

Aglianico

THEN & NOW Tasting the Wine of Ancient Roman Legionnaires

By Dick Rosano

Terredora Di Paolo
vineyard in Montefalcione
in Campania

The scene would be appropriate for the cinematic genius of Francis Ford Coppola. A Roman commander stands on a slight rise at the edge of a field. He stares off toward the sun that has touched the horizon, lighting the sky and pastures in the distance in an orange blaze. He turns slowly on his heel to face his legions of war-weary troops encamped on the outskirts of the Imperial City.

All are tired from the march, but all are invigorated by the prospect of marching into Rome the next morning bearing the captured combat flags of a conquered enemy. Rome will reward them; Caesar will be pleased.

The commander casts a satisfied glance at the soldiers drifting between lighted campfires. He tells the lieutenant who approaches him to serve the men some wine to go with

boar that he smells roasting over the fire pits.

“Ellenico,” the commander says, identifying a wine that was introduced to southern Italy by the Greeks centuries before. “The best should be served to these brave legions.”

Ellenico was well known in ancient Rome. It was considered one of the best wines of the Empire, and it traveled with the Roman armies



The Acerenza Cathedral in Basilicata about 55 miles southeast from Vigneti del Vulture



The cellars at Vigneti del Vulture in Basilicata

Farnese Vini



Wine cellar key at Vigneti del Vulture in Basilicata

Farnese Vini

on the march. The name tags it to its history, connecting to the Hellenic culture that accompanied those invaders more than 500 years earlier with the vine.

Today, ancient Rome's vinous treasure is called Aglianico, the name of the grape and the wine that is made from it. And while only lightly marketed in the United States, this elixir still deserves the accolades that the ancient legionnaires bestowed on it.

Aglianico grapes are grown throughout central and southern Italy, principally Campania and Basilicata, although some small vineyards of this varietal can be found Puglia, Molise and Lazio. It hits the market under a variety of names, from the simple moniker Aglianico to Aglianico del Vulture, depending on the locality of the grapevines and the labyrinth of Italian regulations.

The Italian wine laws, called *Denominazione di Origine Controllata*, or DOC, recognize Aglianico as a superior wine, according to the strict rules set by the Italian government. In past decades, achieving DOC status was a mark of distinction and, while such an award still merits honor, most of the production of Italian wines has progressed to the point that nearly any wine—other than country plonk—deserves the merit. In the case of this grape, DOC recognition is awarded to Aglianico del

Vulture (from Potenza) and Aglianico del Taburno (from Benevento).

Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita, or DOCG, which is DOC adding the word “guaranteed,” recognizes additional Aglianico-based wines. The two mentioned above—Aglianico del Vulture Superiore and Aglianico del Taburno—can also be awarded DOCG, based on a vintage-specific quality that raises these bottles above the standard DOC level, including fruit selection, vineyard practices, vintage conditions, and aging.

The most talked-about version of the wine is bottled as Taurasi, a DOCG blend of grapes which emphasizes a high percentage of Aglianico. With intense ripeness and bold flavors, Taurasi is made both for the cellar and for tonight's dinner table. Higher prices also attend this wine, but the reward more than outweighs the cost.

Aglianico has been marketed in the United States for about 40 years, and while it remains slightly hidden from common stores, it is eagerly sought by the wine cognoscenti. And, as its reputation for quality continues to grow, some producers are affixing proprietary names to the finished product, as can be seen in the section on tasting notes below. By adding these proprietary names—names that indicate the winemaker's creative motivation, not just the varietal in ➤

Label of an exceptional Aglianico wine—the 1999 Terre Degli Svevi Aglianico del Vulture Re Manfredi.



Frederick Wilman and Sons, Ltd.



Courtesy of Terredora

Daniela Mastroberardino from Mastroberardino winery and co-founder of Terredora di Paolo winery in Campania

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the bottle—they are following the wisdom of the wine world: The more specific the region and name, the more individualistic the wine is expected to be. Higher prices follow the same formula.

