

## ***The Wines of Campania: Red, White, and Pure Gold***



**Tom Maresca**



**O**f all of Italy's wine regions, Campania has the greatest potential for producing both red and white wines of superb quality. Not all wine experts, not even Italian ones, accept this, but I have long believed it. Initially, it was largely an act of faith, but in recent years it has become more and more a matter of fact. The same growth in number of producers and ascent in quality that have played out in Burgundy and Piedmont is now in full swing in Campania, with a consequent increase in the number of award-winning wines every year, as well as – and this is Campania's special excitement – constant rediscoveries of amazing, almost lost, ancient varieties and pockets of extremely old, pre-phylloxera vines.

I've been exploring Campania oenologically for several decades now, and I had the opportunity, just a few weeks ago, to pull all my accumulated, diffuse observations together at the invaluable week-long [Campania Stories](#) event organized every year by Miriade Partners. This series of tastings, seminars, and meetings with producers surveys all of Campania's production – this year 80 winemakers showed over 300 wines, and in addition to those I was able to taste many more during visits to individual estates. The whole week afforded a very rare opportunity to savor the astonishing diversity and depth of this great wine zone's production.

I've been told – and it may well be true – that Campania alone possesses more indigenous grape varieties than all of France. It is certainly true – and this should be of more than passing interest to winelovers everywhere – that it has more ungrafted vines – vines growing on their own roots – than any other part of Europe. All of which makes Campania a wonderland for ampelographers and a super-playground for oenophiles.

### **A Little Bit of History**

The pioneers of quality winemaking in Campania – if you are willing to disregard the Roman Empire – were the Mastroberardino family, which has been making top-flight wines and exporting them around the world since the 19th century. In the latter half of the 20th century, when Italy was still recovering economically and psychologically from the devastation of World War II, the Mastroberardinis made the crucial decision to resist the influx of international grape varieties. They placed their faith in Campania's most important indigenous grapes, the whites Fiano and Greco and the red Aglianico, and they provided leadership for the entire region in developing the DOCs – now DOCGs – for Fiano di Avellino, Greco di Tufo, and Taurasi. They did this so successfully that now their base, Avellino province, and particularly its heartland, Irpinia, is the red-hot core of Campanian wine production and is home to some of the largest and most accomplished producers, as well probably the greatest number of up-and-coming small producers. Its quality levels set the goals to which all of Campania now aspires.



Piero Mastroberardino

But for a long while, Mastroberardino was the only significant producer of these great wines, at least on the international market. In the 1990s, a family split led to the creation of the Terredora estate, the property of Walter Mastroberardino and his children, while his brother Antonio and his sons continued the patronymic firm. Shortly before that, the Capaldo family had launched the large, well-financed, and dynamic Feudi di San Gregorio winery, and at about the same time some small growers began to make and bottle their own wine. Suddenly the Campanian wine scene changed dramatically, in the same ways that Burgundy's and Piedmont's had before it, and the race to make ever better wines was on.

Now, small, high-quality growers have proliferated in all of Campania's wine zones – most notably in Irpinia, the heartland of Fiano di Avellino, Greco di Tufo, and Taurasi. Names like Benito Ferrara (Greco di Tufo), Ciro Picariello (Fiano di Avellino), Guastaferro (Taurasi), Lonardi (aka Contrade del Taurasi: Taurasi), Luigi Tece (Taurasi), and Rocca del Principe (Fiano di Avellino) have already won attention in Italy

and will in all probability soon start achieving international notice. Other zones of significant interest to American wine lovers include Sannio in Benevento and the Falerno-producing areas of Caserta, as well as its rapidly rising Terre del Volturno, the latter home to Pallagrello rosso and bianco and Casavecchia. Right around Naples, the Campi Flegrei and Vesuvio appellations produce some lovely and steadily improving wines, as do, further to the south, Salerno's three subzones, Costiera Amalfitana, Colli Salernitani, and Cilento. There are now first-rate wineries in all these areas: for example, La Sibilla and Grotta del Sole in Campi Flegrei and Nanni Copè and Masseria Felicia in Caserta, to name just a few of many small wineries now producing top-quality wines.

### **Romancing the Vines**



Campania adds to the excitement generated by this dynamic winemaking scene two other, unique elements: a treasury of ancient grape varieties, many just clinging to life and waiting for rediscovery, and a proliferation of surviving pre-phyloxera vines, scattered all through the volcanic, sand-laced soils of the province.

