

Wine: Italy's Favorite Energy Drink

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Puglia is the second largest producer of wine in Italy but its products are mostly underappreciated. Why is it so? We went in search of an explanation at the Apulia Wine Convezione, where we sampled around 35 wines

Italy's Puglia region is one of the oldest and most underappreciated wine producing regions in the world, and the Apulia Wine Convezione proved it. The convention took place in the giant courtyard of the Palazzo dei Celestini, adjacent to the famous, elaborately carved church of Santa Croce in Lecce, Italy. White LED lights outlined the sweeping architecture and large candles burned among palm trees, making for a festive mood, not unlike a low key Mardi Gras. Hundreds of wines were beautifully arranged beneath the portico that wraps around the courtyard, and from my notes, I tasted around seventy of them. Several were extremely impressive. So impressive that, as the jazz band took the stage on the first night in the "City of Jazz," I went in search of an explanation. Why have these wines been overlooked for something like 2,000 years?



The answer has nothing to do with the global wine market's unwillingness to test Pugliese wines. And though it is tempting to blame the slow advancement of technology, this also falls short of the mark. The answer turned out to be much more fundamental.

Puglia is the second largest producer of wine in Italy (Italy in turn being the country that produces more wine than any other), and from its very beginning, as the poems of Horace reveal (1st Century B.C.), the wines were strong and sweet. Puglia's best known native grapes are red:

Negroamaro and Primitivo, which has the same DNA as Zinfandel, with more and more superb wines being made from local Aglianico and Nero di Troia grapes. All of these grapes are capable of creating very dark, brooding wines, and I had always blamed Puglia's lackluster wine history on the weather.

The past 4,000 years of wine making in the region suffered from the lack of temperature-controlled fermentation; one of the primary challenges for winemakers was creating wine that didn't spoil in the barrel. A high alcohol level, which goes hand in hand with high levels of residual sugar, helped Pugliese winemakers preserve their wine. The sweet wines did not impress wine drinkers from the north. Likewise, few Pugliese natives had much esteem for their native grapes, and they exported most of their wine for blending.

But then, why, thirty years after temperature-controlled fermentation was introduced to the region, are so many Negroamaro and Primitivo wines still too sweet?

To understand the reason you have to first understand Puglia's enduring agricultural industry. Puglia has the most level land of any region in Italy and for that reason agriculture has been its primary industry. Puglia is also one of Italy's poorest regions. Put yourself into the shoes of a Pugliese field worker in the 1400's. You've worked hard all morning and the sun is bearing down. You stop for the traditional light lunch of bread and vegetables, but you need something extra to give you the energy to complete your work. And that has been the primary relationship between Pugliese and their wine: a source of energy. This tradition continues today, and Puglia's wine scene is still second to beer and spirits.

At the Apulia Wine Convezione I sampled around 35 wines that were either 100% Negroamaro or 100% Primitivo. The majority lacked balance. If winemakers could stop making red wines that taste like late harvest Zinfandels they'd attract more global attention. Overblown flavors were all over the place, from coffee, cola, and chocolate to blackberry, strawberry, and raisin juice. The few varietals that were not overblown, on the other hand, were very good. I liked the great aging ability of Tenuta Cocevoli's 2006 "Vandalo" (100% Nero di Troia) with omnipresent soft tannins. It can also be drunk young, its tannins standing up to heavily seasoned or heavily brothed meats. I found L'Astore Masseria's 2007 "Filimei" (100% Negroamaro) nicely expressive, with a green bell pepper and herbaciousness that reminded me of South American wines. Its dark finish typified the character of the Negroamaro grape.

The blended Primitivo and Negroamaro wines were truly tremendous. My favorite wine of the event was Ionis's 2004 "Suavitas Salice Salentino" (90% Primitivo 10% Malvasia Nera), which had the huge depth of dried fruit and soft tannins that I've come to associate with the very best Salice Salentino wines. Aged in barrique, this wine was not over oaked or overtaken by vanilla scents. Taurino's 2003 "Patriglione" (90% Negroamaro 10% Malvasia Nera) had all the qualities of sitting down in a big leather armchair in your grandfather's den. The huge, leathery fruit of the wine was gentle, though, dismissing any thought of old-timer pretension.

The rosès (rosato in Italian) convinced me that they are Puglia's greatest assets in the global wine. The dark character of the Negroamaro grape succeeds in creating a wonderful structure when used to create rosè. None of the rosès I tasted were sweet, and very few exhibited the fruity, creamy flavor of strawberry yogurt, which I, personally, find wimpy. I like my rosè to have an intense fruit and floral aroma and a high acidity level that cuts through them, leaving the mouth feeling clean and refreshed. I mean, who's going to drink a rosè on a cold winter's eve? These wines are meant to cut through the muggy heat of the Mediterranean, and it is my opinion that they have more depth than rosès from cooler climates. Leone De Castris, founded in 1661 and thought to be the first producer of rosato in Italy, was my second favorite wine of the event, the 2008 "5 Roses Anniversary Rosato" (80% Negroamaro 20% Malvasia Nera of Lecce). I later learned its nickname, the "King of Rosès." I



also liked Tenuta Cocevola's "Castel Del Monte" (100% Nero di Troia), which was nicely light, with good tannins for food pairing.

Although I was least impressed with the whites, primarily because few represented the region's native grapes, with more than 50% being Chardonnay, there were two unique wines in the line up. Taurino's wines stuck out throughout the entire event, but the winery's 2008 "Sierra" ("mostly" Chardonnay with Malvasia Bianco) clearly stood alone amongst the whites. It was atypical for a Chardonnay, with a lighter body and a crisp acidity that made it a great palate cleanser. After extolling on Taurino's overall strong performance, I must follow up with Torrevento, which made wines that I included among my favorites in every category, including the 2006 "Castel Del Monte" (70% Bombino 30% Pampanuto), which exhibited impressive balance.

Unfortunately, the wines that featured the region's native white grapes were underwhelming. The only Fiano I found was strangled by lemon. The two wines made from the Verdeca grape, which I had been excited to try, were middle of the road in expressiveness.

There were two dessert wines being poured, of which Taurino's "Le Ricordanze" (Semillon and Riesling) is worthy of mention. Though it is sometimes true that white dessert wines cannot hold their own when paired with chocolate, Taurino's had enough sweetness to balance the delicious Vico Chocolate selection, yet it also danced off the tongue without a hint of stickiness.

The Apulia Wine Convenzione showed me that Puglia's winemakers are honing their voice and homing in on a style. More and more winemakers are setting their sights on a wine market that appreciates wines for more than energy. The reds are wildly approachable and many are capable of significant aging due to longer maceration periods. The rosès exhibit the Mediterranean terroir, and their clean, vibrant, and dry qualities will appeal to many countries. This is particularly pertinent in regards to regions like Napa Valley, whose rosès, let's face it, are mostly strawberry soda pop.

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