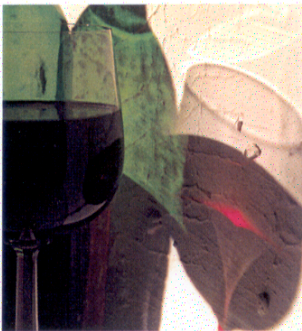


wines

Tastes of Campania

Today many gifted wine makers are filling the ranks with fine wines crafted from this historic region

BY SERGIO ESPOSITO and CHRISTY CANTERBURY



As indicated by its Latin name, *campania felix*, or "fortunate country," Campania has all the right elements to produce great wine. The Greeks labeled Campania "Oenotria" or "Land of Wine," for the abundance and greatness of the area's wine culture. Over time, the region's potential has been squandered by overproduction and simply left untapped. Only 10 years ago more than half the region's quality wine came from a single producer; and in recent history, Campania is one of the only regions in Italy that imports more wine than it produces.

Today, many gifted winemakers are starting to fill the ranks with wines crafted from Aglianico, the area's premier red grape, as well as Fiano and Greco di Tufo, two grapes that are capable of producing fine, distinctive whites. Responsible producers are increasingly establishing their own vineyards or cooperating with growers to improve the quality of the grapes they buy. Success requires a different breed of producer, a trend-breaker, and one whose wines are even more laudable given the scarcity of their type. With a little more time, this region may once again shine through as one of Italy's premier wine regions.

Campania's climate varies dramatically. It is hot and dry with occasional autumn rainfall near the sea, cooler and damp as the height of the terrain increases inland. Drought can be a factor on the coast, but the hills sometimes suffer from excessive rain and hail. The hills belong to the Appennine mountain chain that stretches the length of Italy. In Campania, they climb from 100 to 700 meters above sea level. The infamous Mt. Vesuvius also affects weather patterns, causing bizarre changes around the Bay of Naples and the central interior. Farmers once planted grapes in terraced vineyards, but today the vines are typically planted on gentle slopes.

Two wines in particular capture the innate magnificence of Campania's potential and hold both historic and future significance: Falerno del Massico and Taurasi. Falerno del Massico, the most treasured wine of the Romans, is being revived today in its original zone near the region's northerly border with Latium. This wine was such a prize that pricing was double that of what the Romans considered "Great Wine." In excavations at Pompeii, advertising signs were discovered that reveal the importance of this particular wine. They read: "Available for purchase: Wine, Good Wine, Great Wine and Falerno."

Today, the full-bodied rosso version is based on Aglianico and needs several years of aging to begin to come together. The bianco, vinified from the virtually unknown (and hard-to-find) Falanghina, exhibits freshness in its grapey juiciness and evergreen scents. This style of bianco is, however, quite different from the sweet version that inspired the passion of the Romans. Taurasi, one of Italy's most profound reds, has a superior aging capacity because of its powerful structure, abundant tannin and ample extract from the Aglianico grape. Mastroberardino, the region's long-time leading producer, has produced riservas dating from the 1960s that are still drinking

beautifully today. These grapes are not limited simply to the regions above and, along with many other native varieties, cover the entire region. Across the board, the deep-colored, powerful Aglianicos burst with chewy fruit from black and red plums, blackberries and cassis. Often quite tannic when vinified alone, it can be blended to soften its grip. To experience a monovarietal Aglianico, try the Naima crafted by the producer De Conciliis. His estate is located in Paestum, an important archeological town just south of the Amalfi coast. The wine's core is deep ruby and purple. Lavender and balsamic grace the nose, and the palate displays sun-baked plums and mulberries.

Campania also produces some thirst-slaking whites. One is Fiano, a subtle and soft, medium-bodied wine. Aromatic, it is reminiscent of pine nuts, toasted hazelnuts, pears and cider apples. Another white, Greco, is crisp and more intensely fruity. Sometimes it is juicy and tropical while at other times it is more like fresh, green table grapes with a hint of bitterness from the skins. De Conciliis also produces two interesting examples of Fiano. The Perella, aged several months in oak, is lush and full of ripe autumn fruits. The Donnaluna is a fruitier version, brimming with varietal characteristics and freshness. On an interesting note, Antonio Caggiano produces a fascinating blend, Fiagre, that perfectly combines the outstanding elements of the Fiano and Greco di Tufo grapes. Medium bodied with refreshing acidity, the wine's flavors of lemon and grapefruit are enhanced by scents of warm, summer flowers.

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