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Aglianico Emerges From the Bottom of Italy's Boot

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Donnachiara, ** 1/2 Taurasi 2008

Fresh and fragrant, with soft, plummy fruit flavors and a touch of menthol.

The vast ocean of wine that is Italy is fed by many rivers. Sangiovese and nebbiolo, universally considered to be among the world's great grapes, pour in to acclaim. They are joined by great floods of crowd-pleasers like pinot grigio and workhorses like montepulciano and trebbiano, which account for many serviceable but indistinct wines. Lesser-known varieties trickle in from all directions, adding wonderful flavors and nuances.

One of my favorites is a red grape that seems largely taken for granted, when it's thought of at all. It stirs little excitement. I'm not sure why, because I find the wines delicious, structured and age-worthy.

I'm talking about aglianico, the primary red grape of Campania, which encompasses Naples and Salerno on the western coast of southern Italy, and of Basilicata, the arch and instep of the boot. Aglianico has been termed the Barolo of the South, a seemingly admiring phrase made hollow by a patronizing note. Yes, the tannins, acidity and dark flavors in aglianico bear a resemblance to the great Piemontese wine. But aglianico has much to offer of its own. Perhaps it's time to shed the notion that aglianico's value comes from what it resembles rather than from what it is.

To get a clearer sense of aglianico, the wine panel recently tasted 20 bottles from Campania and Basilicata. All the wines were from recent vintages. For more-accessible wines, the latest releases were from the 2011 vintage. More age-worthy wines might receive prolonged cellaring at the winery; the most recent release for some was 2006.

Florence Fabricant and I were joined for the tasting by Joe Campanale, the beverage director and a proprietor of four New York restaurants, including Dell'anima and L'Artusi in the West Village; and Liz Nicholson, the wine director at Maialino, who in September will become a sommelier at Marea. All of us share the perception that aglianico is underappreciated. Liz, for one, has tried to do something about it at Maialino, where her [wine list](#) features quite a few aglianicos in the Southern Hospitality section.

“Maybe the wines people are embracing are lighter, softer and easier going,” Joe speculated. He may be right. The red wines of Sicily, which have caused such excitement in recent years, tend to be fresher and more agile, and many wines that can age for decades, whether Bordeaux, Napa cabernet or Brunello di Montalcino, have been purposely made more accessible at an earlier age. Yet people haven’t turned their backs on Barolo, which, like the more age-worthy aglianicos, can require significant aging to soften its tannic intensity.

Not that aglianico is heavy by any means. We were all impressed by the consistently high quality of these wines. Some, as the range of vintages suggested, were more immediately approachable, while others will continue to benefit from aging. We found big differences in texture and density, but most of the wines were distinctively structured and earthy, with flavors of red fruit, licorice and menthol.

“I was imagining even more tannic, massive wines,” Joe said.

As is true in many parts of the world, the aglianico producers in our tasting seemed to have backed way off their earlier use of small barrels of new French oak. The tannins in the wines seemed to have come naturally from the grapes. We detected little in the way of oak tannins or the vanilla and chocolate flavors imposed by the barrels.

Most of the wines came from Campania, which has a range of aglianico appellations. Taurasi is the most famous and prestigious, perhaps rightfully so — three of our top four wines were Taurasis. It’s also generally the most expensive, with wines usually ranging from \$30 to \$65.

Other Campania appellations include Aglianico del Taburno and Irpinia, while the best appellation from Basilicata is generally Aglianico del Vulture. As one might guess from this land of extinct volcanoes like Mount Vulture and decidedly active ones like Mount Vesuvius, aglianico thrives in volcanic soil, especially on sunny hillsides where the ripening season can stretch well into the fall. As the weather gets warmer and summer approaches, imagine these wines accompanying steaks and sausages sizzling on the grill or ribs in the smoker. Aglianicos are just right; savory and robust enough to stand up to such dishes, while lively and intriguing enough to refresh. That sounds like a great combination to me.