Manuela Piancastelli and Peppe Mancini of Terre del Principe provide a graphic example of the first element. They searched for the vines and wines that Peppe remembered from his boyhood in the Caserta province of Campania, and they succeeded in saving and propagating – from a small number of extremely old vines – the elegant red grapes Casavecchia and Pallagrello nero and the powerful white Pallagrello bianco. All three produce wines that have already made their mark in Italy and will, as the numbers of their cultivators grow, undoubtedly soon be well-known on the international wine market.

The whole Campi Flegrei denomination can stand as example of the second element. This geothermically active area (it has fields of hot sulfur springs) was scarcely touched by phylloxera. The louse that causes that blight cannot survive in its soils, but vines do very nicely, and almost all growers in the region tend vines that stand on their own roots, many of them quite old: upwards of 75 years is not uncommon. The small (9.5 ha) La Sibilla winery, for instance, works with vines averaging between 30 and 85 years old, all on their own roots, and replanted as necessary by massal selection – so always pre-phyloxera stock if not necessarily individual pre-phyloxera plants. The value of this lies in the fact that a vine on its own roots produces fruit, and therefore wine, with much greater varietal intensity and purity than a vine that has been grafted onto American rootstock.

Another dramatic example, in a totally different zone, is the Taurasi riserva of Raffaele Guastaferro, which is vinified from two and a half hectares of 175- to 200-year-old Aglianico vines high in the hills of Avellino province. I tasted a vertical sampling of Guastaferro Taurasi Riservas back to 2004, when Raffaele took over the winemaking from his father, and they were among the most intense, concentrated, and elegant

Taurasis it has ever been my pleasure to enjoy. These wines in their character and quality recalled and rivaled the finest Barolos, with the added dimension of a natural delicacy that Nebbiolo wines don't often achieve.

### **What's in a Name?**

The greatest difficulties wine lovers encounter in coming to know the wines of Campania are almost certainly their sheer number and the consequent flood of names that must be dealt with. First there are the various provinces of Campania:

**Avellino** (and its important subzone, Irpinia),

**Benevento** (and its subzone Sannio),

**Caserta** (its subzones are Falerno del Massico and Terre del Volturno),

**Napoli** (subzone Campi Flegrei), and

**Salerno** (subzones Costa Amalfitana and Cilento)

All these embrace a large number of different grape varieties and consequently numerous denominations.

That's not as overwhelming as it may seem at first sight. The chief grape varieties provide the key to understanding Campania wine. The major white grapes to know are Fiano, Greco, and Falanghina, with Pallagrello bianco growing fast in volume and importance. The major red grapes are Aglianico and Piediroso, with Pallagrello rosso and Casavecchia beginning to be more significant.

For my palate, the most intriguing examples of the white wines are almost always monovarietal, even though many growers try their hand at blends. Despite Fiano and Greco's wide cultivation throughout Campania, the general opinion holds that the best examples of both come from Irpinia, where each has won a DOCG designation: Fiano di Avellino and Greco di Tufo, each from the richly mineral-inflected soils around their named towns. Falanghina also is very widely grown: It's a more forgiving grape than

either Fiano or Greco and makes a friendlier, lighter-bodied wine, so good examples come from all over Campania. For me the best are from Caserta, where it makes the DOC Falerno Bianco, and from Campi Flegrei, where the intense minerality of the soils of that geothermically active region lend its Falanghina a distinctive tang.

Taurasi, a 100% Aglianico wine grown high on the slopes of the Irpinian hills – up to 600 meters in some cases – stands as the peak (yes, pun intended) of Campanian red wine production, but other zones are improving fast. The Aglianico of Benevento, for instance, recently won its own DOCG designation. And Piediroso, traditionally grown throughout Campania and traditionally blended in varying proportions with Aglianico, now appears frequently as a monovarietal wine – some of them very impressive.

Nevertheless, Piediroso's most important role still is in blends, such as the often-lovely Falerno rosso del Massico, or in Lacryma Christi rosso, where it dominates the blend, or in the reds of the Costa Amalfitana, where it partners with Aglianico and other very localized red varieties. At the moment, Pallagrello rosso and Casavecchia come only from a small subzone of Caserta (Terre del Volturno), where they usually appear as monovarietal (or nearly so) wines.

