

Montefalco Sagrantino, Child of Umbria

Charles Scicolone (October 26, 2008)



Discover one of Italy's Greatest Wines-Montefalco Sagrantino

I am often asked which Italian red grape varieties make the best wine. I have to stop and think because there are so many good ones, but three always come to mind: Nebbiolo, Sangiovese and Aglianico. Recently I was invited by the Consorzio Tutela Vini Montefalco to the hill town of Montefalco in Umbria to taste Montefalco Sagrantino D.O.C.G. and now I may have to add another varietal to my list: Sagrantino.



There are many different explanations on how the Sagrantino grape came to Umbria. Pliny the Elder (d.79 A.D) in his *Naturalis Historia* writes that a grape called Itrola was cultivated there in Roman times. Some sources state that it might have been brought to Umbria by followers of St. Francis returning from Asia Minor in the 14th and 15th centuries. Others think that it is native to Spain and may have been brought to Umbria by the Saracens.

Recent studies show that the Sagrantino variety does not have any similarity to any other grape variety cultivated in Central Italy, nor is it related to Sangiovese as some believed. The grape is only found around five hill towns, Montefalco being the best known. It is therefore a very local grape variety.

The name can be traced to the Latin "Sacer", meaning sacred and related to the sacraments, since the grape was cultivated by monks to produce a raisin wine used for religious rites. Sagrantino is first mentioned in a document dated 1549 when a Jewish trader Guglielmo and his wife Stella placed an order for this grape

Montefalco Sagrantino D.O.C.G. must be produced from 100% Sagrantino grapes. In the beginning it was only made into a passito (made from dried grapes) wine. It is an ideal grape for this process because it can dry for as long as four months and can conserve its sugar components intact. By law, this version has to be aged for 30 months and have at least 14% alcohol. The dry version (secco) must also be aged for 30 months but 12 of the months must be in wooden barrels. The alcohol content must be at least 13%. It was not until the early 1970's that a dry version was produced.

The Sagrantino grape is very high in polyphenols (substances extracted from the skins of grapes that provide the coloring and texture for the wine) and also tannin which helps red wine to age. We were told by Signore Mattivi from the Istituto Agrario Di San Michele all'Adige that of the 25 most popular grapes tested, Sagrantino was the highest in polyphenols and tannin. I also learned that the



structure of tannin is different in the pits and the skins. Even though the Sagrantino grape is so high in tannins because of the nature of the grape, it is possible to have a balanced wine. Phenolics (polyphenols) have powerful antioxidant properties, but I will not go into this discussion!

It was only a three day trip and the first morning began with a blind tasting of 25 Montefalco Sagrantino wines: 13 from the 2005 vintage, 6 from the 2004 vintage and 6 from the 1998 vintage. The wines were all dark in color and high in tannins, with good acidity. They are rich in both red and black berry aromas, a little jammy, with a hint of cloves and eucalyptus. Others can have mushroom, leather, barnyard, coffee and toffee aromas. On the palate they were tannic with fruit but the flavors were not as concentrated as the aromas. They all had a very long finish and a good aftertaste, which make them very good with food.

From the 2005 vintage- I liked the Tenuta Rocca di Fabbi, the Adanti "Aruqata," the Terre de la Custodia, the Perticaia and the Tenuta Alizature

2004 vintage- Terre de Trinci "Ugolino" and the Tenuta Castelbunno

The best of the 1998's was the one from Scacciadiavoli - black fruit aromas mostly blackberries, eucalyptus, mushrooms and a little barnyard. On the palate it was full and tannic with a great blackberry finish and aftertaste. This wine proves that Sagrantino can age!

At the Gala Dinner I tasted the 2003 Adanti Montefalco Sagrantino. The wine was showing very well with a lot of aromas and flavors and the best finish and aftertaste of any of the wines that I tasted. I was pleased to see an old friend, Liu, named after a character in Puccini's great opera Turando at the dinner. She is the daughter of the owner of Scacciadavoli. She had spent two weeks with me at Vino to learn about Italian wine before she went to



Bordeaux to study winemaking. Liu thanked me for teaching her about Italian wine and told me that she had even brought the notes that I gave her to Bordeaux to show the French. I think that she will make a very good wine maker.

