

Learn about Italian Wine



ITALIAN WINES AND HISTORY

The ancient Greek and Etruscan settlers produced wines before the Romans, but the great empire helped make the wines from their regions the world's most extensive. Over the centuries, independent kingdoms and states within the peninsula created their own wines from indigenous varietals and popularized them with names of their locations.

Wine has always been a part of life in Italian culture and deemed an important source of trade and wealth.

Early wines from 13th century Tuscany are well known today and some regions in the south continue to make wines very similarly to their ancestors.

With thousands of indigenous grapes growing in every region of the country, it's easy to get confused and lost in the shuffle. It's best to explore and experiment different grapes, styles and get out of the comfort of the classics. Italian wines are generally drier, more bitter and tart than the French or Spanish. These wines need food, which is easy to pair with almost anything.

Following the establishment of the appellation system in France in the 1930's, other European countries were soon to follow with their own similar system. However, it was complicated during the second world war, recessions and mass emigration of regions throughout Italy, the modern Italian Wines classifications were not introduced until 1963 and they still continue to evolve today.

Labeling will follow either a geographic indication or without.

The Denominazione di Origine Controllata (DOC) system helps protect the Italian wine appellations.

The four tiers are as follows.

Vino

Indicazione Geografica Tipica (IGT)

Denominazione di Origine Controllata (DOC)

Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita (DOCG)

LOCATION

The country of Italy is a long peninsula that stretches out into the Mediterranean sea, bordered by the Alps in the north and coast lines along the Adriatic, Tyrrhenian and Ligurian seas.

The Apennine Mountains run down the center of the country, creating a divide between the eastern and western coasts.

Sicily and Sardinia are large islands that are unique on their own, with mountainous centers and beautiful beaches.

A warm, Mediterranean climate can be generalized for the center and south, while a cool continental climate is the primary in the north.

DOC VS DOCG AND CLASSICO

Wines without geographical indications are labeled "Vino" and are generic wines that are bianco, rosso or rosato and labeled with or without a vintage.

Quality wines use terms to protect the traditional areas, grapes and winemaking customs.

It is important to recognize label terminology that matters.

Classico is a theoretical superior vineyard area within a DOC or DOCG.

Superiore denotes wines that have a higher level of alcohol or longer aging requirement before release.

Riserva are legally defined as wines that have extended ageing in cask, then in bottle.

Metodo Classico are used for making sparkling wines in the Champenois style.

Recioto/Passito are made from dried grapes and often sweet.



NORTHERN ITALY

One of the most culturally diverse regions in Europe is Northern Italy. France, Switzerland, Austria and Slovenia canvas the entire north, where the Alps serve as a natural border. This is a connection point of languages, cuisine, traditions and many different wine appellations.

While several of the regions are landlocked, the nearby seas and large lakes affect the climate and weather. Most of the vineyards and regions are on foothills and mountain sides, around lakes or narrow valleys. Bulk wines would be sourced from vineyards on flatter, more fertile areas that have generic geographic designations.

Northern Italian wines have characteristics of higher acidity, lighter colors, and distinct earth qualities that can be served with food rich in fat, butter, cream and mushrooms. A traditional northern Italian dish does not have as much olive oil or tomatoes, but more cream and butter.

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PIEDMONT

Piedmont is in Northwestern Italy, bordering the French Alps and Liguria to the South. The region gets its name from the Italian word Piemonte, *the foothills of the Alps*. This region has many rolling hills and valleys, which contain a large majority of Italy's quality DOCs and DOCGs. Mainly the Langhe and Monferrato hills near the famous city of Alba, known for



white truffles. The city of Asti is a wine regions like Barolo and Barbaresco. The climate of Piedmont is mild, continental with a common risk of early spring frosts. commercial center for neighboring

Main Red grapes:

Nebbiolo

Barbera

Dolcetto

Freisa

Ruché

Main White Grapes:

