

AGLIANICO: THE NEBBIOLO OF THE SOUTH?

At its best, this traditional grape variety from Italy's torrid southern territory makes top-quality and long-lived reds.

Andy Howard MW explores the character of Aglianico, selecting the best producers and his top 12 wines

The future for Aglianico looks promising. This ancient grape is the signature red variety in the rugged, beautiful regions of Campania and Basilicata, and wine quality is on a steep upward trajectory. It should be on every wine lover's radar.

Aglianico is sometimes called the 'Nebbiolo of the south', but this really doesn't do the grape justice.

Like Nebbiolo, wines made from Aglianico have inherent quality and a remarkable ability to age, with many examples showing alluring floral aromatics when young, and developing spice and herbal nuances with time in bottle. The wines will almost certainly differ in colour (Nebbiolo has thin skins, whereas Aglianico is thick-skinned), while both share high acidity and plentiful tannins – the latter characteristic sometimes makes Aglianico a difficult choice for consumers.

However, times are changing, and exciting wines are being produced across Campania and Basilicata as winemakers get to grips with the challenges the grape variety brings, producing distinctive, fragrant, terroir-specific wines, and often giving amazing value.

Many leading commentators are strong advocates for Aglianico. Jancis Robinson MW notes: 'There are some grape varieties that, like Cary Grant and Catherine Deneuve, exude class. Aglianico is one of these.' Renowned Italian wine expert Ian D'Agata goes further, stating: 'Aglianico is one of

the world's dozen or so great grape varieties.' What is undeniable is Aglianico's ability to age – leading producer Mastroberardino holds stocks dating back to the 1950s, which have the freshness of a wine produced in the past two or three years. But allied to this, producers are now finding ways to express the finesse of the Aglianico grape while enhancing its ability to emphasise individual terroir characteristics. Highly respected consultant Riccardo Cotarella observes: 'Aglianico is an outstanding marker of the territory. It's able to express where it comes from like few other vines.'

Ancient soils

Aglianico can be found across southern Italy in Molise, Puglia, Calabria and Sicily, but it is within Campania and Basilicata that it reaches its finest expression. Campania is the home of two DOCGs, Aglianico del Taburno and Taurasi. The latter was southern Italy's first red DOCG classification in 1993; Taburno achieved the same status in 2011. Basilicata, an even more remote but beautiful region to Campania's south and east, is renowned for Aglianico del Vulture, and a DOCG for Aglianico del Vulture Superiore was created in 2010.

Volcanic influences can be seen in many, but not all, of the key Aglianico areas. However, the type (and timing) of volcanic activity is markedly different across Campania and Basilicata. Taurasi lies in Irpinia, 50km northeast of Naples, with



Mastroberardino's Radici estate at Lapio, Campania

Aglianico

vineyards in the Apennine hills of Avellino. Taurasi is influenced by its proximity to mount Vesuvius, with deep wind-blown ash from relatively recent eruptions having a marked impact on soils, in turn accentuating smoky, mineral characters. Taburno, in the province of Benevento, is a mountain rather than a volcano, although the eruptions of the super-volcano Campi Flegrei, some 15,000-39,000 years ago, left a marked influence here. White Falanghina grapes are most commonly grown on volcanic earth, with Aglianico vineyards situated high on Taburno's steep slopes, on ancient clay-limestone soils.

In contrast, on the coast south of Salerno, the newly emerging areas of Cilento and Paestum have no volcanic influence, but are dominated by proximity to the sea.

In neighbouring Basilicata, the finest vineyards are located on the steep eastern flanks of the ancient Mount Vulture, a volcano extinct since the Pleistocene era.

Taurasi DOCG must contain 85% Aglianico, but is occasionally blended with Piediroso, Barbera and Primitivo. Taurasi wines tend to

'Wines made from Aglianico have inherent quality and a remarkable ability to age'

be full-bodied with high tannins and acidity; they have black- and red-berry fruit flavours, and black-olive and herbal notes when young; and they develop spice and smoke characters when aged. The best examples can be astonishingly long-lived.

Aglianico del Taburno DOCG must also be 85% Aglianico and is often a touch lighter than Taurasi, with red-fruit notes and slightly less prominent tannins, all balanced with higher acidity. Wines from coastal Cilento and Paestum, without the influence of volcanic soil, display an alluring floral, fragrant and refined edge with the cooling influence of sea breezes evident.