That may seem like a lot to learn, but there is great pleasure to be had in the process: Aglianico, Fiano, and Greco stand clearly among the world's noblest varieties, and the newly rediscovered Casavecchia, Pallagrello nero, and Pallagrello bianco may soon join them. These wines and their kin are getting better all the time. They all share the great features that make Campanian wine so special: volcanic terroirs that give intriguing, distinctive minerality; thrilling acidity, marked even for Italy; highly varied microclimates that lend special character to the grapes grown there; and, uniquely, ancient vines on their own roots, many pre-phyloxera – a package of qualities unmatched anywhere else in the world.

## **A Selection of Campania's Pure-Gold Producers**

The following list certainly doesn't contain everything there is to know about the wonderful wines of Campania, but it provides a good start: an abecedary of the region. It offers a sample of the best producers of all of the areas, as I at this point know them. The winemaking situation in Campania is fluid and dynamic, with new, high-quality producers steadily emerging: I know I haven't tasted them all, and I haven't been able to visit all that I've tasted. *Ars longa, vita brevis.*

### **Alois**

A mid-size, steadily improving producer of both red and white Pallagrello and Casavecchia. These are substantial wines, already complex when still young. I especially like Alois's all-stainless-steel Pallagrello bianco.

### **Astroni**

A mid-size producer in the Campi Flegrei zone, making very interesting, soft and deep Piediroso and lovely mineral-inflected Falanghina. I was especially impressed by the cru Vigna Astroni, which rests six months on its lees. This gives the Falanghina greater depth and roundness without losing any of the characteristic Campi Flegrei minerality.

### **Contrade di Taurasi**

A small (5 hectares) family-owned estate in Taurasi with lovingly produced reds and a gorgeous white made from an endangered grape that Alessandro Lonardi is determined to save. It's locally called 'Grecomusc' (that's the name on the label) but it's actually Roviello bianco. Good a wine as that is, Lonardi's Taurasi's are better: big and austere and needing time to mature.

### **Di Prisco**

A small family-owned estate in Irpinia that produces both fine, substantial Taurasi and excellent Greco di Tufo. The latter originates from very high vineyards – 650 meters – in the commune of Montefusco (prime Greco country) and rests eight months on its fine lees before bottling. A lovely wine.



### **Donnachiara**

Rapidly improving Taurasi and brilliant white wines issue from the Pettito family's approximately 23 hectares in Irpinia. The three whites – Fiano di Avellino, Greco di Tufo, and Falanghina, all fermented in stainless steel – are marked by clear varietal character, energy, and vivacity. A few years ago, the Taurasi was less clear-cut, but it has intensified sharply in recent vintages. An estate to watch.

### **Ferraro Benito**

A small (8-9 hectares) Irpinia producer of all three of the region's DOCG wines. Of these, the Fiano, while perfectly characteristic and enjoyable, is the least, but only because the Taurasi and Greco di Tufo – especially the cru Vigna Cicogna – are so off-the-charts fine.

### **Feudi di San Gregorio**

Started in 1986, Feudi was at first the new kid on the block who stirred things up – to everyone's benefit, as it has turned out. A large firm and an energetic one, and a quick learner to boot. It started out by over-oaking its wines, but that tendency is being brought under control, and recent vintages of Taurasi are showing better and better. Good Fiano and Greco too, as well as an intriguing Fiano/Greco blend (Campanaro). Feudi too is rescuing an endangered grape variety, Sirica, which yields a really interesting red wine, not as austere as Aglianico, but similarly structured.

### **Grotta del Sole**

Four generations of the Martusciello family have been involved with wine, and for the past 25 years the family has been actively working to save the indigenous vines of its home Campi Flegrei zone. It now makes a lovely range of native Campanian wines, including the too-neglected sprightly white Asprinio and the better-known Falanghina. Notably, Grotta del Sole produces a very fine Brut Spumante Asprinio d'Aversa, as well as an impressive cru red wine, Campi Flegrei Piediroso Riserva Montegauro.

### **Guastafarro**

A small (7 hectares) Taurasi producer, Rafaele Guastferro has the good fortune to own

and cultivate very old vines. Two and half hectares of them, which he describes as between 175 and 200 years old, make his Taurasi Riserva – a wine of monumental structure, rich aromatics, and astonishing elegance. Not yet imported, but that will no doubt change soon.

### **La Rivolta**

A newish (1997) mid-size estate in Benevento province producing a steadily upward-trending line of wines. Really enjoyable, brisk Falanghina del Sannio, soft, round Taburno Piediroso, and an impressive, newly DOCG Aglianico del Taburno, all at good value.

