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Terroir and Determination: Vino Nobile di Montepulciano

BY ERIC GUIDO | FEBRUARY 07, 2023

This is a golden age to be a winemaker in Montepulciano. The prestigious terroir and variety (Sangiovese, known as Prugnolo Gentile here), along with a momentum of forward-thinking ideas and a spirit of determination are spreading throughout the entire region, energizing not only the population but the wines themselves.

Nowhere else in Italy can I think of a single region pushing so hard to prove itself in such a uniform manner. This can be seen from the growers, the producers' Consorzio and even the locals around town. Being in Montepulciano incites feelings of rejuvenation and positive change. Nevertheless, the road has not been easy, nor have all of the challenges been overcome, but what is evident is that the momentum that has been created will continue to push quality levels higher across the board.



Old vines at Avignonesi in the Caprile vineyard.

First, a Lay of the Land

Montepulciano is not your average Tuscan city. Located in the southeast of Tuscany, the fortified hilltop town is a marvel in and of itself. When visiting, I wouldn't dream of staying anywhere other

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intersected by steep stone stairwells. Upon first visiting, a traveler finds themself walking in circles until the navigation of the many tiny alley walls and shortcuts becomes apparent. The valleys of Val d'Orcia on one side and the Val di Chiana on the other fill the views from the city walls. And no trip would be complete without a walk down along its walls to the Madonna di San Biagio Sanctuary - just be prepared to walk back up.

Wine is deeply rooted here, not just by the vineyards surrounding Montepulciano, but within the historic city itself. Entering Fattoria della Talosa at its tasting room and shop at the highest elevation (around 600 meters) and descending the winding stairs and tunnels to their 16th-century cellar (at 500 meters) is a telling experience. Some passages, which the winery has slowly excavated, continue to go even deeper, revealing stashes of ancient bottles and small religious altars carved into the walls. A similar experience can be had at the De' Ricci cellars, with cavernous, vaulted ceilings that house their barrels of aging Vino Nobile. These wineries provide a unique perspective into the soils of the region, as the walls and ceilings are lined with sandstone and compressed clay, ingrained with fossilized marine sediments. These historic locations speak to the importance of Montepulciano's wine through the ages, along with references that have been documented for nearly 700 years. What's more, when the DOCG classification was created in Italy, Vino Nobile di Montepulciano was included with just three others, Brunello, Barolo and Barbaresco.



Talosa's historic barrel aging cellar.

Trials and Tribulations

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and identify other wineries worth talking about. As a result, the notes in this article contain many new names. This research also sparked many conversations with up-and-coming or traditional producers that provided interesting insights.

There is a lot of talk regarding Vino Nobile becoming a varietal Sangiovese wine, which I respect and see as a positive change, but something I don't broadly agree with. I fully believe that 100% Sangiovese wines have their place in the region and signal the importance of the terroir surrounding Montepulciano. Just last year, I spoke of Virginie Saverys, owner of the Avignonesi estate, who decided upon purchasing the property in 2009 that she intended to begin producing Vino Nobile as a 100% varietal Sangiovese. This change aims to highlight the unique terroirs throughout the region and to give the wines a sense of place - something that Avignonesi has continued to pioneer with multiple cru bottlings.

By law, Vino Nobile is required to be only 70% of Sangiovese, with the remaining 30% composed of regional and international grapes. For many years (just as we once witnessed in Chianti Classico), that 30% often contained Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot or Syrah, which masked the varietal character of Sangiovese entirely in the finished wines. In addition, the overuse of small barrels and new oak into the mix resulted in a Sangiovese "based" wine that could have come from nearly anywhere in Italy. Luckily, things are changing very quickly now, and producers have begun to focus on much higher percentages of Sangiovese, as well as the use of only local grapes, such as Canaiolo, Mammolo and Colorino (the latter being more about adding color than flavor).

