

WINES OF THE TIMES

# Aglianico in Its Own Right



Wines made from the aglianico grape were virtually unknown to much of the world just 25 years ago. They have made great progress since. Now they are merely unappreciated. That may sound like faint headway for a red wine with structure, lively acidity and the ability to age and evolve. Perhaps it is worth trying to accelerate that trajectory so more people can enjoy the grape's pleasures. Among its many charms, aglianico is versatile, able to make wines that are delicious when young as well as those that can benefit from years, even decades, in the cellar.

In his painstaking book "Native Wine Grapes of Italy," Ian d'Agata wrote of aglianico: "Along with nebbiolo and sangiovese, it is generally believed to be one of Italy's three best wine grapes, but in my opinion, it is far more: At the very least, it's one of the world's dozen or so best wine grapes." One contributing factor that may prevent aglianico from receiving its due recognition has been frequent comparisons to nebbiolo, the great grape of Barolo and Barbaresco. Aglianico wine has often been called "the Barolo of the South," a description meant to raise the estimation of aglianico, but one that diminishes its attractions by conferring a younger-sibling status.

Perhaps the phrase was well-intended, or maybe it was a bit of cynical marketing, like the incessant efforts to attract attention to the nerello mascalese wines of Mount Etna by calling them the Burgundies of Sicily. Either way, the result has been to look for the characteristics of Barolo in aglianico wines, which rather than raising aglianico up, keeps it down. The two wines may bear a passing resemblance in their floral aromas, great acidity, sometimes impenetrable tannins when young, and savory minerality. But the wines are also quite different, and aglianico can suffer when looked at through a nebbiolo lens rather than appreciated in its own right.

Aglianico is mostly associated in the United States with the Campania region in southern Italy, which forms a rough semicircle inland from the Tyrrhenian Sea, encompassing Naples, Pompeii, the Amalfi Coast, Salerno and Paestum. But it also thrives in the neighboring region of Basilicata, and I have long contended that the aglianicos of Vulture in Basilicata have the potential to equal the best aglianicos of Campania.

To get a better understanding of the similarities and differences between the aglianicos of Campania and Basilicata, the wine panel gathered in late February to taste 20 bottles from recent vintages.

For the tasting, Florence Fabricant and I were joined by two guests, Joe Campanale, an owner and beverage director of Fausto, near Grand Army Plaza in Brooklyn, and Todd Wernstrom, sales director at the French Corner wine importer, who has been an advocate for aglianico for years. We had hoped to divide the tasting between wines from Taurasi, perhaps the best of the Campania appellations for aglianico, and Aglianico del Vulture, the best of the Basilicata appellations. The two have much in common. Both encompass volcanic soils. The Vulture vineyards are on the slopes of Mount Vulture, an extinct volcano, while the vines of Taurasi, northeast of the town of Avellino, are on the hills in the realm of Mount Vesuvius, a not-so-extinct volcano. The best sites in both regions are relatively high in altitude, roughly 1,300 to 2,500 feet above sea level, which prolongs the growing season, permitting smooth, even ripening while retaining great acidity.

As it happened, we ended up with nine wines from Taurasi, nine from Vulture and two from the wider Basilicata appellation, a vaguer, catchall zone. Neither made our top 10. Campania has a number of additional zones in which aglianico can be quite good, including Taburno and the region around Paestum, but we decided to limit the Campania wines to Taurasi.

I have to emphasize that this was not an all-encompassing tasting or a complete comparison. This was a cross-section of the available wines and, if we could not after the blind tasting precisely describe differences between Taurasi and Aglianico del Vulture, we could at least say that the wines had a lot in common. We could safely reaffirm that they both belong at the top of the aglianico hierarchy.

The wines showed very well in the tasting, and confirmed our belief in the versatility of the grape. Some wines were made in a lighter, more elegant style, while others were burly and tannic. Some were predominantly fruity, while others were complex and savory, with great minerality.

