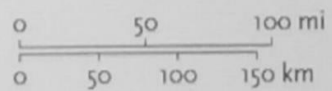


**NATIVE
WINE
GRAPES
OF ITALY**

IAN D'AGATA



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BARILE (PZ)**



Aglianico

WHERE IT'S FOUND: Campania, Basilicata, Puglia, Abruzzo, Lazio, Molise. NATIONAL REGISTRY CODE NUMBER: 2 (note that Aglianico del Vulture is still listed separately at 266). COLOR: red.

Aglianico is one of the world's great red grapes, one that is finally carving a place in mainstream wine-drinking consciousness. Along with Nebbiolo and Sangiovese, it is generally believed to be one of Italy's three best wine grapes, but in my opinion, it is far more: at the very least, it's one of the world's dozen or so best wine grapes. After all, Aglianico wines can be highly reminiscent of those made with Nebbiolo, and nobody disputes the notion that Nebbiolo is one of the world's greatest cultivars. In fact, Italian wine insiders are well aware that one of Italy's twenty greatest red wines of all time is Mastroberardino's 1968 Taurasi, made with Aglianico. Furthermore, like very few other cultivars, Aglianico has a knack for turning out a full range of potentially stellar wines, from fragrant, juicy light-bodied versions to deep, rich, very ageworthy and complex behemoths. These and other characteristics have always ensured Aglianico immense popularity, at least in Italian winemaking and wine-drinking circles.

Aglianico's many virtues have been obvious to all for centuries, and consequently locals weren't shy about attaching the name Aglianico to any other grape variety they might be growing, regardless of whether those grapes had anything at all in common with the more famous cultivar. This is one reason that Aglianico has always been plagued by a litany of erroneous synonyms and homonyms. In 1906, Molon described almost thirty Aglianico or Aglianico-Something grapes, but other experts compiled even more plethoric, and inaccurate,

lists. Another reason for Aglianico's many synonyms and homonyms is that it has always expressed many different biotypes, grapevines which looked so different to nonexpert eyes that they were considered distinct varieties. In 2005, Costantini, Monaco, Vouillamoz, Forlani, and Grando showed that a number of differently named Aglianicos previously thought to be distinct varieties were really all just Aglianico: for example, Aglianichello (an Aglianico characterized by small grape bunches) and Aglianico Pannarano (a toponym referring to the place of origin) are both Aglianico. By contrast, Aglianico di Napoli (preferably now called Tronto to avoid confusion), shows a different SSR profile from Aglianico and is therefore a homonym, though it was long thought to also be an Aglianico biotype. Of course, there are no more famous Aglianico biotypes than Taurasi, Taburno, and Vulture, long believed to be different varieties, and each one responsible for the unique characteristics of an eponymous wine. In fact, Aglianico del Vulture is still listed separately in the National Registry.

Curiously, given that Aglianico is believed to be one of Italy's oldest grape varieties, present on Italian soil at least since the days of the Roman Empire (if not earlier), there is little written documentation of it as a cultivar or as a wine. In fact, we don't really know if Aglianico made any part of famous blends such as *faler-num*, *gauranum*, *faustianum*, and *caecubum*, Campanian wines famous in antiquity with which Aglianico has been associated at one time or another. The name Aglianico first appears in print in a 1520 document attesting to the Count of Conversano's ownership of vineyards planted with *Aglianiche* (the feminine plural of Aglianico) and in a mid-sixteenth century reference to Aglianico wines produced on Monte Somma. In more modern times, Acerbi mentions Aglianico in 1825, and Viala and Vermorel in 1909.

As it has always been accepted that Aglianico first arrived on Campania's shores around the eighth century B.C.E., courtesy of colonizing

Eubean or Thessalian Greeks, the popular consensus at one time was that the variety's name harkened back to its Greek origins, deriving from the word *ellanico* (or Hellenic). The first to draw upon Greek etymology for this purpose was della Porta, who found a similarity between the Helveola grapes described by Pliny the Elder (though these were most likely white grapes) and an admittedly not well-characterized Hellanico grape. As the story goes, when Campania fell under the rule of the Bourbon royal family, of Spanish origin, the name gradually changed from Ellanico to Aglianico, since in Spanish the double "ll" is pronounced "gl." Unfortunately, most linguists do not find that *aglianico* can derive from *ellanico*. In fact, the exact origin of Aglianico and of its name remains unclear. Attilio Scienza of the University of Milan (one of Italy's most important grape variety experts) believes that Aglianico stems from the Spanish word *llano* (or plain), making it a "grape of the plains." He supports this by pointing out that there was no record of Aglianico existing prior to the sixteenth century, after the Spanish domination of southern Italy began in the fifteenth century.

