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An Italian Name Worth Practicing - By ERIC ASIMOV

BEST VALUE

Ocone Aglianico del Taburno 2003 - \$40 - ** 1/2 (www.oconevini.it)

Spicy and complex with tart cherry flavors. (Polaner Selections, Mount Kisco, N.Y.)

ALL right, class, summer vacation is long gone and school is well under way, but I'm forced to interrupt our curriculum for a quick review session. Why is this? Because it's come to my attention that a crucial word in the lexicon of Italian wines has fallen by the wayside.

That word is aglianico, which, just to be clear, is pronounced ah-lee-YAHN-ee-koh, and which is the name of the leading red grape of southern Italy. Yet the entire category of aglianico wines seems to pass unnoticed by most people, which is a shame because they have so much pleasure to offer.

In an effort to remedy this sad state of affairs the wine panel recently sampled 25 aglianico wines, mostly from the two leading aglianico regions, Campania and Basilicata, with a couple of other areas sprinkled in. Florence Fabricant and I were joined for the tasting by two guests, Chris Cannon, an owner of Alto and Convivio, and Charles Scicolone, a wine consultant.

Both Chris and Charles agreed that aglianico wines languish unfairly out of the minds of most consumers. Part of the reason is simply that the wines are overshadowed by more familiar names like Chianti, Barolo and even Valpolicella.

More important is the diffuse nature of aglianico production, which has prevented any one name or region from becoming well known. In addition, while the grape is ancient, widespread production for international consumption is relatively recent.

Winemaking has always been important in Campania, which forms a half moon inland from the Mediterranean, encompassing Naples, and in Basilicata, at the arch of the boot between Apulia's heel and Calabria's toe. But until about 20 years ago the wines were largely for local consumption. Change has come with lightning speed. Mirroring developments all over former vinous backwaters of Europe, government assistance has helped dozens of farmers, who used to sell their grapes to cooperatives, go into winemaking themselves. Cooperatives, once notorious sources for poor wine, have improved exponentially, and viticulture and winemaking have moved into a new age.

In fact, our No. 1 wine came from a co-op in Basilicata, Cantina di Venosa. Its 2003 aglianico del Vulture Vignali is as good a \$10 wine as anybody is likely to find, dense and pure with classic aglianico flavors of sour cherry, minerals and leather. All of us were surprised and pleased by the high level of quality throughout. While we found a few overtly modern wines that pander to consumers with sweet fruit and oak flavors, most were balanced, well-knit and dry.

For years, the aglianico torch was largely carried by two producers, Mastroberardino in Campania, best known for its Radici from the Taurasi zone, and Paternoster in Basilicata, which has long made exemplary aglianicos from the volcanic soils of Mount Vulture (pronounced VOOL-too-reh). Now, dozens of producers export their wines to the United States. Sadly, we couldn't find wines from some of the top producers, like Paternoster, Antonio Caggiano and Galardi, which makes Terra di Lavoro, as close as an aglianico wine comes to cult status.

Our No. 1 wine was the only one of the eight wines for \$20 and under that did make the cut. That left a sizeable middle ground, with top-flight wines like the earthy 2004 Cretarossa aglianico d'Irpinia from I Favati and the **spicy, pure 2003 aglianico del Taburno from Ocone (www.oconevini.it)**

The aglianico grape is fairly tannic, though not as tannic as the nebbiolo, to which it is often compared. Still, depending on the wine and the vintage, aglianicos are best enjoyed after 5 to 10 years of aging. Some wines, like our No. 6, the 2003 Taurasi Cinque Querce from Salvatore Molettieri, may age for much longer because of the density of its flavors. Mastroberardino's Taurasi Radici has a history of aging well (the 1968 is a lovely wine today), but the 2003, our No. 8 wine, seems a little too soft to last even half that long.

I'm usually very happy to find aglianicos on wine lists. The subtlety of the fruit and the fact that they can be dry and intense without being heavy makes them good companions to a variety of meat, poultry and pasta dishes. With their fairly recent entry into the world of modern winemaking, aglianicos are bound to get better as new vineyards mature, and winemakers and growers gain more experience. Now is the time to get in on the fun. Don't say I didn't try to tell you.

Tasting Report: Out of the Shadows, Ready for Subtle Pleasures.