Moscato

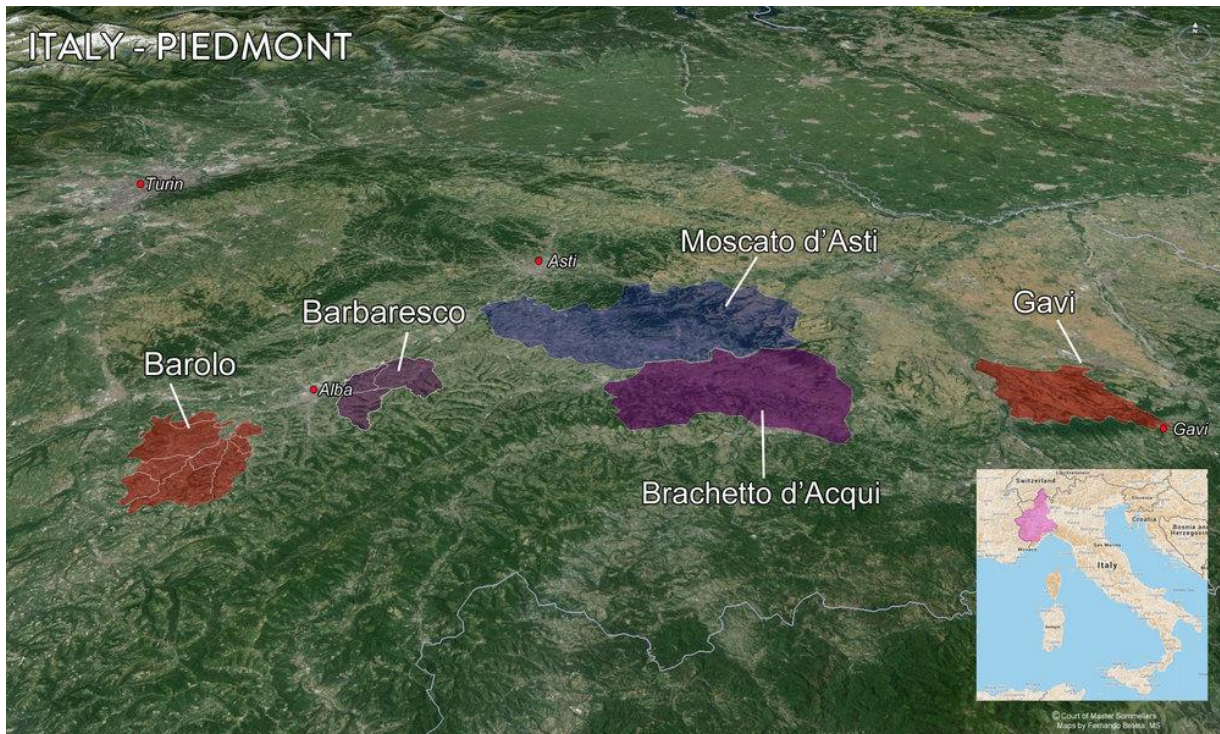
Arneis

Cortese

Chardonnay

Favorita (vermentino)

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BAROLO AND BARBARESCO

Two of the most famous red wine regions of Italy are Barolo and Barbaresco. These relatively small areas produce wines of exceptional quality that can age for decades.



The history of Barolo wine is owed to 19th century developers and merchants that understood the potential of grapes there. The continental climate and rain shadow effect from the Alps create conditions for heavy fog in the area, which translates to “nebbia” in Italian and the origin of the Nebbiolo grape’s name. Soils are prehistoric calcareous marl and sandstone, providing many unique parcels and conditions for vineyards to be planted.

The full list of MGI (Menzioni geografiche aggiuntive) can be viewed [here](#).

Barolo DOCG and Barbaresco DOCG must be produced from 100% Nebbiolo and aged for a minimum time in wooden casks and bottle before release. Riserva wines spend an additional year in bottle before sale.

For other Nebbiolo-based wines that don’t require cellaring, try the wines, from the larger zones of **Langhe DOC, Roero DOCG, Gattinara DOCG and Ghemme DOCG**.

OTHER REGIONS

Barbera d’Asti DOCG, Barbera del Monferrato DOCG and Barbera d’Alba DOC are well-known in restaurants as a category for value and drinkability. The Barbera grape can take a bit of new oak and lend a softer texture than Nebbiolo. High in acid, and low in tannins, this grape is often compared to Pinot Noir.