### **La Sibilla**

Growers in the Campi Flegrei zone for five generations, the Di Meo family began making their own wine in 1997, in a cellar built into part of an old Roman aqueduct. From approximately nine hectares of very old vines, almost all self-rooted, they produce delightful aperitif-style Falanghina and rounder, more substantial Crunadelago from 50- to 60-year-old vines – the latter combining touches of salt, flint, and dried apple in nose, palate, and finish: quite nice. Also fine, earthy Piediroso and cru Piediroso Vigna Madre, both marked by soft brambly fruit and a bracing, leathery finish.

### **Marisa Cuomo**

So much has been written about the wife and husband team (Marisa Cuomo and Andrea Ferraioli) at this small Costa d'Amalfi estate that my praise would be superfluous. The simple fact is that for over 30 years now, they have been turning out a battery of top-flight wines. Most pleasing to me are their Furore rosso (especially the Riserva, usually 50/50 Aglianico and Piediroso) and Furore bianco (usually 60/40 Falanghina and Biancolella). In a category of its own is their much honored Fiorduva, an incomparable wine that ought to be sweet but defies sweetness with complexity and depth. It is vinified from the very local varieties Ripoli, Fenile, and Ginestra.

### **Masseria Felicia**

Small (5 hectares), family-owned (Maria Felicia Brini and her husband) Masseria Felicia

is situated right in the heart of ancient Roman Falernum district, on the slopes of Monte Massico. Old volcanic soils yield lovely Falanghina (Sinopea) and Falerno del Massico bianco (Anthologia; 100% Falanghina), as well as richly fruited and beautifully balanced reds. The latter run from basic Falerno del Massico (stainless steel) through the lightly barricked Ariapetrina, to the flagship wine, Falerno rosso Etichetta Bronzo (80/20 Aglianico/Piedirosso), all fine, with great, soft fruit and structure, all – especially Etichetta Bronzo – very age-worthy.

### **Mastroberardino**

This is the most famous name in Campanian wine, the pioneer, the progenitor. Without Mastroberardino, there might be no Campanian wine in any significant sense. Now headed by Piero Mastroberardino, the firm continues to produce top-flight versions of the wines it saved from extinction: Taurasi Radici, Fiano di Avellino Radici, Greco di Tufo Novaserra, Lacryma Christi red and white, Falanghina – Mastroberardino makes them all at or very near the top of their potential. Still the star of the zone, without question.

### **Monte di Grazia**

The Arpino family produces Monte di Grazia rosso and bianco from a tiny two and a half hectares of vines high (between 400-500 meters) on the precipitous Amalfi coast. Both wines are unique in different ways. The red, vinified mostly from the otherwise almost extinct Tintore, is rich with dark fruits, complex, elegant, and structured for long life. The white, made from the very local varieties Biancatenera, Peppella, and Ginestra, all almost as endangered as Tintore, smells and tastes of dried apple and dried pear and – above all – volcanic minerals: basalty, ever-so-slightly-sulfury, slaty. All told, two intriguing wines, deserving of attention.

### **Montevetrano**

Silvia Imperato's five hectares in the Colli Salernitani – almost a wine wilderness when she began there 25 years ago – have been heaped with honors from the start. The eponymous Rosso Montevetrano is now vinified from 50% Cabernet sauvignon, 20 %

Merlot, and 30% Aglianico. The percentage of Aglianico has been steadily growing under Silvia's insistence: Some say that Riccardo Cottarella, her consulting enologist from the beginning, learned to appreciate Aglianico under her tutelage. Now she has added to her line the 100% Aglianico Core, a wine of great structure and depth, though a little austere on first tasting: It needs time to compose itself.

### **Mustilli**

Mustilli consists of 35 hectares of vines in the Sannio district. The founder of the estate, Leonardo Mustilli, was a pioneer – probably the pioneer -- of Falanghina, which continues to be a major factor for the still-family-owned firm. Mustilli also makes very fine Sannio Aglianico and Piediroso and, among white wines, good Sannio Greco.

### **Nanni Copè**

Giovanni Ascione hand-tends every single vine on his 2.5 hectares of mostly Pallagrello nero (plus a bit of Aglianico and Casavecchia) in the Terre del Volturno zone of Caserta. His passion pays big dividends: His sole wine – Sabbie di Sopra Il Bosco (“the sandy soils above the woods”) – has been steadily winning prizes almost since its introduction in 2008. It is big, more powerful and structured than its elegance and easy drinkability reveal at first taste. Nanni Copè is already on its way to being a cult wine in Italy.