According to Scienza, this is not to be taken to mean that Aglianico vines were once grown in the plains of Campania (in fact, the variety does best in volcanic soils and steep mountainous slopes) but rather that the grape derives from the domestication of native, wild grapevines that grew at the edge of forests, on the plains and elsewhere. To date, his team has been unable to identify either of the two parents, though they have been hard at work on this for the last ten years (private communication). Furthermore, Scienza believes that Aglianico originated from one of the six secondary domestication centers (the one in southern Italy and northern Africa), in which many of the cultivars we know today were supposedly born. DNA profiling studies (Scienza and Boselli 2003, Scienza 2004) support that thesis, finding no major genetic links between Greek varieties and Aglianico, or indeed between Greek varieties and other southern Italian native varieties as

groups, suggesting that many of Italy's southern native grapes, including the *Malvasias* and Aglianico, are not of Greek origin as has always been commonly believed. Clearly, these results do not prove the "nativeness" of Aglianico beyond doubt, because genetic modifications may have been induced subsequent to this variety's arrival on Italian shores.

The greatness of Aglianico starts with the grape itself. Generally speaking, Aglianico has medium-small, pyramidal, usually winged, compact bunches (150–200 grams of average weight) and small, round, dark blue-black berries equipped with thick skins, but the phenotypic expression depends on which biotype is being observed. There are three main biotypes: Taurasi, Taburno, and del Vulture. The Taurasi biotype has a more cylindrical bunch and smaller berries than the del Vulture and Taburno biotypes, suffers from *millerandage*, and is also less vigorous. The Taburno biotype is also called Aglianico Amaro, not because the grapes or wines are bitter (as could be inferred from the translation of the word *amaro*) but because of the high natural acidity this grape is famous for (*amaro* actually means acidic in the local dialect). This biotype is also affected by *millerandage*, mostly in reaction to non-ideal rootstock choices and boron deficiency in the soil. It is less fertile than the other two biotypes, but its bunch is the largest; the berries change color later than Taurasi or del Vulture, but Taburno ripens sooner, and usually with higher sugar and acid concentrations. The del Vulture variety usually expresses the most intense fruit aromas and flavors. New biotypes are on the way: the venerable Mastroberadino estate, now in its tenth generation, is currently studying a new Taurasi Aglianico biotype called Redimore that they hope to have officially certified soon.

Besides the many different biotypes, there are also many Aglianico clones available: VCR 11, VCR 14, UNIMI-VITIS-AGV VV401, UNIMI-VITIS-AGV VV404, and Ampelos VCP-VL5 (these five are all Aglianico del Vulture selections developed between 1997 and 2012); VCR 7, VCR 2, VCR 13, AV 02, AV 05, AV 09, VCR

23, VCR III, VCR 106, VCR 109, VCR 103, UNIMI-VITIS-AGT VV 42I, UNIMI-VITIS-AGT VV 4II, BN 2.09.014, BN 2.09.025, Ampelos TEA 22, and Ampelos TEA 23 (these are all Campanian Aglianico selections developed between 1997 and 2008). Recently two clones have been developed from Aglianico grown in Puglia: CRSA Puglia D382 and CRSA Puglia D386. Interestingly, it is plantings of the VCR 2 clone, which yields bigger, blacker wines, that have increased greatly in the last ten years, especially in the Irpinia portion of Campania. This long list of clones, and the monumental clonal selection research behind it, tells you just how important Aglianico is in Italy.

Aglianico is blessed with thick skins that enable it to resist botrytis, allowing for late harvesting of this slowly ripening variety. In fact, Aglianico grapes are perhaps the latest of all great red wine grapes to be picked: for example, in the Vulture area of mountainous Basilicata, starting the harvest in late November is not unheard of. Long and slow growing seasons blessed by relatively warm autumns are a panacea for this variety, since its naturally high acidity and strong tannins need the softening effect of fully ripe berries. These late-season harvests expose Aglianico to the vagaries of autumn weather; though it's a generally resistant variety, in wet years peronospora can be a problem, while in hot and dry ones Aglianico can also suffer. Aglianico grows very well even at altitudes (six hundred to seven hundred meters above sea level) where most red grapes never manage to reach optimal ripeness. Yet Aglianico doesn't just get by in these marginal climates: it manages to produce some of the world's greatest, richest, most ageworthy wines there. What's more, while Aglianico is very capable of translating site-specific nuances into the glass, it always preserves its identity wherever it is grown. In other words, Aglianico seems able to dominate its *terroir*, much as Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot do, and in contrast to Nebbiolo or Pinot Nero.

