

Italy's future Côte d'Or

Tom Maresca discovers that three ancient grapes of Campania, together with its varied soils, are exciting interest in this rich and complex region. Just don't tell Burgundy

THIS PREDICTION IS premature but heartfelt: some day wine lovers will treat Irpinia in southern Italy with the respect and importance they currently afford Burgundy's Côte d'Or, which it strikingly resembles in possessing both distinctive white and red grapes and an amazing variety of soils and exposures in a tightly concentrated area.

An ancient wine-producing area about 50km east of Naples, Irpinia sits high in the hills around the two towns of Avellino and Atripalda. The latter is the home of the family-owned Mastroberardino winery, the region's longest established. 'This viticultural district has distinctive characters, which have allowed us to show over decades and decades the huge potential of our wines,' co-owner Piero Mastroberardino says. 'My family still uses

for vertical tastings bottles dating back about one century, still fresh and full of flavours.'

Lovers of Italian wine are familiar with Irpinia's production even if they don't recognise its name. Irpinia contains what were until recently Campania's only three DOCG wines, the red Taurasi, named for the town at the heart of its growing area and made from the Aglianico grape, and the whites Greco di Tufo and Fiano di Avellino, each named for the indigenous variety from which it is vinified and for its significant town. Those three, the holy trinity of southern Italian wines, are among the most ancient of indigenous varieties, as well as being, in most respects, the south's leaders in quality.

I recently travelled to Irpinia for the

This page: Fiano d'Avellino vines flourish in Mastroberardino's Radici vineyard – the family was one of the first to propagate this indigenous Campanian variety in the 1980s



Photograph: Mick Rock/Cephas

Bianchirpinia wine fair. The event highlighted the two principal white varieties of the region and featured new releases – mostly 2011 with a few 2010s. Almost every aspect of the event impressed: the quality of the wines, the number of producers participating, the degree of cooperation and openness among everyone involved.

Minerally, aromatic whites

Some growers compare Greco to Chablis because of its minerality. Some call it a red grape in disguise, because of its structure. The late Lucio Mastroberardino, of the Terredora winery, emphasised Greco's freshness and minerality on the palate and the fruitiness of its aroma, which he described as peach and green almond. Paolo Sibillo, director of Villa Raiano, describes the aroma as peach, acacia flowers and jasmine, and the palate as fresh and forceful. I always find a little hint of green olives in it, and often a slight, pleasing, oily feel in the mouth. It can be very fruit forward, or acidity can lead, but either way it tends to be mouthfilling and on the big side for a white wine. I love it with shellfish and white meats.

Fiano can seem more delicate than Greco, and is certainly more elegant. It is richly aromatic, showing white flowers and hazelnuts, and marked minerality on the palate. Sibillo finds it 'intriguing, delicate, complex – all white fruit and nuts'.

Mastroberardino thought Fiano 'more delicate and softer than Greco, with scents of hazelnut, white flowers and aromatic herbs'. Some growers compare it to Riesling, but I find that truer of Fiano's style and ageability than of its flavour. Fiano loves food of all kinds – roast veal, fish dishes, chicken in cream sauces, cheeses – but it also makes a lovely wine to sip by itself. Like Greco di Tufo, Fiano's alcohol levels tend to run between 13% and 13.5% and are always well balanced by fruit and acidity.

These two white grapes already yield thoroughly enjoyable wines, and they are going to get better as many of their young producers learn about them more thoroughly and explore the intricacies of their many terroirs. Irpinia's growers have already undertaken serious efforts to distinguish sub-zones in the region, starting from the premise that, as Lucio Mastroberardino said: 'The two vines grow in different soils – Fiano in very sandy and mineral-rich soils, and Greco in chalk and clay rich in trace elements, especially magnesium.' His cousin Piero agrees: 'The cool Sabato valley, where the white varieties dominate, has soil that is chalky and rich in minerals, with clay in the deeper layers, which produces wines with unusual longevity.'

Complex, contrasting terroirs

Efforts to discriminate soil types are ongoing: to date, studies have distinguished three relatively homogeneous subzones in the Greco growing area and four in the Fiano area, with work going forward to refine those sub-zones further with regard to microclimate and altitude.

As a whole, Irpinia is potentially as complex and rich as the Côte d'Or, and blessed, in Greco and Fiano, with white grape varieties that can produce wines different from, but potentially as deep and



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satisfying as the Côte d'Or's Chardonnay. Like most fine wine zones, Irpinia is hilly, in fact precipitous: several of its steep hills swell into real mountains. They catch the clouds, the winds and often the rain. Because it's high, Irpinia is windy and cool – much cooler than stereotypes of not-far-distant Naples would suggest – with marked day-to-night temperature changes and a long growing season.

Those conditions usually push Greco and Fiano grapes to full sugar and phenolic ripeness. The hills also provide a multiplicity of exposures and microclimates and, because of the area's highly varied geology, soils are markedly diverse: layers of volcanic ash, decayed lava, marine sediments, clays and alluvial deposits, or a mixture of all of these.

For winemakers, this highly diversified environment means it's crucial to match variety with site, and give each the special maintenance and care it requires. Done properly, that results in top-quality wines that show distinctive characters. Just as the crus of the Côte d'Or display both rich varietal character and a marked *goût de terroir*, so too do the best wines of Irpinia. What impressed me most at Bianchirpinia is just how many producers are already achieving that kind of site-specificity in this recent revival of an ancient land.