You may find a rosé wine called Aglianico del Taburno. It should not be confused with the DOCG red noted above, but it might prove an interesting discovery. If you stumble across a bottle, try it! ▲

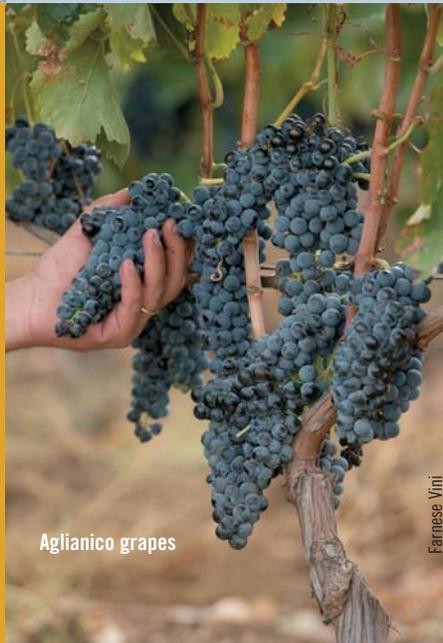
Dick Rosano is a wine, food and travel writer whose columns have appeared here in Ambassador magazine, as well as The Washington Post, Wine Enthusiast, and other national magazines. He is the author of the three mysteries set in Italy: "The Secret of Altamura: Nazi Crimes, Italian Treasures," "Tuscan Blood" and "Hunting Truffles," as well as a history book "Wine Heritage" on the influence of Italian-Americans on wine.



Aglianico grape vines at Vigneti del Vulture in Basilicata

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You may encounter a grape called Aglianicone, which appears not to be directly related to Aglianico and has been scientifically proven to not be a clonal variation of Aglianico. It is assumed by some ampelographers (botanists who specialize in identification of grapevines) that the two grapes might be related by parentage—which may explain why it is occasionally referred to as Aglianico Bastardo. Both grapes are grown in Campania, but Aglianicone produces fruit inferior in character and flavor profile to Aglianico. Don't worry about getting them mixed up though, at least not in the States. Aglianicone's poor reputation means that little or none of it leaves Italy.



Aglianico grapes

Farnese Vini

Tasting Notes

Vigneti del Vulture 2014 Pipoli Aglianico del Vulture (\$17)

Elegant approach, fine yet evident tannins, soft mouthfeel, focus on blackberry and mocha flavors. Score: 91 (Empson)

Donato d'Angelo 2012 Calice Aglianico del Vulture (\$23)

It comes across as closed at first, but the aromas open slowly with floral highlights; mouthfeel is lightly tannic, with concentrated fruit, and chewy mouthfeel. Score: 90 (Vias)

Nativ 2013 Aglianico (\$23)

This is a hearty wine from start to finish. The scent of black fruit and coffee open quickly, followed by flavors of blackcurrants and blackberries, held aloft by hints of brown spice and smoke. Score: 90 (Montcalm)

Re Manfredi 2012 Aglianico del Vulture (\$35)

Aromas and flavors of blackberry, raspberry, anise, and tobacco smoke; a finish that is beautifully finessed. Score: 92 (Wildman)

Terredora di Paolo 2014 Aglianico (\$18)

This wine is fragrant and forward, with intense flavors of raspberry and cherry, with supple tannins and a velvety smooth finish. Score: 89 (Vias)

Terredora di Paolo 2009 Pago del Fusi Aglianico (\$56)

With medium ruby red color and a light approach on the palate, this wine features soft fruit flavors of cherry and blueberry, with cinnamon accents on an elegant frame. Score: 92



Terredora di Paolo 2010 Taurasi Fatica Cantadina (\$36)

Tangy and fruity, this wine is a nice combination of raspberry, cherry and allspice. Score: 90

Despite its relative obscurity on the American market, there are many Aglianico wines to choose from in our stores. In addition to the wines reviewed above, others to look for include Macarico, Bisceglia, San Martino, Tormaresca, Feudo di San Gregorio, and Paternoster, to name just a few.

Aglianico has many names. Ellenico is the popularly considered original name dating to ancient times. Some theories say the name comes from Apulianicum, the Roman name for all of southern Italy; or from Falernium, which the Romans attached to the wine once they abandoned the Greek moniker. Today, there are white wines called Falerno, produced from a grape called Falanghina, not the red grape that the Romans were referring to. Yeah, unraveling the evolution of names requires an advanced degree in linguistics.