Basilicata

The Basilicata region's only DOCG, Aglianico del Vulture Superiore requires 100% Aglianico, and in the past it gained an unwarranted reputation for firm, tannic and intense wines. The reality is very different. Ian D'Agata >

‘Aglianico is richer than Nebbiolo – it needs lots of work and care in the vineyards’ Luigi Maffini

believes that Vulture wines display ‘the most intense fruit aromas and flavours’ with rich plum and mineral notes dominating. Fertile soils with high mineral content are found here, lying over ancient layers of lava and lapilli (small volcanic stones), which cover impervious clay soils beneath. As a result, soils drain well while retaining water – an important characteristic in an area where high summer temperatures are common.

Basilicata is a rugged, sparsely populated countryside which seems to belong to previous centuries. On my recent visit I was held up several times by shepherds driving flocks of hundreds of sheep across the country roads. However, winemakers here have definitely moved with the times. Elena Fucci is a renowned producer in Barile, and has focused all her efforts on a single wine (Titolo) at her winery since 2000. With 6ha of vines, at 600m above sea level, Fucci is driven purely by quality and regularly produces at 50% of the permitted yield. Refinement is her primary objective, with a subtle influence of oak and restrained tannins. As with most modern producers of Aglianico, a delicate approach in the winery is key. Fucci de-stems but avoids crushing grapes on arrival at the winery to minimise bitter flavours. She notes that ‘with Aglianico, it is very important to press very softly’. Fucci has experimented with amphorae but has some concerns over the higher porosity, so now uses smaller barriques with extra thickness to reduce gas transmission.

At the other end of the production scale in Basilicata, one finds the cooperative of Cantina di Venosa, the largest producer of Aglianico in the region. Founded in 1957, the co-op has 400 members and more than 800ha of vineyard land, producing a wide range of Aglianico wines, from sparkling to rosé, to light- and full-bodied reds. Commercial director Antonio Teora explains the balance between power and freshness which is achieved in Vulture as being down to a combination of altitude and very high potassium levels in the soils. Although very



Aglianico in Campania and Basilicata
 1 Aglianico del Taburno DOCG
 2 Taurasi DOCG
 3 Avellino
 4 Cilento DOC
 5 Aglianico del Vulture Superiore DOCG

Map: Maggie Nelson



Mastroberardino's Taurasi Riserva 1968

different to the Fucci wines, the Cantina's wines share similar fruit profiles, subtle oak ageing and finesse, all at competitive prices.

Campania

Close to the Campanian coast, Cilento and Paestum have emerged as sources of refined, elegant, ‘new-wave’ Aglianico. Jack Lewens, ex-sommelier and co-owner of Leroy in London's Shoreditch, has set up the Vigneti Tardis co-venture with Bruno De Conciliis of Viticoltori De Conciliis, making delicate Aglianico wines (and Aglianicone, a distinct



and ancient variety which shares similar acidity and tannins to Aglianico, though perhaps with a touch more fruit and a little less spice) from low-yielding vines with a hands-off, minimal intervention, low-sulphur approach. Lewens says: ‘We’re trying to emphasise the freshness in the wine, and the high levels of potassium in the area give a lovely saline freshness to the palate.’

Luigi Maffini is another Cilento producer who has strong views about the tough, tannic and robust Aglianicos of the past. Maffini emphasises the importance of balancing yields to get the most out of the grape: ‘Higher yields equate to less ripe tannins. Aglianico is richer than Nebbiolo and needs lots of work. It's very important to take care in the vineyards.’

In the winery, Maffini restricts the amount of time his wines spend in oak for ageing, and minimises the use of new barrels. He sees a big difference between the coastal wines and those from Taurasi and Vulture, stating: ‘The style of wines coming out of Cilento is much more delicate, with fine tannins – this allows the fruit to shine.’

Since the 1980s, Taburno has established itself as another key area for Aglianico. Elevation is a significant factor here, with the region seeing very different climatic conditions to nearby Taurasi. The La Guardiense cooperative, founded in 1960, has close to 1,000 members and is the biggest producer of (white) Falanghina in the world. Marco Giulioli is winemaker at La Guardiense, where

Above: the vineyards of Luigi Maffini in Cilento, Campania

he has worked for many years with consultant Riccardo Cotarella. Giulioli has seen vinification techniques improve in the past decade, in particular learning to adapt to the requirements of the specific Taburno biotype Aglianico Amaro (‘bitter Aglianico’). Giulioli expresses a personal preference for cooler vintages where he sees a very different tannic profile, but warns: ‘You need to talk about hours, not days, for skin contact. Gentle extraction is the key.’