Today, Aglianico grows mainly in Campania and Basilicata, though there are also small

holdings in Puglia, Abruzzo, Molise, Lazio, and Calabria. The Taurasi production area in Campania is made up of seventeen different communes, while Basilicata's Vulture area essentially revolves around the many small towns in the province of Potenza. But Aglianico is beginning to attract increasing attention outside Italy too: as climate change is all too obvious globally, producers everywhere are hitting panic buttons and asking for ever-later-ripening varieties. Aglianico plantings now dot the world map. In Australia, Aglianico has been planted in regions as diverse as Adelaide Hills, Barossa Valley, Langhorne Creek, King Valley, Mudgee, McLaren Vale, Riverina, and even Northern Tasmania (the Grey Sands estate owns Aglianico vines)—not just the drought-plagued inland wine regions. In California, there are plantings in various AVAs such as Alexander Valley and Paso Robles, but the variety has also been planted in less-famous wine-producing states, such as Texas and New Mexico. In the United States, the first Aglianico vineyard planted was in 1988 by Dave Caparone of the Caparone winery in Paso Robles; their San Marcos Road vineyard was planted with cuttings identified by Harold Olmo of the University of California at Davis, and later by Anna Schneider, one of Italy's most distinguished wine grape scientists. Aglianico has also been planted in Argentina and Mexico. Given the grape variety's many strengths and few weaknesses, it will likely be planted more widely in years to come.

Which Wines to Choose and Why

The three most famous wines made from Aglianico are Campania's DOCG Taurasi (near Avellino, in the mountainous Irpinia section of the region) and DOCG Taburno Aglianico (around Benevento, to the southeast), and Basilicata's DOC Aglianico del Vulture. However, there are many very good, even excellent, wines made in other DOCs, such as Cilento, Sannio, and Gallucio, all in Campania; the grape can also be included in IGT wine blends such as Colli Cimini, Colline Pescaresi, and Daunia. Though Aglianico is more than good

enough to stand on its own, it is often blended with other local varieties that play a softening role. In Taurasi, producers are allowed to add up to 15 percent of grapes other than Aglianico, and throughout Campania tradition calls for blending Aglianico with the fresher and more aromatic Piediroso. In Puglia, the choice falls on Primitivo (Zinfandel) to make faster-maturing, fruitier wines, while in Abruzzo or Molise it's Montepulciano. By contrast, Aglianico del Vulture legislation demands 100 percent Aglianico grapes, as does that for Taburno Aglianico.

No matter where Aglianico wines are made, they always share certain features. They will always be firm, savory red wines with real mineral rather than animal or vegetable nuance, and plenty of underlying fruit to go along with their great structure and depth of flavor—and the promise of a long and generally happy cellar-life. If the grapes aren't allowed to overripen, the wines invariably express a lovely floral note, most often recalling red roses, another similarity to Nebbiolo. Aglianico's floral perfume, high tannins and acidity, and obvious ageworthiness have given it its reputation as the "Barolo of the south." And just like Nebbiolo wines, those made with Aglianico can be downright ornery when young. Unless the wine is specifically made to be easygoing and fresh, young Aglianico wines will prove tough, tannic, and tarry, with at times eye-tearing acidity.

It is noteworthy that most of the *terroirs* where great Aglianico wines are made have in common a volcanic origin: Taurasi, Taburno, and Vulture are all extinct volcanic sites. The complex geology of the soils and the generally cool microclimates of these three areas allow for the development of smoky and spicy notes of amazing complexity, complicating the typical red rose and sour cherry of wines from Taurasi, the leather and herbs of Taburno, and the rich plum and highly mineral nuances of wines from the Vulture.

Taurasi is prized not just for its volcanic soils, but for its altitude as well. The vineyards climb to more than five hundred meters, pro-

viding hot, sunny days and cool nights; these day-night temperature differentials (often more than 10°C difference) help develop the penetrating aromas of the better Taurasi wines and the cool mountain weather allows the grapes to ripen slowly. The aromas and flavors of Taurasi can be remarkably similar to Nebbiolo-based wines at times, though Taurasi wines made with the VCR 2 clone need a lot of aeration for the typical floral note of Taurasi to emerge. This similarity is one reason why, in the early parts of the twentieth century, Aglianico wine was shipped to northern Italy (and Bordeaux as well) to reinforce weak vintages of more famous wines made in those weather-challenged areas. In Taurasi, the "wine railroad" is still famous, a train loaded with vats of wine sent off to more northern locations to "correct" their low alcohol, meager reds. (In the Vulture area you can still see the ruins of the Macchi building, where old-timers have told me that vats of Aglianico wine were stored before their journey north.)