Dolcetto is used in various appellations. Deep purple, fresh, delicious young wines can be served slightly chilled and paired with salumi.

Moscato d’Asti and Asti DOCG have been very popular in recent decades and are two of the most produced styles in Italy. Moscato grapes are vinified off-dry, semi and full sparkling. Highly aromatic, crisp and low in alcohol, these make excellent aperitifs and pairings for spicy dishes.

Gavi DOCG is a white wine from Cortese grapes. Dry, light, mineral and unoaked, Gavi di Gavi (from the classic zone) is a versatile wine.

Brachetto d’Acqui DOCG makes unique red, sweet sparkling wines from the aromatic brachetto grape. This is a perfect pairing with strawberries and chocolate.

LOMBARDY

Milan is the most European city in Italy. Fashion, art, business and design flourish and locals consume many international wines. Over 25 million cases of wine are produced annually and 20% of it is DOC quality.

Grapes like Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Pinot Blanc do not sound Italian, but have been in the area for almost two centuries.

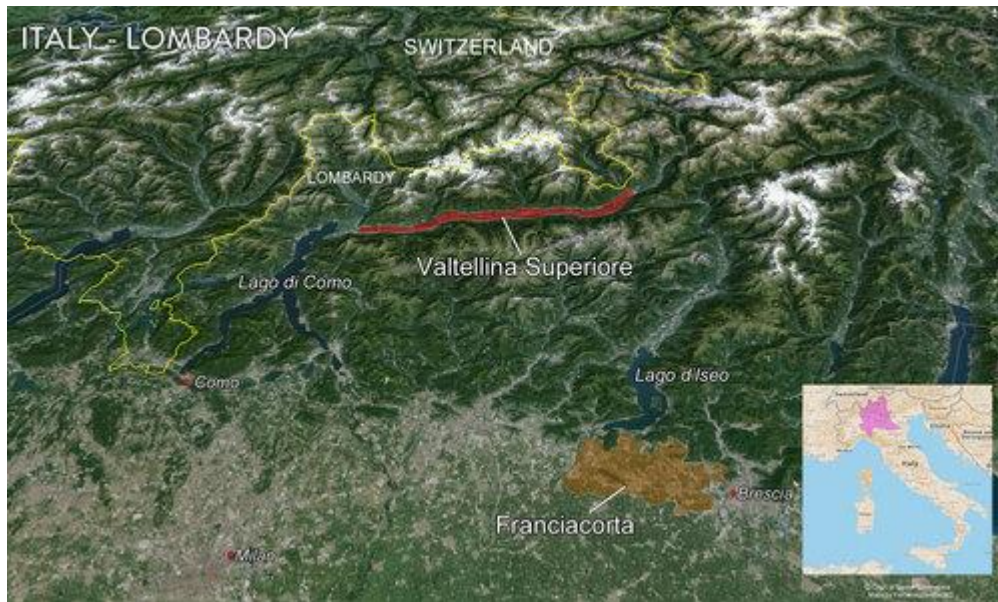
Northeast of the city is the region of **Franciacorta**, close to the lake d'Iseo and city of Brescia. Metodo Classico wines are wonderful here, making sparkling wines that rival the Champagne.

Wines are required to age for a longer period in bottle on the lees, adding richness and toasty complexity.

Close to the Swiss border in a narrow alpine valley, is the small region of Valtellina.

Valtellina Superiore DOCG is a brilliant area for the Chiavennasca grape (local name for Nebbiolo). Several subzones lend variety in styles and wonderful producers like Ar.Pe.Pe can make different bottlings.

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Map of Lombardy

TRENTINO-ALTO ADIGE

One of the most beautiful places in the world is found in this northern Italian region. The drive north between Trento and Bolzano is breathtaking. The Dolomite mountains, villages and perfect rows of vineyards are lined along the valley.

The continental climate provides cold winters but extremely hot summers, allowing grapes to ripen fully. You would think that only white grapes are planted, but locals love to drink red wines too.

Popular grapes like Pinot Grigio, Sauvignon, Chardonnay and Merlot are found on labels as well as the German spellings for Weissburgunder, Gewürtztraminer, Müller-Thurgau, Blauburguner. Interesting wines made from Silvaner, Kerner and Lagrein match perfectly with seafood, veal, vegetables and pork.

