it? Furthermore, what is the Danes' perception of the wine they buy at the supermarket?

A. For the Danish wine consumers without a particularly big interest in wines the normal thing is to buy wines in the supermarkets, and it is not considered a low status way of buying wine. Here you will find everything from cheap Bag-in-box till middle end wines at 20-25 euros. Some supermarkets also have more specialized departments with premium wines. It is difficult for smaller producers getting into the supermarkets because of the market dominance from a few big importers. You will often need a certain volume of wine before the interest is there. So the best advice for smaller producers is trying to get in contact with the many small to middle-sized importers through the international wine fairs or wine fairs in Denmark.

Q. Who's the Danish wine consumer?

A. Denmark has a very high consumption of wine per capita and you will find wine drinkers in most segments of the population. The last decades have seen a fast development within the younger generations and today you will see a big group of people in their 20's and 30's with a great interest for wine. They are typically more curious than the older generations and are particularly the driving force behind trends as natural wines, orange wines, sparkling wines and new wine countries such as Slovenia and Greece.

Q. Could you describe how Danish consumers perceive Sicilian wine?

A. The Sicilian wines have together with the wines from Puglia and Veneto been an important explanation for the rise in consumption of Italian wines over the last 10-15 years. It is my impression that the Danish wine consumers regard Sicilian wines as very good quality for money and the wines have suited some of the other key words for getting into the market: well-known international varieties, wines with alcohol, wines with less pronounced acidity and tannins. This is changing however and driven by the wines from Etna people – especially the more experienced and interested ones – are now discovering and appreciating other wines from Sicily

Q. What are the strengths of Sicilian wines in Denmark and what do you think Sicily has not understood yet, i.e. what aspects still need to be improved?

A. For the Sicilian wines to be still popular in the future they will need to deliver both the cheaper everyday wines and the specialized wines from local varieties and small producers. The major part of the market is still interested in the former but to keep the interest of the restaurants and wine connoisseurs the latter is very important. This is also an area where Sicily will have an advantage over wine countries like Chile, Australia and South Africa who are all big contenders in the market. Organic wine is now almost considered old-school in the Danish market and something that will give producers a big advantage. Biodynamic wine and natural wines are popular, but is of course only a small segment of the market.

Q. What's the role of social networks for the Danish wine consumer? What is(are) the most followed social network(s)?

A. This depends of course very much on the age of the consumer. For the young generations the social networks are important and almost all importers use this tool in some way. The young consumers are also very used to buy wines online. The most important channels are Facebook and Instagram.

Q. Let's talk about you. Do you usually follow the social pages of Italian companies? What do you read to keep up to date about the world of wine?

A. No, I am too old for that. I mostly keep myself updated through online magazines, printed magazines and newsletters. And by travelling as much as possible

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