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Why the best Pinot Grigio is not Italian

► Now that the weather seems to be warming up, it is time to confront the ugly, intractable question of Pinot Grigio. Sales of these wines have grown steadily, 8 per cent year on year according to the most recent trade figures I've seen. They sell as much as Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc, and account for around 40 per cent of the Italian wine sold in the UK.

The ugly question is this: why do these wines sell so well when so many of them are awful? My eminent colleague Hamish Anderson, wine writer and buyer for the Tate restaurants, refers to the cheap specimens as "one of the world's worst-value wines with all the flavour of alcoholic water". Couldn't have put it better myself.

Needless to say, I am not claiming that all Italian Pinot is terrible. Some producers, especially in Friuli, make wonderful wines

of great complexity. Two favourites of mine, which I tend to drink in restaurants on the whole, are the wines of Livio Felluga and Jermann.

But these are not cheap wines: the examples from these two producers cost around £20. The wines that have led the growth are cheapos, £5-£6.

Reader, they do not taste good.

Italy may be the home of Pinot Grigio, but some of the best lower-priced specimens come from elsewhere. Such as New Zealand: Villa Maria Private Bin Pinot Grigio 2011 is a food-friendly wine with lots of pear and citrus notes. Sold by Majestic and the Co-op for £9.99.

And such as Australia: The Gum Pinot Grigio 2012, from the cool-climate Adelaide Hills (£9.99, M&S) is a fleshier style with some peachy notes added to the pear and citrus.

For a Pinot Grigio alternative, here's a zinger: Tagus Creek Chardonnay & Fernão Pires 2012. It's made in the Tejo region of Portugal, and its pale colour belies a rich combination of fresh, juicy fruit and good acidity. Sold by Asda and Tesco for £5.99.

A great way to welcome the summer.