Trentino DOC and Alto-Adige variety of grape varieties.



(Südtiroler) DOC allow wide

VENETO

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While Piedmont and Tuscany may have greater awarded and treasured wines, no other region has more recognizable wines than Veneto. For a new wine consumer, a bubbly glass of Prosecco or a crisp Soave, light-red Valpolicella or even a full glass of Amarone della Valpolicella may be their first introduction to Italian wine.

The region produces millions of cases of wine, but spread out over various DOCs. Near the steep hills of the city of Verona, the best reds are from the Classico, Valpaltena and Val d'Illassi zones. The neighboring Lake Garda is warm and provides the adequate micro climate to grow red grapes.

Valpolicella DOC and Amarone della Valpolicella DOCG are made from a blend of grapes, including Corvina, Corvinone, and Rondinella. The latter made from raisinated grapes, in a process called appassimento. The wine referments and can be vinified dry to off-dry with elevated levels of alcohol.

Sweet wines are called Recioto and can be of exceptional quality.

Soave is one of the most produced white wines in Italy, where the Classico zone is the best, **Soave Superiore** and **Recioto di Soave** both receive DOCG status. At least 70% White Garganega grapes are used with optional Trebbiano di Soave and Chardonnay.

Prosecco is easily the fastest growing category of all Italian wines. The popular bubbly drink is a must on almost every wine list, bar menu, and retail shelf. The general **Prosecco DOC** is shared with Friuli-Venezia-Giulia, as the area overlaps and produces over 2.6 million hectoliters of wine per year. The smaller, original areas in **Conegliano Valdobbiadene and Asolo** receive the DOCG status. The focus there is to make *Superiore* wines, with drier *brut*, *extra brut* and *cru* designations.

Prosecco is mostly made from the Glera grape and optional accessory varieties, in a *frizzante* (slightly sparkling) and/or *spumante* (fully sparkling) style. The main difference with the Champagne Methode is that these wines traditionally spend the second fermentation in tank in a process called Charmat. This helps retain the aromatic quality and freshness without overpowering with yeasty flavors. It is also much cheaper to produce wines this way and are an affordable alternative.

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Map of Friuli Venezia Giulia

FRIULI-VENEZIA-GIULIA

One of the rising star regions of the wine world is the Colli Orientali del Friuli. Located on the border with Slovenia, this pocket of northeast Italy is influenced by the Julian alps and the Adriatic sea. You can be skiing in snow in the morning and skiing on water by lunch time. This location also overlaps longtime Slavic and Austria-Hungarian cultures. Today, it can seem like Collio wines and Brda (Slovenia) are not much different. Modern winemakers have opted for clean, crisp, light white wines for which the regions are known for. There are a handful of small independent creators of “orange wines” with extended skin contact and vinification in amphorae, looking back at ancient traditions.

Local grapes are exciting and deserve more attention. Friulano, Picolit, Ribolla Gialla, Malvasia Istriana, Verduzzo, Refosco, Schioppettino are all examples of grapes that represent the region well. However, since Napoleon times, French grapes brought over have established



as the most popular. Pinot Grigio (Pinot Gris), Sauvignon (Sauvignon Blanc), Pinot Blanc, Merlot, and Cabernet Sauvignon are allowed on labels.

EMILIA-ROMAGNA

Arguably the finest food in all of Italy is produced in Emilia-Romagna. Cities like Modena, Bologna, Parma, Ferrara are foodie destinations with countless well-known dishes and products. A pit stop to a one of the restaurants is a must, to enjoy gnocco frito with a glass of Lambrusco. The wines are lesser known, as this is a very fertile, agricultural focused region and considered the “breadbasket” of Italy.

The clear majority of the wines produced are Lambrusco, a fizzy, semi-sweet red wine with gripe tannins and astringency. It’s a gateway wine for many, until they experience one of the top DOCs, Lambrusco Grasparossa di Castelvetro, Lambrusco di Sorbara, and Lambrusco Salamino di Santa Croce. These are usually finished in Sparkling wine bottles and closed with cork and cage. Sangiovese-based wines are on the rise and will soon be a fierce competitor to its Tuscan neighbor to the south.

