



Nuanced Nero d'Avola

by Stephanie Johnson

Nero d'Avola has always struck me as Italy's version of malbec: bold and fruity, but a bit monolithic. Yet during a recent dinner in Palermo, I tasted a nero d'Avola that kept me coming back to the glass. Feudo Montoni's Nero d'Avola Lagnusa was fresh and floral, with high-toned red fruit flavors and snappy acidity that reminded me more of a young cru Beaujolais than of my jammy nero d'Avola stereotype.

Lagnusa's flavor profile began to make sense a few days later, as I stood shivering in gusty winds at nearly 2,000 feet above sea level, looking out over Feudo Montoni's vineyards in west-central Sicily. Fabio Sireci refers to his estate as an "island within an island," a splash of green vines amid a sea of golden grain fields where summer temperatures can drop as much as 40 degrees in the evenings. Lagnusa is Sireci's "entry-level" nero d'Avola, a moniker that feels utterly inadequate given the wine's complexity and sheer deliciousness. Vrucara is his top-tier nero d'Avola, culled from vines 80 to 100 years old that deliver a deep, nuanced wine with a similarly cool core of acidity.

Heading about 80 miles west from Feudo Montoni to a coastal plain near Menfi, I found another intriguing expression of nero d'Avola at Cantine Barbera. Marilena Barbera's organically farmed nero d'Avola vines grow a few hundred feet from Sicily's southwestern coast, where gentle sea breezes and limestone-laden soils yield a softer, saline-inflected wine. Barbera ferments the destemmed grapes for just one week and ages the juice in stainless steel for

six months, giving full expression to the wine's warm, herbal strawberry flavors. It's a multidimensional wine that speaks strongly of a place.

Sicily is a continent, or so its inhabitants claim of its diverse growing regions, and nero d'Avola turns out to be highly adept at expressing the island's terroir differences. It accounts for about 16 percent of all plantings, by far the most of any red variety, and appears in nearly every part of the island except the northeast, where nerello mascalese prevails on Mt. Etna's volcanic slopes. For years the variety functioned as a workhorse grape, appearing in blends or bolstering northern Europe's more anemic reds. Duca di Salaparuta was the first producer to bottle and market a varietal nero d'Avola, in the early 1980s, and others soon followed, as vigneroni like Fabio Sireci and his father, Elio, at Feudo Montoni were recognizing the variety's potential to produce serious wines.

Vito Catania, proprietor of the Gulfi winery in Sicily's southeastern zone of Vittoria, has been a champion of the variety since the mid-1990s. After building a successful chemical company, Catania returned

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to his family's agricultural estate and began working with viticulturist Salvo Foti, a vocal proponent of Sicily's native varieties and traditional vineyard practices. At a time when international varieties were in fashion, Catania and Foti focused on nero d'Avola. They found some of the choicest plots around Pachino, a township in Sicily's far southeastern corner. Catania bought plots of old, albarello-trained nero d'Avola vines in plots with different elevations and soil types, and he vinifies the fruit from each plot separately to produce four nero d'Avola wines: Nerobaronj, Neromaccari, Nerobufaleffj and Nerosanloré. Each wine shows nuances of its particular terroir and microclimate, yet they share a dense and savory character, and feel more earthbound than Feudo Montoni's ethereal wines from the heights of Sicily's cooler interior.

The Pachino wines are also completely distinct from Gulfi's Rossojbleo and Nerojbleo: Those wines are produced from grapes grown at their Vittoria estate in the foothills of Monti Iblei, and exhibit lively red-fruit flavors with floral accents that have more in common with nero d'Avola wines from other excel-

lent Vittoria producers like COS and Occhipinti.

We recently conducted a tasting panel with 20 nero d'Avola wines grouped by area of production, and the differences in flavor profiles from one region to another were striking. So why had I (and others; I can't be the only one) developed this one-dimensional view of nero d'Avola? A quick glance through the list of recommended wines that follows provides a clue. Most of the wines are labeled simply "Sicilia DOC" or "Terre Siciliane IGT," island-wide appellations that encompass dozens of grape varieties and thousands of vineyard acres. In other words, they could have been grown and produced almost anywhere in Sicily. Pinpointing the origin would require some knowledge of the producer, or a bit of research.