Two elements were blessedly absent: Pronounced oakiness and powerful, jammy wines that showed more cooked fruit than fresh. It was a sign that the wine culture wars, during which these exaggerated styles were rewarded by high ratings from powerful critics, have largely ended. Rather than following fads, the important distinctions these days among the wines were in interpretations of ripeness, a producer's preferred style and in terroir.

"It was nice to see no trendy wines," Joe said.

The Taurasi appellation requires that wines be aged a minimum of three years before release, with at least one year in barrels. Taurasi Riservas require an additional year of aging, with a minimum of 18 months in barrels. By contrast, Aglianico del Vulture can be released roughly a year after harvest. As a result, while the vintages in our tasting ranged from 2016 back to 2011, the wines from 2016 and 2015 in the tasting were from Basilicata. The youngest Taurasi was from 2014. Youth in aglianico is not a bad thing, just different. The 2016 Gricos Aglianico del Vulture from Grifalco, at No. 7, was the youngest among our top 10. It was made in an easygoing, accessible style, from the producer's younger vines, though it showed aglianico's intensity and bittersweet mineral flavors. It's a great value at \$20.

As much as we liked this wine, we had to give deference to the wines that were made for the long haul. Our top wine was a 2011 Taurasi Riserva, the Radici from Mastroberardino, a historic producer that was almost alone through the mid-20th century in producing great aglianicos.

This wine showed the complexity that can come from painstaking viticulture and aging that goes beyond the minimum. It was complex and elegant, with aromas and flavors of flowers, tobacco, licorice and minerals. The 2011 vintage was not considered particularly good, so this wine may not live as long as some riservas, but it's awfully good right now.

The 2014 Taurasi Radici from Mastroberardino also made our list, at No. 9. It was fruitier and without the depth and complexity we found in the riserva, but very good nonetheless.

Our No. 2 wine was also a 2011 Taurasi Riserva, the Piano di Montevergine from Feudi di San Gregorio, a big Campania producer that sometimes makes shiny modern wines. But this one seemed almost as traditional as the Mastroberardino, a bit denser and more tannic perhaps but floral, earthy and complex.

The top wine from Basilicata was the 2014 Gudarrà Aglianico del Vulture from Bisceglia, at No. 3, with chewy tannins, aromas and flavors of red fruits and flowers and an attractive, lingering flavor of iron. It was our best value at \$19.

The No. 4 wine was the 2011 Taurasi from Ponte, dense and tannic, with flavors of licorice and tobacco, while No. 5 was an Aglianico del Vulture, the 2013 Paternoster Don Anselmo, earthy and brooding, yet pure and complex.

Also worth noting were two Aglianicos del Vulture from Terre degli Svevi, the 2012 Re Manfredi Serpara at \$49 — deep, dark and complex, with flavors of dark fruits and menthol — and the fresh yet concentrated 2013 Re Manfredi, less expensive at \$36. Our last wine, the 2012 Lonardo Taurasi, was more on the elegant side, with pure, bittersweet flavors of fresh fruits.

It's interesting that the rules for the Aglianico del Vulture wines are less demanding than those for Taurasi. Perhaps, as it has not yet achieved the status of Taurasi, it might be seen as an imposition on producers to require more aging before release. Interrupting the cash flow is more difficult if you can't charge as much for your bottles.

Nonetheless, this was an excellent group of wines, and a reminder that the Barolo of the South does not need to rely on a crutch from the north.

The lusty foods and intense wines of southern Italy provide inspiration to spare for cooks and connoisseurs. San Marzano tomatoes, fresh mozzarella, succulent olives, tender pastas and fragrant olive oils, alone or combined, spell sheer enjoyment. The typical red wines, like the commendable assortment of aglianicos and Taurasis we tasted, provide earthy, darkly brooding complements to this happy, familiar fare. The roots of red-sauce Italian, ever popular in the United States, are in the South — in Campania and its capital, Naples, as well as in Puglia and Basilicata. This recipe is a riff on the traditional pasta alla puttanesca, with tomato, capers, olives and garlic, but without the anchovies. I went bigger on the fish front, with chunks of seared swordfish to bolster the mixture with meaty, briny notes.

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