LIGURIA

A summer postcard from Liguria would make any recipient jealous, as this has picture-perfect coastline, dotted with colorful cities along the bays. From the French Riviera to the Tuscan border, sail ships, yachts and travelers will stop to enjoy some seafood, pesto Genovese and drink a glass of Pigato (vermentino). The Colli di Luni DOC is shared with Tuscany, but the best vineyards on steep hillsides are in Liguria.

CENTRAL ITALY



Map Central Italy

TUSCANY/TOSCANA

Along with Piedmont, Tuscan wines are the most recognized and awarded in Italy. The Sangiovese grape has established the reputation of the DOCGs of **Chianti Classico**, **Brunello**

di Montalcino and Vino Nobile di Montepulciano. With its many synonyms and clones, this grape is best when it's aged in cask and cellared in bottle for years. Recent vintages like 2015 and 2016 will be collected and heralded for decades. Click to enlarge



The capitol Florence is key to the history and base for many producers of Chianti. The Antinori family alone have over 26 generations under their belt as wine growers and merchants. Medieval towns south of the city are not much larger today, then they were 500 years ago. Castello della Volpaia in Radda is a winery entirely run by the village and produces single vineyard wines that have been awarded internationally.

Tuscany has a long western coastline with the Tyrrhenian sea and is bordered to the east with the Apennine mountain range. This creates long warm summers and mild winters that will aid the growth and maturation of different grapes. On the coast, the region of **Bolgheri** is best-suited for Bordeaux varieties like Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc and experimenting with Sauvignon Blanc, while further inland on the Umbrian border, Syrah is becoming more popular

Super-Tuscans have raised the reputation since the 1960s that Italy can produce wines that are world class. Tignanello, Solaja, paved a path that now Tenuta Sette Cieli and others are widening with young, progressive winemakers. Value is still available in every category, with **Toscana IGT, Rosso di Montalcino, Rosso di Montepulciano** and smaller DOCs.



Castello della Sala - Umbria

UMBRIA

This landlocked region does not get enough recognition for its wines. It has been slower to develop an international style, perhaps since many of the grapes are not found anywhere else in the world. White Grechetto and the red Sagrantino are the best suited for quality wines here. There are many small DOCs, but rarely seen exported outside the region. The largest in production and notoriety is **Orvieto DOC**, a white wine that can be made in various styles ranging from dry, off-dry, late harvest to Muff Nobile (botrytized sweet style). This is a case where a DOCG status is not awarded for the best-known wine in the region. **Sagrantino di Montefalco DOG** has been a renaissance for the grape since Marco Caprai started making drier styles versus the sweet style of the past. This intensely tannic red wine is aged for many months before release and can continue to age for many more.