Visiting the area, I get the feeling that Montepulciano is trying to compete or prove itself against Montalcino. Several winemakers seem set on the idea that a 100% Sangiovese will be the wine that propels Montepulciano further in the eyes of consumers. However, not every terroir is created equal, and simply being able to state that your wine is a varietal Sangiovese doesn't make the wine any better. As a good example, looking at Montalcino versus Chianti Classico, Montalcino must rely solely on the success of Sangiovese year after year. At the same time, in the case of the latter, the blending of other grapes can help each winery establish its style and balance the wines depending on the character of the vintage. Granted, keeping the percentage of Sangiovese as high as possible is a trend that we see throughout Tuscany, and many of the top estates in Montepulciano have excelled with mono-varietal bottlings. If an estate has an individual terroir that they firmly believe will warrant a varietal Sangiovese or cru bottling, then they should absolutely seek to create such a wine. Still, wineries should not pursue this approach just because their neighbor or another famous hilltop town in Tuscany excels with it. A few producers in Montepulciano that have fully succeeded with varietal Sangiovese include Salcheto, De'Ricci, Avignonesi, Fattoria della Talosa and Cantine Dei, with several others coming soon.

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Looking out across Pieve Le Grazie from Montepulciano.

And Then There Came Pieve

Luckily, while the general blending rules only require 70% Sangiovese in a Vino Nobile, the Consorzio del Vino Nobile di Montepulciano has worked hard on their Pieve project. I first mentioned this classification in [last year's article](#). I have since had the opportunity to explore each of the Pieve individually and blind taste a number of the wines.

The Pieve (parish) designation identifies 12 subzones (UGA) that were initially established as parishes hundreds of years ago. These are: Argiano, Ascianello, Badia, Caggiolo, Cerliana, Cervognano, Gracciano, Le Grazie, San Biagio, Sant'Albino, Valardegna and Valiano. The new classification raises the required amount of Sangiovese (Prugnolo Gentile) to 85%, with the remaining blend needing to be made up of the traditional Tuscan varieties (Canaiole Nero, Ciliegiolo, Mammolo, and no more than 5% Colorino), with 100% of the wine from estate-grown fruit within the Pieve designated on the label. The wines must be aged for at least 36 months before release, the same as the Riserva category. However, Pieve is considered a class above Riserva.

The first vintage consumers will see in the market will be 2020, to be released in 2024, which is also what I tasted while in Montepulciano this past July. Each wine was presented with a general discussion of its Pieve of origin. Unfortunately, the tasting was 100% blind in regards to the producer. Since I was not able to take into account the unique style of each producer, how much I was tasting terroir versus style is still a question. It's also important to note that 2020 was a hot vintage that resulted in many big and powerful wines—not the best year to search for a sense of place in the glass. However, during some visits, I did have the opportunity to taste several upcoming Pieve from barrel with promising results.

Meanwhile, other producers questioned what they consider to be broad generalizations of terroir. As we toured the vineyards, I witnessed vast differences between one plot and another, sometimes

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broader area.

Will the Pieve classification change the way we look at Vino Nobile? Absolutely, but it will take some time to see the impact of this work. In the end, any further definition of a region clarifies, on some level, the differences of place. At some point, we will witness one Pieve performing at a higher level than others, even if that is driven more by its producers than terroir. Also, the blending rules alone are a huge step forward in the right direction. Adding to this, the need for all vines to be of at least fifteen years of age to qualify for Pieve is yet another improvement. My only desire was to see this kind of change made at a level lower than a Riserva alternative (such as a village-level Burgundy), at which point the entire region would take a big step in the right direction. In reality, many producers have been making wines that would have qualified under the Pieve designation for many years. In those cases, will this only mean an increase in price because of a new designation on their label? Only time will tell.

I remain very optimistic because, as I mentioned at the beginning of this article, prestigious terroir and variety, passion and determination are characteristics Montepulciano has in spades.



Blind tasting through the twelve new Pieve designations.

Vintages in the Market

The current releases from the region include 2020 and 2021 Rosso di Montepulciano, the 2019 Vino Nobiles and 2018 Riservas and selection bottlings. The 2020s and 2021s are intense, rich powerful wines, the result of warm vintages, while 2021 produced lower quantities due to extreme cold temperatures in April, just after budding. There is a lot of immediate pleasure in these wines, but often at the expense of finesse. The 2019 vintage was also warm but more balanced, noted for

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cellaring. Like most regions in Tuscany, Montepulciano had to deal with a complicated vintage in 2018, which resulted in very pretty and more immediate fruit- and floral-focused wines with soft tannins. The heavy rains in the early part of the year drenched the vineyards, which created a risk of disease, yet also made it very difficult to tend to the vines through mechanical means. This was followed by an extremely hot and dry summer that slowed vegetative growth. Sporadic rains in late August into September helped regain some balance before harvest. In general, production was down around 15%.

I tasted all of the wines for this article in Montepulciano in the summer of 2022 and in our New York City offices in the fall of 2022.

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