In addition to tasting wine, I was able to visit several wineries. At Colpetrone Winery, the oenologist is the well known and respected Lorenzo Landi . He took us on a tour of the vineyards and the cellar. Signore Landi let us taste barrel samples of the Montefalco Sagrantino which was very interesting. He then instructed us on the importance and use of barriques in the production of this wine. Colpetrone produces a very modern style wine. He also spoke about the vintages going back to 2001. After the tour we went out side where we sat in the afternoon sunshine sipping their passito with bitter chocolate - a great combination. The passito was wonderful with cherry and blackberry aromas, full bodied with just the right amount of sweetness and of course tannin. I was thinking to myself that it might go well with certain game dishes and asked a young lady from the winery if it was ever used in this way. She replied in the "old days" they would drink it with lamb on Easter Sunday. I could see how this would work .Colpetrone is now owned by the Saiagricola group that has other wineries in Italy and are producers of rice, olive oil, honey and other Italian products.

The next winery I visited was Azienda Agraria Terre De La Custodia. The winery is owned by the Farchioni family. La custodia was the name for the cupboards and strongboxes where the Franciscan friars and the Poor Clares of Montefalco kept their wine.

The Farchioni Family had a special bottle created for their Sagrantino. It has an indentation at the front and a notch at the back that makes it very easy to grasp. The internal shape of the glass and the slightly conical shape of the bottle causes the sediment to deposit in a single spot .The notch keeps the sediment from coming out when pouring, allowing all the wine to be poured from the bottle. It really works.

The highlight of the visit was a special menu created by Chef Massimo Inffarinati which he called "Eight Meats for Eight Wines". If I were to say that each dish was perfect, it would be an understatement. The sauces with each dish were so light and so good that everyone sent back clean plates .We enjoyed hen, chicken, pig, cinghiale, Chianina ragu, venison and pheasant. The chicken



"Galantina" paired with Grechetto dei Colli Martani D.O.C. 2007 was a perfect combination as was the pork filet rolled in bacon fat paired with the .Plentis Grechetto dei Colli Martani 2006 D.O.C.

I could really list all of them!! Everyone wanted to know if the chef had a restaurant but he did not. Peccato!. Lo Chef teaches at a professional cooking school and does special events at the winery.

The last winery we visited was Perticaia where we had a tasting of five pecorino cheeses with five Perticaia wines. The owner Guido Guardigli worked for the Saiagricolo group until 2000. He feels tied to the land and the name Perticaia, in the archaic language of central Italy, means plough, the passage from animal herding to farming.

The matching of the cheese and wine was very informative as was Signore Guardigli.. All of the combinations worked, but the two that I liked best were the Canestrato from Grosseto in Tuscany paired with the Trebbiano Spoletino 2007, and the Stagionato in Grotta aged in caves, from Pienza and Siena in Tuscany paired with the

2003 Montefalco Sagrantino. All of the white wines at this winery are aged in stainless

steel and were very fresh and clean..The Montefalco Rosso (60% Sangiovese, 15% Sagrantino and 15 % Colorino) is also aged in stainless steel. The Montefalco Sagrantino 2003 was aged for 12 months in tonnaeaux, 12 months in steel and six months in bottle.

I also enjoyed at the Rosso di Montefalco and the passito from Antonelli. The 2006 Adanti Rosso di Montefalco was drinking very well. They are a traditional winery and all their wines went very well with food.

I was very impressed with the overall quality of the wines, both the secco and the passito. The passito is a unique wine because it is a desert wine with a lot of

tannin and the sweetness is not over done. It is a very balanced wine



My stay at the Villa Zuccari in San Luca di Montefalco www.villazuccari.com [2]

was very enjoyable. It is about 10 minutes from Montefalco by car in a lovely

setting with a garden and a pool.. There are rooms with large terraces that overlook the garden with a nice view. The staff could not be nicer or more helpful.

Next time the restaurants of Rome.

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