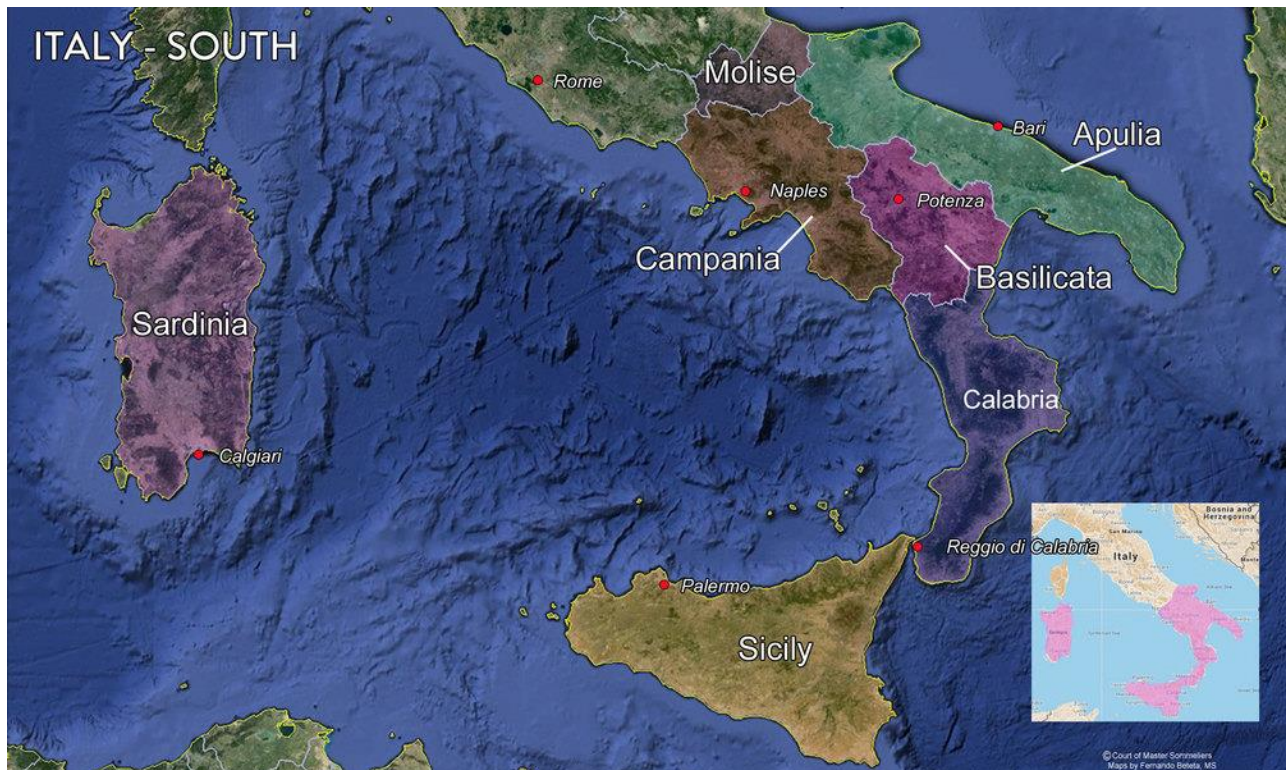
Torgiano Rosso Riserva DOCG is an even smaller appellation for Sangiovese, created and produced almost entirely by one family.

MARCHES

If you're looking to try interesting and authentic grapes, then the Marches is an easy choice. There's something unique about Adriatic wines that have this piercing mineral rusticity to them. While Sangiovese and Trebbiano are grown there, it's the Verdicchio and Montepulciano (grape) that are standouts. The area of Castelli di Jesi Classico makes Superiore wines that can retail under \$15, and compete with northern Italian wines twice that price. Rosso Conero Riserva DOCG is a large area that makes red wines from the Montepulciano grape that are easy drinking, pronounced wines.

Southern Italy and Islands

Featured



Map Southern Italy

LAZIO

This warm region is overwhelming white wine driven. Most is consumed locally with fresh seafood and classic cucina Romagnola. The best known wine region is Frascati DOC, just south of the Capital Rome is made with Malvasia Candia grapes. Many small DOCs with indigenous grapes should be sought after more for their novelty than their actual merit.

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CAMPANIA

The true south begins in Campania, where tomato vines, olive trees and ‘southern’ culture prevails. Napoli is like a whole different country. The towering Vesuvio volcano in the distance is a reminder of their past and the eruption that devastated Pompei. While the coast and islands are best left for the tourists, the hills in the interior are ideal for the grapevines. Ancient Roman grapes like Fiano, Falanghina, Greco, Aglianico and Piediroso are national treasures that overcame millennia of human selection and vine diseases. The best wine appellations are Greco di Tufo, Taurasi, Fiano di Avellino Ischia and Capri. The white wines are unoaked, light, mineral and full of acidity, The reds share similar traits and have pronounced tannins and balanced acidity. Something that is usually not achieved in warm climates.



PUGLIA

This up-and-coming tourist destination has one of the longest coastlines in Italy. Beautiful beaches and UNESCO protected sites have brought a much-needed injection into the local economy. Puglia had a declining population where abandoned towns, businesses and farms left many of the wines there unknown. Today Puglia is the second largest producer of wine in Italy, after Veneto. The production has doubled since 2014. The majority is bulk wine but quality and value have increased.

Styles are diverse, ranging from Uva di Troia red based-wine in the northern region of Castel del Monte and Negroamaro wines on the southern Salento peninsula. Salice Salentino DOC is third largest in production, after Castel del Monte DOC and Primitivo de Manduria.