Modern outlook

Mastroberardino is almost certainly the most famous name and influential producer of Aglianico in Campania. The family-run estate was created in the 1750s, and Piero Mastroberardino represents the 10th generation to run the business.

Mastroberardino is a huge advocate for Taurasi Aglianico, believing that the area shares many similarities to Burgundy, with a patchwork of different sites, soils and mesoclimates. Taurasi is cooler than the coast, largely down to the significant altitude (which ranges from 200m-900m above sea level), and the presence of volcanic ash over colder clay, or clay-limestone/sand soils.

Mastroberardino demonstrates how Aglianico ages, proudly showing off vintages dating back to the 19th century in its newly created museum. Of Mastroberardino's range, the Radici (and Radici Riserva) wines are perhaps the most impressive and classical >



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Photograph: Andy Howard MW

in style. These are wines that merit at least one, if not two or three decades of ageing in bottle to reach maximum potential. The Radici, Taurasi 2015 is elegant and has great fruit purity, with fine tannins suggesting a drinking window of 2025-2060. However, Piero is also developing new, more modern styles such as Stilèma Taurasi, a wine with short, low-temperature maceration accentuating leafy, lifted red-cherry characters. Mastroberardino is also pushing the boundaries of Aglianico further with its floral IGP white Neroametà; the vibrant Lacrimarosa Rosato (fresh, strawberry fruit and a salty finish); and Anthères – a rare sweet red made from botrytised grapes.

Another top producer in Irpinia is Feudi di San Gregorio, run by the irrepressible Antonio Capaldo. The current winery was built in 1986 after the devastating earthquake of 1980, and the stylish buildings and tourism facilities are a long way removed from many of the region's

Above: Piero Mastroberardino

more traditional producers. Capaldo notes that Aglianico was planted in the area 200 years ago, and that this is one of the keys to the variety: 'The grapes are very able to balance themselves. We don't green harvest and it's important not to force them.' The wines of Feudi di San Gregorio run the whole gamut from intense metodo classico sparkling Aglianico Brut, through to fresh, crisp and briary reds such as Dal Re, to intense Taurasi and single-vineyard bottlings.

Within its upper range, Aglianico imparts power, longevity and purity of fruit, but with remarkable finesse. Oak and tannins are always in the background, with balance being the key word. Feudi's top wines are Serpico (10,000 bottles, very old vines, 12 months in new barrel followed by five years in bottle) and a range of single-vineyard wines (Contrada Rosamilia and Contrada Candriano), which emphasise their individual sense of place.

Stock your cellar

Modern-day Aglianico from Campania and Basilicata is a variety that surprises as well as excites. For many consumers, previous experience suggests that Aglianico will be sturdy, tannic and need many years of ageing before becoming approachable.

However, winemakers across both regions have adapted their methods and are now allowing Aglianico's inherent quality to shine. Greater focus on the vineyard and a gentler approach in the winery are yielding floral, fine wines that have great terroir character, yet manage to retain Aglianico's remarkable ageing ability.

When one considers the quality available for the price, these are wines that should be on every wine lover's shopping list. **D**

Howard's pick: 12 top Aglianicos

① Mastroberardino, Radici, Taurasi, Campania 2015 96

£36.95 Vintriloquy

A benchmark for Aglianico, Radici was first produced in 1986. A wine to age for decades, yet surprisingly approachable now. Great density with concentration and depth. Aged two years in oak and two in bottle, this has intense, pure fruit allied to subtle oak, fine tannins and elegance. Some smoky, mineral flavours starting to appear. Ultra-refined. A wine with real sense of place.

Drink 2023-2050 Alcohol 13.5%

Elena Fucci, Titolo 20th Anniversary, Aglianico del Vulture, Basilicata 2017 96

£35 Lay & Wheeler, Millésima

This anniversary edition adds even more concentration and structure to the 'standard' Titolo. From a single parcel of 75-year-old vines, the nose is intriguing with a potpourri of dried leaves and a complex spices and herbal/balsamic notes. Plenty of tannic grip on the palate, balanced with pure, vibrant dark fruit. Will age several decades. Drink 2024-2050 Alc 14%

Feudi di San Gregorio, Serpico, Irpinia, Campania 2012 95

£40.10-£46.50 Exel, Hallgarten Wines, Vintriloquy, Vinvm, Wine Poole

A great Irpinian Aglianico which balances power and refinement. From the 400m-high Dal Re vineyard, only 10,000 bottles were produced. Hugely concentrated with impenetrable colour. Although there is great fruit density here, the wine retains wonderful lift. It saw 12 months' ageing in new oak before five years in bottle. Will live 50 years. Drink 2020-2055 Alc 14.5% ➤