### **Ocone**

Twelve hectares in the Sannio district produce excellent value reds and whites of the classic Campanian varieties. Most pleasing to my palate are the Falanghina called Flora, from 300 meter high, 30-year-old vines, and the estate's Aglianicos, especially the very fine Aglianico del Taburno cru, Vigna Pezza La Corte – the latter from 30-year-old vines planted up to 400 meters.

### **Picariello Ciro**

Ciro Picariello works ten hectares of vines in the heart of Irpinia to make Fiano di Avellino and only Fiano di Avellino. The vines lie high on the hillsides – 600 meters – and are often harvested late-ish for whites, in October. They are fermented and aged in stainless steel and rest long on their lees before bottling. The results are excellent: wines

of subtlety and concealed power, with the structure to age long and gracefully. They are already frequent prize-winners in Italy and should quickly attract an international following among those who love white wines with complexity and staying power.

### **Pietracupa**

Another great Irpinia small producer (6 hectares), Sabino Loffredo produces Fiano di Avellino, Greco di Tufo, and Taurasi of the highest quality, though the whites are clearly the stars of his show. Like so many in Irpinia, the vineyards sit high on the hillsides, between 300 and 600 meters elevation, and in good years Loffredo may bottle cru-designated wines from them.

### **Rocca del Principe**

This is another small (6 hectares), masterful Fiano specialist, located in the commune of Lapio, the homeland of Fiano. Ercole Zarella and Aurelia Fabrizia work their wine entirely in stainless steel, with a brief amount of skin contact. The varietal intensity they achieve is amazing, as is this seemingly delicate wine's ability to mature beautifully: I tasted back to '06, and the wines kept getting better and better, with no loss of freshness or vitality.

### **Tecce**

Regarded as a mentor and model by many young winemakers in Irpinia, Luigi Tecce describes himself as "a less than minimalist winemaker." He admits to no regular method, changing what he does in the cellar to suit the harvest. It may be unsystematic, but it works: His Irpinia Campi Taurasini Satyricon and especially his Taurasi Polifemo receive top honors almost every year – deservedly.

### **Terre del Principe**

In the Terre del Volturno zone of Caserta, Manuela Piancastelli and Peppe Mancini have become pioneers of the vines they rediscovered. They work with all three varieties, producing two big, persuasive reds, a 100% Pallagrello nero (Ambrusco) and a 100% Casavecchia (Centomoggia), and two interestingly different whites from the Pallgrello bianco grape: Fontanavigna, aged only in stainless steel, and Le Sèrole, fermented in

barrique and aged on the lees in stainless steel – marvelously diverse readings of the same material.

### **Terredora**

The other half of the Mastroberardino family soldiers on after the premature death of winemaker brother Lucio. Their large holdings of prime vineyards yield classic versions of Irpinia's wines: Especially pleasing to me are their Taurasi Fatica Contadina and Pago dei Fusi, but their white wines may be the real headliners. Greco di Tufo Loggia della Serra, for instance, is one the finest examples of the breed.

### **Villa Diamante**

Another small (approximately 3 hectares), high, family-owned Irpinia estate producing some of the region's loveliest Fiano – particularly their justly honored Vigna della Congregazione – and, emerging more recently, the very fine Taurasi Riserva Pater Nobilis. Both wines combine power and delicacy in a manner totally true to Irpinian character.

### **Villa Matilde**

This large (70 hectares) family-owned property pioneered the rebirth of Falerno, and it remains the flagship of the appellation. Consistent quality for price has marked the wines from the very beginning, from the basic Falerno rosso and Falerno bianco through the two fine cru selections, Falerno rosso Vigna Camarato (80/20 Aglianico/Piedirosso) and Falerno bianco Vigna Caracci (100% Falanghina).

### **Villa Raiano**

An ambitiously improving 20-hectare estate that produces the gamut of Irpinian wine at a high level of quality and a moderate level of price. They make better-than-sound Campania Aglianico and Taurasi, but I enjoy most their white wines. These start with a metodo classico Spumante Brut, called Ripa Bassa, made from a blend of Fiano, Greco, and a touch of Coda di Volpe, and proceed through Greco di Tufo, with a nice cru Contrada Marotta, to culminate in two lovely crus of Fiano di Avellino, Ventidue and – my special favorite – Alimata.

