

Peaks and Valleys of Nero d'Avola

Wine Review: Nero d'Avola

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Photo



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For a decade now, Sicily has been among the most exciting wine regions in the world. I've fallen in love with reds and whites, wines full of freshness and vitality, complexity and a sense of place, from both Mount Etna in the east and the region centering on Vittoria in the southeast.

The most interesting Sicilian reds are made primarily of nerello mascalese on Mount Etna and, in the east, frappato, often blended with nero d'Avola. It's interesting to note that just 15 years ago, nerello mascalese and frappato, if they were mentioned at all in wine texts, were considered to be mediocre grapes at best. Back then, the star Sicilian red grape was thought to be nero d'Avola.

Why was this? Sicilian wine faced a crisis of quality in the 1960s and '70s. As wine was becoming an international business, Sicily's reputation was for churning out oceans of cheap, dull dry wines and flawed sweet and fortified wines, made primarily in cooperatives that emphasized quantity over quality.

In the 1980s, a new generation of wine producers sought to prove that Sicily could make great dry wines. As happened elsewhere in Italy, they first focused on international varieties like

cabernet sauvignon, merlot and chardonnay. As those wines drew attention, they then looked to Sicily's myriad indigenous grapes.

Leading enologists of the time all seemed to fix on nero d'Avola as the best grape, drawn by its deep color, fruitiness and full body, all fashionable attributes of the era. Yet in the last decade or so, the most interesting producers seem to be those who placed more emphasis on frappato (blended with nero d'Avola to make Cerasuolo di Vittoria) and nerello mascalese.

The wine panel in recent years has examined the [lovely reds of Mount Etna](#) and the enticing [wines of the Vittoria region](#). But we have never focused on nero d'Avola wines. So it was that we tasted 20 bottles from recent vintages, made entirely or almost so from nero d'Avola. For the tasting, Florence Fabricant and I were joined by Franny Stephens, who, with her husband, Andrew Feinberg, owns Franny's in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn, and Joe Campanale, the beverage director and a proprietor of four Manhattan restaurants, including dell'Anima and L'Artusi in the West Village.

For me, the tasting was a bit like entering a time warp. Unlike the Sicilian wines that I've come to love, which draw you in with elegance and finesse, many of these nero d'Avolas seemed to strive for impact and power, characteristics that are not as universally prized as they once were. It wasn't that the wines were high in alcohol — most of the bottles in the tasting ranged from 13.5 percent to 14 percent. But many were powerfully oaky, heavy and ponderous.

Joe said he had come into the tasting optimistic but was disappointed by many of the wines. "Too many were overbearing," he said. Florence said she had not been prepared for the overt fruitiness of the wines, which left her with an impression of sweetness. Franny, however, said she was not at all surprised.

"It's not one of my favorite grapes," she said. "As much as Sicily is hot right now, there still is only a handful of producers trying to get the essence of Italy." What did she mean? She defined it as "anchovies and sausage and tomatoes and salinity."

We did find wines that we liked, earthy wines with energy, brightness and some tannic bite, in which the fruit had not been ripened to the point of soft sweetness or surrounded in an aromatic cushion of oak. Our No. 1 bottle was not a surprise: the 2011 Siccagno from Arianna Occhipinti, a producer whose wines have always been among our favorites. In contrast to many of the wines in the tasting, this one was understated and lightly tannic, and the flavors emphasized the floral-mineral end of the spectrum rather than the sweetly fruity.

The Occhipinti comes from the southeast of Sicily. Our No. 2 bottle, the 2012 Centopassi Argille di Tagghia Via, came from a region of northwestern Sicily more famous from pop culture than from wine, Corleone, the fictional ancestral home of Don Corleone of the "Godfather" movies. In fact, the wine comes from a group of cooperatives that cultivates land seized by the authorities from the Mafia. This wine, farmed organically, was vibrant, bright and lovely, and it was a great deal at just \$15.