Some producers use these generic appellations because more specific ones don't yet exist; others may fear that using more specific place names like Menfi or Contea di Sclafani might confuse consumers. Linking nero d'Avola with Sicily on wine labels is a good start, but more precise appellations could elevate the variety's image as a dexterous translator of terroir. ■

Nero d'Avola Tasting Notes by Stephanie Johnson, *W&S Italian wine critic*



Cantine Barbera 2016 Menfi Lu Còri Nero d'Avola

Scents of brushy herbs and refreshing salinity evoke Sicily's windswept southern coast near Menfi, where Marilena Barbera's organically farmed nero d'Avola vines grow a few hundred feet from the sea. She cold-macerates the grapes for a few days before fermenting with ambient yeasts. A small portion of the wine ages in oak casks, the rest in stainless-steel tanks for a few months, preserving lively flavors of strawberry and cranberry edged in notes of orange peel and tarragon. It provides pleasure well beyond the bottle's modest price tag. (*T. Edward Wines, NY*)



Gulfi 2013 Sicilia Nerojbleo

The Catania family harvests the nero d'Avola grapes for Nerojbleo from several vineyards near their estate in the Vittoria zone. Here in the foothills of Monti Iblei, Gulfi's vines grow in lighter soils and at higher elevations (more than 1,300 feet) than their Pachino vineyards, and the wines reflect those differences in their more lifted and buoyant flavors. The 2013 Nerojbleo offers flavors of fresh plum and cherry carried on a zipline of acidity, remaining vibrant through a long and harmonious finish. (*Selected Estates of Europe, Mamaroneck, NY*)



COS 2016 Terre Siciliane Nero di Lupo Nero d'Avola

Snappy acidity drives this wine's flavors, the red cherry and plum fruit laced with notes of dried herbs and black tea. At just 11 percent alcohol, it feels lithe and lively, with gentle fruit-skin tannins and lovely violet scents that enhance the wine's graceful character. (*Domaine Select Wine Estates, NY*)



Feudo Montoni 2013 Sicilia Vrucara Nero d'Avola

Feudo Montoni's Vrucara plot ranges up to 1,640 feet above sea level, where the breezes and day-night temperature shifts preserve a cool core of acidity in the wine. Proprietor Fabio Sireci ferments the fruit from the pre-phyloxera vines in cement vats with the stems, followed by six months in used barrels and up to 20 months in cement tanks. The wine's lean frame flashes out with air, the flavors of dark berries infused with cool green herbs and tingly spices. Notes of Aperol and orange peel emerge, adding complexity and energy to the finish. (*Wilson Daniels, St. Helena, CA*)



Feudi Montoni's vineyards among the grainfields in west-central Sicily.



Gulfi 2011 Sicilia Nerobufaleffj

Gulfi proprietor Vito Catania owns several plots in the township of Pachino at the far southeastern tip of Sicily. Despite the area's hot, dry summers, Catania farms the alberello-trained vines organically and without irrigation. Nerobufaleffj comes from 35-year-old vines grown in a mix of black clay, red sand and white limestone; at just 164 feet above sea level, it is the highest of Gulfi's Pachino plots. While all of Gulfi's wines showed well in our tastings, this one feels the most complete, its flavors of black plum and braised mushroom accented with notes of brushy herbs and bright salinity, a stream of acidity balancing its dense concentration. (*Selected Estates of Europe, Mamaroneck, NY*)



Feudo Montoni 2015 Sicilia Lagnusa Nero d'Avola

Aromas of violets and eucalyptus waft from the glass of this vibrant nero d'Avola. Its brambly red-fruit flavors are accented in notes of cinchona bark and orange zest, feeling as fresh as the cool breezes that whip through Lagnusa, a plot at more than 1,950 feet above sea level. Fabio Sireci ferments with whole clusters in cement tanks, accentuating the wine's freshness and imparting complexity far beyond most "entry-level" nero d'Avolas. (*Wilson Daniels, St. Helena, CA*)



Gulfi 2016 Sicilia Rossojbleo

"Joy juice" was the phrase that popped into my head while tasting this wine. Scents of pink flowers and soft herbs precede flavors of juicy raspberry and pomegranate that ride a fine line between tartness and ripeness. The wine is fermented and aged in stainless steel, with 20 percent whole clusters to maximize freshness and add subtle spices. It feels like a wine you could drink all day—and the price actually makes that possible. (*Selected Estates of Europe, Mamaroneck, NY*)



Occhipinti 2015 Terre Siciliane Siccagno Nero d'Avola

Arianna Occhipinti harvests fruit for this wine from biodynamically farmed vines planted in limestone soils near Ragusa in Sicily's southeastern Vittoria zone. The vines sit at 900 feet above sea level, developing flavors of black raspberry and plum, with just a hint of tartness that balances the wine's natural fruit sweetness. Mouthwatering acidity keeps the flavors lively as notes of iodine and umami emerge, brightened at the finish by a hint of orange peel. (*Louis Dressner Selections, NY*)