In praise of Aglianico

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See my tasting notes on many southern Italian wines, including Aglianicos.

There are some grape varieties that, like Cary Grant and Catherine Deneuve, exude class. Aglianico, a speciality of Campania and Basilicata in the hinterland of Naples, is one of these. It makes firm red wines with real savour that is somehow more mineral than animal or vegetable yet they do not lack fruit, and have great structure that promises a long and generally rather glorious life. Aglianico's high tannins and acidity, and its evident ability to age, has inspired some to call it the 'Barolo of the south'. Praise indeed – although Aglianico is generally much deeper crimson than the Nebbiolo grape responsible for Barolo.

It is the signature grape of Taurasi in Campania and Aglianico del Vulture just over the border in the hills of Basilicata. Although it buds early, it ripens so late, and its grapes are so naturally high in acidity, that it has traditionally been assumed that it simply wouldn't ripen sufficiently often further north. At higher altitudes in Taurasi, it has often been picked well into November.

But throughout the world of wine, where climate change is all too obvious, calls are going out for ever-later-ripening varieties. So perhaps, as more and more wine drinkers around the world are exposed to its charms, it will be planted more widely. Even in this part of the world, temperatures can routinely be lower than outsiders merely looking at a map might imagine. I was assured recently by Sara Carbone, who, with her brother, is reviving their parents' two vineyards 500 m above sea level in the Aglianico del Vulture zone, that they often have to wear sweaters at night even in August. (The wine from the older of these vineyards, planted in 1975, has the arresting name of Stupor Mundi.)

For long Aglianico was thought to have been brought to its southern Italian power base by the land's early colonisers, the Greeks, and Aglianico was interpreted as a corruption of the word Hellenic. It has even been thought that this could be the variety from which the classical wine Falernum was made. (Geography helped this theory.) But the thoroughly modern tool of DNA analysis has found no close relationships with any known Greek varieties.

The most famous producer of Aglianico in Taurasi by far has been Mastroberardino, currently run by the tenth generation. Their Taurasi, grown on particularly volcanic soils, comes in a *normale* version and Radici, made for especially long ageing. Mastroberardino, Radici Riserva 1999 Taurasi (only about £20 in the UK; closer to $50 in the US) was absolutely stunning and apparently at its peak last September – sleek, subtle, polished and with strong mineral elements, which is perhaps not surprising because the best soils of Taurasi and Aglianico del Vulture tend to be volcanic, as the name of the latter suggests.

In Taurasi, producers are allowed to add up to 15% of grapes other than Aglianico, and throughout Campania there is a tradition of blending Aglianico with other local grapes such as the rather fresher and more aromatic local Piedirosso, or the Primitivo of Puglia to make earlier-maturing, more obviously fruity wines.

Aglianico del Vulture rules demand 100% Aglianico grapes, although a number of local clones have been identified. The leading producer here has been D'Angelo, a much younger enterprise than Mastroberardino, and one that has been able to buy in a considerable proportion of its grape needs from the many growers here. But, as elsewhere throughout Europe, more and more growers are making and bottling their own wines. In southern Italy last month, I was impressed by a producer of Aglianico del Vulture quite new to me, Vigne Mastrodomenico of Barile with 8 ha of Aglianico at 350 m on slopes made up of ancient eruptions from Mount Vulture. Their Mos 2008, an attempt at a sort of early-drinking Aglianico Lite, was no greater success than others of the genre in my view, and their top wine Likos in this rainy vintage was also a little softer and lighter than the most successful Aglianicos, but their Likos 2007 Aglianico del Vulture impressively expressed the variety's iron hand in a velvet glove character. It's imported into the UK by Cantina Caputo and can be found in the US for only just over $20 a bottle.

Like many producers this far south, the father and daughter team at Mastrodomenico are currently in thrall to French barriques, but there is a general, wider trend towards larger casks for maturation and slightly less obvious oak in the wines. Tasting a wide range of Aglianicos blind in the Radici del Sud wine competition last month, I was struck by the fact that there were many wines that qualified as decently made modern red, a definite step up from rustic failure, but there were not enough that really made the most of their volcanic attributes.

Aglianico's attributes are too obvious to keep a strictly local secret. The variety has long been common in Molise, where Di Majo Norante make a very competent varietal example, to a more limited extent in Calabria, and is also being planted quite widely in northern Puglia, where decent varietal examples such as Villa Schinosa's 2006 show great potential for the

vine (even if the wine itself is at its peak). Other notable examples of varietal Aglianico from Puglia are Rivera's Cappellaccio in Castel del Monte and Carvinea's Sirena made by ubiquitous consultant Riccardo Cottarella, but most Puglian Aglianico goes into blends for the moment.

The variety is slowly being recognised outside Italy, with plantings dotted around the state of California, notably Seghesio's Alexander Valley version and Kenneth Volk's in Paso Robles. It is also being tentatively planted in Australia's drought-plagued inland wine regions. Westend Estate of Griffith, New South Wales, won the Best Red Wine trophy in the Australian Alternative Varieties Wine Show last year with their varietal 2008 Aglianico.

The last Italian vineyard census, way back in 2000, found almost 10,000 hectares (24,700 acres) of the variety. It would be a great shame if the next census found fewer than this.

RECOMMENDED AGLIANICOS

Mastroberardino, Radici 2005, 2004 and Radici Riserva 1999 Taurasi

Mastrodomenico, Likos 2007 Aglianico del Vulture

Donnachiara, Montefalcione 2007 Taurasi

Carbone, Terra dei Fuochi 2009 Aglianico del Vulture

Contrade di Taurasi 2007 Taurasi

Galardi, Terra di Lavoro 2008 Roccamonfina

Macarico, Selezione 2006 Aglianico del Vulture

Francesco Radino, Nostos 2006 Aglianico del Vulture

Terra di Vento, Petrale 2007 Colli di Salerno

Terre Colte, Convivio 2007 Taurasi

Bisceglia, Gudarrà 2007 Aglianico del Vulture

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