Our No. 3 bottle, the 2011 Nero Sicilli from Vittorio Savino, was made with the assistance of Salvo Foti, an enologist who also makes some of the most interesting wines on Mount Etna. This wine, from an old vineyard in the southeast, was lively and lightly tannic with pronounced citrus highlights among the flavors of red fruits and licorice.

Other bottles especially worth noting include our No. 4, the pretty, balanced 2010 Barone Beneventano del Bosco, and No. 5, the complex, spicy 2010 Alto from Tenuta Rapitalà.

The most expensive bottle in the tasting, at \$68, was the 2007 Rosso del Conte from Tasca d'Almerita, our No. 10 wine. It is considered by many to be an icon among Sicilian wines, developed to compete with the world's best, and no doubt it is well made. But, to our taste at least, its soft, mouth-coating flavors lacked the brightness and energy we found in its far less expensive sibling, Tasca d'Almerita's 2011 Lamùri (\$18), our No. 8 bottle.

Perhaps it is all a matter of taste and style. Most producers in our tasting seemed to want to make plush, soft, fruity wines, and clearly a sizable market exists for that style. Witness Argentine malbec, mainstream California cabernet sauvignons and pinot noirs, and the fruit-driven side of Châteauneuf-du-Pape. If those wines appeal to you, you may find another enjoyable aspect of that taste profile in many Sicilian nero d'Avolas.

But if, like the panel, you prefer wines that are more earthy and focused, and strive for a greater sense of place, then you may be better off looking to Mount Etna, at wines dominated by nerello mascalese, or to Cerasuolo di Vittoria, where the fruity power of nero d'Avola is tempered by blending it with the floral freshness of frappato. Sometimes, as with our favorites in this tasting, that level of refinement can be achieved with nero d'Avola alone. But, it seems, it doesn't happen too often.

Tasting Report

Arianna Occhipinti Sicilia I.G.T. Nero d'Avola Siccagno 2011 ★★★

Understated and lightly tannic, yet energetic and fresh, with floral and mineral aromas and flavors. (Louis/Dressner Selections, New York) \$40

Best Value: Centopassi Terre Siciliane I.G.T. Nero d'Avola Argille di Tagghia Via 2012 ★★★

Bright and vibrant, with lingering aromas and flavors of violets and plums. (Upslope Vineyards, New York) \$15

Vittorio Savino Sicilia I.G.T. Nero d'Avola Nero Sicilli 2011 ★★ 1/2

Bright and lightly tannic, with flavors of red fruits, licorice and citrus. (Summit Selections, New York) \$50

Barone Beneventano del Bosco Sicilia I.G.T. Nero d'Avola 2010 ★★ 1/2

Well balanced and pretty, with earthy flavors of red fruits. (Chatham Imports, New York) \$19

Tenuta Rapitalà Sicilia Alto Nero d'Avola 2010 ★★ 1/2

Bright, complex flavors of herbs, spices and tobacco. (Frederick Wildman and Sons, New York) \$20

Donnafugata Sicilia I.G.P. Tancredi 2009 ★★

Straightforward, with lively flavors of dark fruits. (Folio Fine Wine Partners, Napa, Calif.) \$40

COS Sicilia I.G.T. Nero d'Avola Lupo Nero 2013 ★★

Not particularly complex, with lively, lingering flavors of red fruits. (Domaine Select Wine Estates, New York) \$25

Tasca d'Almerita Sicilia I.G.T. Lamùri Nero d'Avola 2011 ★★

Bright and straightforward, with flavors of plums, herbs and a touch of oak. (A Leonardo LoCasio Selection/Winebow, New York) \$18

Mazzei Sicilia I.G.T. Nero d'Avola Zisola 2010 ★★

Slightly disjointed, with flavors of bright red fruit and oak. (Palm Bay International, Boca Raton, Fla.) \$29

Tasca d'Almerita Contea di Sclafani Rosso del Conte 2007 ★★

Soft and earthy, with flavors of licorice, tobacco and oak. (A Leonardo LoCasio Selection/Winebow, New York) \$68

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