The Taburno area of Campania is much less famous than Taurasi, as up until the 1980s, wine production here was mainly oriented to quantity, not quality: Trebbiano Toscano and *Lambrusco* varieties were being planted and the most common training system was the very high-yielding *pergola*. However, all that changed in the 1990s, and today, in Italy at least, wine lovers are quite aware of the very good and at times outstanding wines made there. Even better, the wines are very inexpensive given the quality in the bottle. The Taburno area is made up of fourteen townships located mainly on the eastern side of the Taburno mountain, where soils are heavily clay-calcareous and where there can be day-night temperature differentials even more brutal than in Taurasi. Furthermore, the Taburno area has considerable summer rainfall, and a generally cooler microclimate, so Aglianico wines born here are marked by particularly high total acidity levels, relatively lighter frames, and delectable fragrance.

However, as great as the wines of Taurasi and Taburno can be, they are often bested in

blind tastings by the superstars coming out of the Vulture area in Basilicata. Basilicata (at times called Lucania) is the country's smallest region, tucked away between the heel (Puglia) and toe (Calabria) of Italy's boot-shaped geography. There is hardly a better habitat for the Aglianico variety than the volcanic soils of the Vulture ("almost too mineral," insinuates Antonio Mastroberardino, but then, he's from Campania, so you understand his position), the extinct volcano that dominates northern Basilicata. The Vulture is so named because its shape is said to be reminiscent of that large scavenger, but this likeness is undoubtedly much easier to appreciate after having imbibed very large amounts of the red wine in question. Otherwise, I can't imagine anyone seeing any resemblance to a vulture or any other bird, for that matter. And I'm an animal lover. In theory, these wines ought to be fairly different from one another, given that they are made in different *terroirs* and with biotypes specific to each individual area; however, many producers have planted all three biotypes (a huge shame, in my opinion) in their vineyards and therefore nuances are lost in many modern wines.

The sine qua non of all Aglianico wines is an extremely high acidity (mainly due to high natural concentrations of tartaric acid) that makes the wine capable of aging magnificently, as well as a wonderfully nuanced minerality. This natural acidity is also responsible for the wine's light-on-its-feet personality—despite its being usually very full bodied and structured—while the mineral, almost flinty touch adds further minerality, freshness, complexity, and depth. The gracefulness and minerality of Aglianico wines offer considerable refinement while eschewing gamey or leathery notes, a combination that sets the Aglianico grape and wine apart from all other central and southern Italian red wine grapes, including Montepulciano, Nero d'Avola, Primitivo, or Negro Amaro. For this reason, it was a shame to see more and more producers—especially in Taurasi, but this was true of many wines from Basilicata as

well—in the early part of the twenty-first century attempting to join the arms race by making always bigger, chocolaty-sweet, very ripe, low pH, and overly alcoholic wines. Whether this was out of a heartfelt conviction (misguided, in my view) that such wines represented an improvement over past efforts, or the secret hope of winning over less-than-expert wine critics with soft, approachable wines, I don't know. It doesn't matter really: mercifully, producers have been scaling back, giving us wine lovers the Aglianico wines we have always known and loved. Last but not least, the astute wine buyer will take note of the fact that Aglianico's wines are grossly underpriced relative to their quality; except for a few examples, most cost a good 30 percent less than Barolo, Brunello, and the other great reds from around the world.

Beyond Italy's borders, Aglianico wines of note are being made in Australia, usually in a more accessible, less acid and tannic style than in Italy. Many are garnering critical acclaim and awards: in the Australian Alternative Varieties Wine Show 2010, Westend Estate of Griffith, in New South Wales, won a best red wine trophy with a 2008 Aglianico. Australian Aglianico producers of merit include Amadio, Beach Road, Brown Brothers, Chalmers Murray, Di Lusso Estate, Karanto Vineyards, Pertaringa, and Westend Estate (in their Calabria series of wines). Many are excellent wines: for example, Chalmers bottled a 2005 that was big and almost prune, while their 2009 was lighter and more refined. I find the Aglianico by Amadio, made from Barossa Valley grapes, also noteworthy.

