

Wines among the Ruins. Ancient vines, Ancient grapes, Ancient city, Modern wine

Charles Scicolone (December 01, 2007)



How were wine grapes grown in Pompeii two thousand years ago? This question can be answered today.

We know that the Romans loved the wine (the legendary Falenian) from this area and many had villas there. They considered it good manners to cut wine and liked it mixed with honey, spices, and sea water because one could drink more and it would take longer to feel the effects. Besides, only the Germans, considered barbarians, did not dilute their wine. The Romans also drank from lead containers (one reason most did not live passed the age of 42).

As a student, I had studied history and was intrigued to learn that in the '90's, the Mastroberardino winery had begun experimenting with ancient grape varieties within the walls of Pompeii. Seeing this ancient city, walking in those vineyards, and tasting the wine made from these



grapes was something I really wanted to do.

My opportunity arrived last May, when my wife, Michele, and I hosted a trip for Cantalupo Tours to Naples and the Amalfi Coast based on our book *Pizza Any Way You Slice It* (now it's just called *Pizza*). I was able to arrange a visit to the Mastroberardino winery which is located in Atripalda, not far from Naples, Vesuvius, and Pompeii in the region of Campania. The Mastroberardino winery originated in 1720 and was one of the first from this region to export wines to the U.S. Antonio Mastroberardino has been credited with preserving grape varieties (many can be traced back to ancient Greece) that would have otherwise become extinct.

I contacted Alessia Canarino at the winery who arranged for our group to visit the vineyards after our tour of Pompeii. She even agreed to meet us at the vineyards and be our guide.

The city of Pompeii was destroyed on August 24 (my birthday) in 79 A.D. (I am not that old) by an eruption of Mount Vesuvius, a still-active volcano. The cinders and volcanic ash that fell that day buried the city and preserved it, making Pompeii a place where time has stopped for almost 2000 years.

Alessia explained that in 1996 Mastroberardino had been given permission to reintroduce vine growing here. Information on how they should proceed with this project came from many different sources, archaeological excavations, botanical studies, and the excavation of ancient wine casks, roots, and the stakes to hold them frozen in time by the eruption. She explained that wine was essential to the people of Pompeii and played an important part in the life of the city. Vines were grown within the ancient walls of the city, especially in the quarters located in the outskirts near the amphitheatre. The Mastroberardinis use these ancient cultivated areas for their experiments.

Today, there are five vineyards. We visited the one known as Forum Boarium, one of the largest and most interesting, which faced the ruins of the amphitheater. Dominating the landscape was the ever-present Vesuvius. One could almost reach out and touch it!

Alessia told us that Mastroberardino followed the same cultivation techniques used before the eruption of 79AD. They were able to follow the imprints left by chalk markers where the ancient stakes had been placed indicating a high-density vineyard (many vines planted close together) with the rows supported by chestnut stakes.

Eight different types of grapes mentioned by Pliny the Elder in his *Naturalis Historia* were tested before selecting the Piediroso (red feet) and Sciascinoso varieties. They were chosen based on archaeological evidence, DNA, literature (Pliny the Elder and Columella) and frescoes on the walls of the houses.

These vines we saw were over six feet tall as it is believed was the practice in ancient times in Pompeii.

In the vineyard, we also visited an ancient wine cellar where 10 dolii, large earthenware jars used for vinification, were buried. It was also a perfect spot to sell wine because it was right outside the amphitheatre. It must have done a great business before and after the games.



In 2001, Mastroberardino's first vintage from Pompeii's ancient vineyards was released. It is called Villa dei Misteri (official classification is Pompriano IGT) in homage to one of Pompeii's best-known archaeological sites and is made from Piedrosso 90% and Sciascinoso (known locally as Olivella) 10%. It is aged 12 months in 225 liter oak barrels (barriques) and 6 months in bottle before it is released. The wine sells for about 100 euros per bottle at the winery and is now available in the United States at \$240 a bottle.

Even though the grapes for this wine were cultivated the same way they would have been before the eruption, the vinification method is very modern. If it would be possible to bring back the person from Pompeii that tended this vineyard, he would think that very little had changed. However if he saw the way the wine was vinified and aged he would have no idea that they were making wine. I hope that some day the Mastroberardino's will vinify the grapes as close as possible to the way it would have been done in 79 AD and age them in the dolii, but the wine we tasted was very modern in style.

At the Mastroberardino winery, we tasted a number of other wines including the 2005 Lacryma Christi (tears of Christ) del Vesuvio made from 100% Piedrosso and aged in 2,250 HL barrels for six months. The wine had aromas of cherries and plums with soft tannins, fruit, and hints of pepper. It sells for about \$20 and is a very good value.

We also tasted two excellent white wines, Greco di Tufo and Fiano di Avellino. Both of these grape varieties can be traced back to the ancient Greeks and age well. I drank my last bottle of 1983 Greco di Tufo just a few years ago.

Mastroberardino makes a Taurasi from 100% Aglianico, also an ancient grape. The 1968 Taurasi might have been one of the best wines I ever tasted.

There were also many great vintages in the 1970's and 1980's. Currently I am drinking the 1995 which has many more years in front of it. Unfortunately, even though they had older vintages at the winery, I could not talk them into selling me any.

I did buy a few bottles of the 1997 Taurasi for just under 20 Euros. The 2001 Taurasi is more international in style which shows a new direction for the winery.

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