

PUGLIA & BASILICATA

Like most of the wine articles, this issue is in preparation for an up-coming LHIC event. I hope it encourages you to attend and learn more about these two lesser known regions.

Ask most people, including many Italians, to name a wine from the regions of Puglia or Basilicata, and you will be met with a blank stare. Even this article required extra research, and most of the descriptives are “borrowed” from several web sites. Partly because of the lack of notoriety, and thus popularity, the wines are very difficult to come by in this country. If you want to try some you will probably need to go online to find them, although some of the better wine stores in the Bay Area are beginning to carry a few. So what are these gems? Let's start with Puglia.

For many years the wines of Puglia were considered only useful for pumping up the alcohol content of the wines of the north. Today this negative image has been completely overcome and the wines of Puglia win awards and admirers wherever they go. While there are a few rosè and white wines produced in the region, red wine reigns supreme for quality and popularity. Here are five wines that some experts consider the best from the region:

1. Primitivo di Manduria: As its name implies, the Primitivo di Manduria is produced primarily near the city of Manduria, in the province of Taranto. The vines grow in a limestone and clay soil, often located next to the sand dunes along the Ionian Sea. The Primitivo grape matures early, in late August, but this doesn't make for a weaker wine, quite the opposite. A dry Primitivo wine has 14% alcohol and is delicious served with cold cuts, sharp cheese, pork dishes, or meat based tomato sauces over a typical Puglian pasta such as orecchiette. A sweet Primitivo wine has 16% alcohol and works well with both desserts and hard aged cheeses.

2. Nero di Troia: “Nero” means “black” in Italian and refers to the intensely dark ruby red of this wine, a red so intense that it almost seems black. Typical of the area near the small city of Troia, in the province of Foggia, this wine can be traced back through history to the 13th century and the reign of the Swabian Emperor Federico II. This wine is described as being austere, with a spicy and woody flavor and hints of blackberries and licorice.

3. Negroamaro: Along with the Primitivo and the Nero di Troia, the Negroamaro grape is one of the chief varieties in Puglia, where it has been traced back to the 6th century BC. This wine, like the other two, was for a long time used as a blending wine thanks to its excellent vigor and productivity. It has an intense garnet-red color and fruity scent, with gentle hints of blackberries and tobacco. It has a full, round flavor.

4. Salice Salentino: This is the most famous wine from Puglia's deep south, The Salento area is a land of long, sandy beaches and birthplace of the “magical” dance, the Tarantella. Its dark ruby red color is marked by purplish notes, and its intense scent includes touches of plums and cherries. It has a rich, well-structured flavor with a pleasantly bitter aftertaste and is an excellent companion to savory first courses, meats, and cheeses.

5. Castel del Monte Aglianico: The Puglian Aglianico is produced in the provinces of Barletta-Andria-Trani and Bari. Like the Aglianico from Basilicata, the wine's color varies from ruby red to garnet and it has a characteristically delicate scent. Its flavor is full, dry, and harmonious with cold cuts, aged cheeses, pasta with meat sauce, poultry, or baked rabbit.

Basilicata is another region whose name rarely crops up in wine circles. It is home to just three DOCs, which accounts for only 2% of the wine produced there (the remaining 98% is sold either under IGT titles or - more likely - *Vino da Tavola*). Reminder: IGT (Indicazione Geografica Tipica) is a designation that was created around 1980 in order to accommodate growers who couldn't meet all the DOC or DOCG regulations for one reason or another, but were still producing great wines.

Winemaking in Basilicata dates back over a thousand years. But rather than the Etruscans and Romans, who pioneered winemaking further north, in the south this task was largely undertaken by seafaring Greeks. Basilicata was also influenced by the Byzantines, who ruled the area during two distinct periods in both the 6th and 9th centuries and gave the region its current name (from Greek *basilikos*, meaning prince and governor). It was during the Middle Ages that Aglianico (then known as *Ellenico*) took its place as the leading wine grape variety – although recent theories lean towards the introduction of the grape (known as *vino de llanos*, or wine of the plains) under Aragonese rule in the late Middle Ages.

Basilicata may not be a particularly affluent region, but it is rich in natural beauty. Predominantly landlocked, with the Ionian Sea on one side and the Tyrrhenian Sea on the other, it features stunning mountain and hill ranges. In fact it is one of the most mountainous regions in Italy, with around 47% mountains and 45% hills – only 8% of the surface area is flat. The three main peaks are Monte Pollino, Monte Sirino, and the volcanic Monte Vulture.

Compared to the rest of Italy, the total wine production in Basilicata is very small, with the main area for viticulture on the volcanic soils in the heart of the fertile Vulture Massif in the north, located around the extinct volcano of Mount Vulture. One of the highest rated Aglianico del Vulture wines is the “Titolo” from Elena Fucci available from K&L Wine Merchant in Redwood City. (**NOTE:** It is the policy of LHIC not to advertise for any particular merchant, but I've made an exception here because of the scarcity of the wine.)

While the local variety, Aglianico del Vulture, reigns in this hilly territory, the huge range of varieties that for years seldom gained attention are now coming into their own thanks to IGT regulations. There are some very pleasant examples of Moscato, and some superb Malvasia, the best of which come from the Vulture zone and the eastern Bradano Valley. Primitivo, Sangiovese, and Montepulciano also do particularly well, as does Bombino Nero. The Aglianico grape is the star of the Aglianico del Vulture wine, but expands further afield to the plains of Matera where it is used in *Vino da Tavola* wines.

The future appears brighter for Basilicata. The established DOC Aglianico del Vulture has gained an excellent reputation for some of the finest wines in Italy, and there are now two more DOCs included in the portfolio: *Terre dell'Alta Val d'Agri*, in the province of Potenza, was awarded its DOC in 2003, and Matera (its name comes from the city of the Sassi, world-renowned for its cave dwellings) joined in 2005. The duo is known for producing some excellent wines from indigenous varieties including Malvasia Bianca, Malvasia Nera, and Moscato Bianco (di Basilicata), as well as Aglianico, Primitivo, and Sangiovese. The two internationals that have also contributed to the wines' standing are Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon.

Cent' anni,
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