In California, Seghesio and Kenneth Volk are producing Aglianico wines, but less well-known and very interesting wines are being made by Caparone in Paso Robles, Sutter Creek Vineyard (the 2006 Domenico Aglianico was a blend, while the 2007 was monovarietal), Villa Creek (Luna Matta Vineyard; I tasted the 2008 bottling, a well-made wine), Jacuzzi Family Vineyards, Ryme Wine Cellars (this estate is devoted to many Italian cultivars and first

started out with Aglianico in 2007), and Terra d'Oro. Caparone made in 1992 what is, to the best of my knowledge, the first Aglianico wine born on American soil, but there are some other places in the United States making good Aglianico wines that will surprise you: Witch Creek, which uses Mexican fruit but makes the wine in California, and Mandola from Duchman Family Winery in Texas (a very light-bodied, almost pinot noir–like aglianico made from grapes grown in the Reddy Vineyard in the Texas high plains). I have tried promising versions made in New Mexico too, by Bellanzi and Luna Rossa winery; to date, the latter's barrel sample is the single best wine I have ever tried from New Mexico.

WINES TO TRY: For Taurasi, try: Antonio Caggiano*** (Macchia dei Goti), Mastroberardino*** (Radici Riserva; they also make a rare but ultra-delicious air-dried, sweet aglianico called Anthares), Quintodecimo***, Salvatore Molettieri*** (Vigna Cinque Querce Riserva), Contrade di Taurasi** (Riserva), Donnachiaro**, Di Prisco**, Perillo**, Ponte**, Luigi Tecce** (Poliphemo), Terredora** (Fatica Contadina), and Urciolo**. For Taburno, try: Cantina del Taburno*** (Bue Apis, from one-hundred-year-old vines), Cantine Tora** (Riserva), and La Rivolta**. For the Pestum IGT, try D'Orta-De Conciliis*** (Zero, humorously refers to it on the label as a “supercampan”). For Vulture, try: Cantine del Notaio*** (La Firma and Il Sigillo), Elena Fucci***, Paternoster*** (Rotondo and Don Anselmo), Basilisco**, Cantina di Venosa** (Carato Venusio), Eubea** (Roinos), and Macarico**. For Puglia, try: Tormaresca** (Tordilupo) and Rivera* (Cappellaccio).

Aglianicone

WHERE IT'S FOUND: Campania, Basilicata. **NATIONAL REGISTRY CODE NUMBER:** 3. **COLOR:** red.

With Aglianico always hovering in the vicinity, poor Aglianicone has always had to fight for

attention. And yet this variety has always been cultivated in Campania: it represents a striking estimated 90 percent of all red grapes grown in the Val Calore, in the southern province of Salerno. First mentioned by Acerbi in 1825, and long thought to be a subvariety of Aglianico, at times it was called Aglianico Femmina or Aglianichello (a name that should be reserved for another grape, a biotype of Aglianico). Semmola documented an Aglianicone near Naples in 1848, as did Froio (1878) and Carusi (1879); reading carefully and comparing the descriptions given by these last two researchers shows clearly that there are two Aglianicone subvarieties, one near Benevento (oval, reddish berries) and another found near Avellino, Caserta, and Salerno (round, dark-blue berries). These morphologic differences explain why in the Avellino and Salerno areas Aglianicone used to be called Aglianico Bastardo, while in the province of Caserta it was thought to be a different variety, and referred to as Aglianico di Caiazzo. Things didn't get any easier when, following Monaco and Manzo's study documenting Aglianicone's relationship to Aglianico (2001), Calò and Costacurta found Aglianicone identical to Ciliegiolo and not related to Aglianico at all (Calò, Costacurta, Carraro, and Crespan 2004). The fun never stops when identifying Italian native grapes.

The Aglianicone / Ciliegiolo fiasco is but one of many well-known, headache-inducing, not-so-scientific capers, among them the Californian Mondeuse Noire / Refosco and the Australian Savagnin / Albariño misidentifications. As in those other instances, the erroneous conclusions were arrived at via genetic testing performed on incorrectly identified grapevines (in this case, likely an atypical-looking Ciliegiolo that had been believed to be Aglianicone). Clearly, if vineyards are sampled poorly and DNA profiles are performed on the wrong grapevines, then wrong results are predictable. These two varieties *do* look alike—though their wines couldn't be more different—and local producers have told me that in the past, careless nurseries sometimes