Irpinia has been an important wine producer at least since Campania was colonised by the ancient Greeks (about 800 BC). But like most of the Italian south, Campania's economy and prestige declined

Above: Maura Sarno of Tenuta Sarno 1860, whose Fiano d'Avellino was Tom Maresca's top-scoring wine in his tasting of Campania's 2011 whites (see box p54)



in modern times – most precipitously after Italian unification. Then, after World War II and the end of the sharecropping system that had kept Italy feudal and agrarian, farmers fled the land as they did all over Italy, leaving fields and vineyards idle. Ancient grape varieties, such as Aglianico, Fiano and Greco, were neglected or overcropped as growers pursued quantity over quality, and the reputation of southern wine was damaged even further.

A force for good

From this nadir, the wines have resurged magnificently, under the leadership of the now-divided Mastroberardino family. Antonio now owns the Mastroberardino name and winery in Atripalda, running it with his son Piero. His brother Walter is proprietor of some of the family's best vineyards

and of the Terredora winery in Montefusco, which he runs with his children Paolo, Daniela and until recently his deceased son Lucio. Both branches of the family spearheaded the resurrection of ancient varieties, and young people with new attitudes started returning to the land. This is the root of the remarkable cooperation and generosity of spirit I witnessed at Bianchirpinia. There was an almost universal agreement that anything that raises the profile of Irpinia is good for all its producers.

The general acknowledgement of the Mastroberardino family's centrality to the region and its wines is testament to that. One young winemaker, as he drove me past the Mastroberardino winery in Atripalda, nodded at it and said: 'That's the church, the Vatican. Without Mastroberardino, none of us exists.'

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When the Mastroberardinos began to propagate Fiano in the 1980s, there were only about 30 hectares of it under cultivation throughout Irpinia; now 562ha are cultivated in the DOCG zone. Greco and Aglianico have similar histories. Back then, Mastroberardino's were almost the only wines of the region on the international market, and not many others were available in Italy.

At Bianchirpinia, 41 producers showed 33 examples of Greco and 38 of Fiano. That is a tremendous explosion of production. Many of these wineries – Picariello, Donnachiara, Feudi di San Gregorio, Villa Raiano to name a few – are already producing world-class wines.

Of those 33 Grecos and 38 Fianos, I gave ratings of 17/20 points or higher (90/100 points) to 27 Grecos and 26 Fianos – a percentage that retrospectively I find staggering. This is not typical for me for any other class of wines I can think of. Even allowing for all the vagaries of a single taster on a single occasion, in the glasses these wines clearly showed the wonderful potential of this still too-little-known wine region. □

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Maresca's top 2011 whites from Campania

The best producers regard 2011 as a very good vintage but not as great as the superb 2010 (some wines may still be available: look especially for single-vineyard wines). I'd estimate that these Grecos will be fresh and pleasing for the next four or five years. The Fianos should last twice as long, growing more elegant and distinguished as they age.

Tenuta Sarno 1860, Fiano di Avellino

19/20pts (96/100pts)

N/A UK www.tenutasarno1860.it

Intense mineral and dried white fruit in nose and mouth, pears, hazelnuts and flint in the finish. **Drink** 2013–2020 **Alc** 13%



and nuts. Balanced and elegant.

Drink 2013–2020 **Alc** 13%

Donnachiara, Greco di Tufo 18 (93)

POA Enologia

Classic Greco aromas and flavours, with invigorating acidity. **Drink** 2013–2015 **Alc** 13%



Feudi di San Gregorio, Pietracalda Fiano di Avellino 18 (93)

££17.75–£22 AG Wines, Carruthers & Kent, Enotria, Great Western, Harper Wells, Mill Hill Wines, Winedirect

Marked minerality, with flowers and nuts. Round, with good weight. Nice fruit and leather finish. **Drink** 2013–2020 **Alc** 13.5%



Pietracupa, Fiano di Avellino 18 (93)

£20.99 AG Wines, Astrum

Excellent Fiano character throughout: dried white fruits predominating.

Drink 2013–2020 **Alc** 13%

Villa Matilde, Fiano di Avellino 18 (93)

£17.25–£20 Christopher Piper Wines, Eurowines

Herbal, mineral, floral nose; palate round and soft, with hazelnuts and minerals; long flinty finish. **Drink** 2013–2020 **Alc** 13.5%



Villa Raiano, Alimata Fiano di Avellino 18 (93)

POA Prestige Food & Wine

Good Fiano fruit-and-mineral character throughout, sustained by fine acidity.

Drink 2013–2020 **Alc** 13.5%



Green olives, earth and nuts on the nose, lots of bright fruit on the palate. **Drink** 2013–2015 **Alc** 13.5%

Mastroberardino, Novaserra Greco di Tufo 17.5 (91)

£23.63 Mondial

Quite fine: live and limber, but still deep and complex.

Drink 2013–2015 **Alc** 13.5%

Mastroberardino, Radici Fiano di Avellino 17.5 (91)

£23.63 Mondial

Flint and white flowers on the nose and in the mouth; dried pears and hazelnuts on the finish: very nice. **Drink** 2013–2020 **Alc** 13.5%

Picariello, Fiano di Avellino 17.5 (91)

£20 HS Fine Wines, Berry Bros & Rudd

Lovely gentle hazelnut nose, bright nut-and-mineral palate, elegant nut-and-leather finish: nice. **Drink** 2013–2020 **Alc** 13.5%

Pietracupa, Greco di Tufo 17.5 (91)

£21–£23 AG Wines, Astrum, Wined Up Here

Minerals, nuts and mushroom aroma and flavour with vibrant acidity. **Drink** 2013–2015 **Alc** 13.5%

Terredora, Loggia della Serra Greco di Tufo 17.5 (91)

£15.95 Tanners, Winetraders

Lively minerals and mushrooms on the palate and in the finish. **Drink** 2013–2015 **Alc** 13%

Villa Matilde, Greco di Tufo 17 (90)

£20 Eurowines

Vigorous and acidic, with olives and nuts strong on the finish. **Drink** 2013–2015 **Alc** 14%

For full details of UK stockists, see p100