Photograph: Andy Howard/MW



Luigi Maffini

② **Luigi Maffini, Cenito, Cilento, Campania 2015** 95

£34.75 *Lea & Sandeman, WoodWinters*
A supremely elegant example of coastal Aglianico. Understated and precise, with lovely acidity and a wave of fine tannins. From Luigi Maffini's Castellabate site, overlooking the Tyrrhenian sea. 12 months in oak, 40% new; shows a lovely leafy touch with purity of fruit and a long, lingering, salty finish. **Drink 2022-2045 Alc 14%**

Luigi Maffini, Klèos, Cilento, Campania 2016 93

£44/magnum *WoodWinters*
Impressive, complex coastal Aglianico displaying rich, dark fruits and notes of crushed shell on the nose. Concentration, but no hint of heaviness despite the ripeness of dark cherry and plum fruit. The tannins are still evident and need a little longer, but this will age beautifully. Restrained and fresh to finish. **Drink 2021-2035 Alc 14%**

③ **Vigneti Tardis, Sabato, Cilento, Campania 2017** 93

£25 *Field Morris & Verdin, Noble Green*
100% Aglianicone, with bright, fresh red cherry and damson on the palate, softened after ageing in old 500-litre barrels. Very low levels of SO₂, unfinned and unfiltered. This is a crunchy, modern style, retaining some grip and bright acidity, but finishing with freshness and appealing black-pepper and spice notes. **Drink 2021-2030 Alc 13%**

④ **Alovini, Alvolo, Aglianico del Vulture, Basilicata 2016** 92

£7.95 *The Wine Society*
Renowned winemaker Oronzo Alo moved from Salento to Vulture and set up Alovini in 2003. This refined, gracious wine is great value. From 20- to 30-year-old vines,

aged in new barrels for 12 months with a further year in bottle. Dark fruit dominates the palate, with intense spice, berry and smoky notes on the nose. Can age for many years. **Drink 2020-2030 Alc 12.5%**

⑤ **Feudi di San Gregorio, Basilisco Teodosio, Aglianico del Vulture, Basilicata 2015** 92

£15.36-£16.45 *Dulwich Vintners, Hallgarten Wines, Strictly Wine*
Basilisco is the Vulture winery of Feudi di San Gregorio. From a 6ha site at 500m, this balances fleshy fruit flavours with a savoury aftertaste. There is something a little on the wild side in this Basilicata Aglianico, with crisp acidity, fine tannins, and a very long, mineral finish adding freshness. **Drink 2020-2032 Alc 13.5%**

⑥ **La Guardiense, Janare Lùcchero, Sannio, Campania 2015** 95

£14.50 *Jeroboams*
Winemaker Marco Giulioli believes this was the best vintage in the past decade, with rain just before picking not affecting the

quality. Smooth, elegant, deep and concentrated with dark berries and spice on the palate. Fresh finish with a cleansing, mineral edge. **Drink 2022-2030 Alc 13%**

⑦ **Mastroberardino, Redimore, Irpinia, Campania 2016** 92

N/A UK *www.mastroberardino.com*
Made with fruit from a single vineyard of Antonio Mastroberardino's pre-phylloxera clone vines on the Mirabella estate, Piero Mastroberardino calls this wine a 'baby' Radici. Matured in small oak barrels, deep and brooding in colour, with a lifted floral perfume and hints of spice on the nose. Retains the classic Aglianico lightness on the finish. **Drink 2020-2030 Alc 13.5%**

Cantina di Venosa, Terre di Orazio, Aglianico del Vulture, Basilicata 2015 91

£12.99-£15 *Bacchanalia, Field & Fawcett, Grape & Grind, Kwoff, The Vineyard*
Named after Horace (Orazio), the Roman poet born in Venosa in 65BC. An elegant Vulture wine with pronounced aromas of wood spice on the nose from 12 months in two-year-old wood. Full and fleshy, with density of dark black fruit on the palate, this brooding Aglianico will age well. Finishes with typical lightness and lift. **Drink 2020-2028 Alc 14%**

La Guardiense, Farfallone, Sannio, Campania 2016 91

£10.95 *Corney & Barrow*
Vibrant, spicy, dark cherry and violet on the palate. A younger 2016, the tannins will soften through 2020, but there is plenty of elegance and complexity here already. Crisp acidity and a smoky, mineral finish add freshness and character. Another beautifully crafted Aglianico from Marco Giulioli. **Drink 2021-2030 Alc 13%**

