

ITALY'S WINE ELITE HEADS SOUTH

Although the *denominazione* in southern Italy are hardly household words for collectors, star varieties such as Nero d'Avola and Primitivo are beginning to receive the recognition they deserve, suggests Michèle Shah. But their success in export markets is not yet a given.

After decades, even centuries of being considered *vini da taglio* - big, tannic, alcoholic, colour-laden wines to be blended into those from other regions in need of a boost - southern Italy's wines are at last attracting positive critical attention.

Today's southern varietal stars, Primitivo di Manduria from Puglia and Nero d'Avola from Sicily, have captured export markets, setting a new trend. Sicily's vineyard potential of 150,000 hectares is not only comparable to Australia's in size, but also in sun-drenched vines, with the addition of beauty, culture and history.

"I would say that the Sicily 'brand' tends to be more popular than Puglia because of the romance attached to the name and its touristic appeal," says Sanjay Menon, CEO of Sansula imports in Mumbai. "I also believe that their approachability and style offer the best potential amongst all Italian varieties to pair with moderately spiced Indian food".

Statistics show that the production of Nero d'Avola is up by 30% since 2000, placing it among Italy's top varieties by plantings. This is not yet the case for Primitivo, from Puglia's 85,000 hectares of vineyard. Although it's well established as 'Zinfandel', which has a better ring to it than 'Primitivo', and it competes as one of Italy's 'soft' brands in terms of export popularity, it does not yet offer the allure of Sicily.

North moves South

In the 1990s, pressure from international markets prompted producers to

come up with easy-to-drink, full-bodied reds with velvety, sweet tannins, which could compete with New World styles and prices, offering the profile sought by a new wave of consumers.

High prices and zero potential for new plantings in northern Italy made the south a new frontier, offering considerably cheaper land and low cost labour. Zonin, from near Venice, was one of the first to move to Sicily, purchasing a 100 hectare farm, Principi di Butera, in the province of Noto.

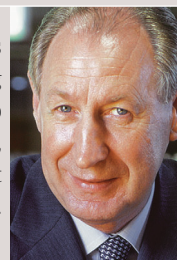
It is however, not uncommon for northern enterprises to clash with local 'mafia', which according to Brian Larky of Dalla Terra imports in California is seen by Americans as having more appeal than Puglia. "Americans have short attention spans and are always looking for the next cool thing, but they do know Corleone. So in the race to new varieties and regions from one of the oldest wine producing countries in the world, Sicily is far more popular and well-known than Puglia."

The southern potential was soon recognised by other northern wine magnates, including Gruppo Italiano Vini (GIV), Gruppo Mezzacorona (one of Trentino's large cooperatives) and the Antinori family. The initial waves of plantings were of international varieties - Syrah, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay. Today, however, this trend has partially reversed to include

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Emilio Pedron

Emilio Pedron is the managing director of Gruppo Italiano Vini (GIV), Italy's largest wine producer.



local varieties and classical appellations, which as single varieties show intrinsic local character based on fruit-forward, warm, full-bodied wines. Blends, however, maintain a good share of the market and are often preferred for their greater complexity, richness and market appeal.

GIV purchased the majority share of two estates in the south, first Rapitalà in Sicily and then Castello Monaci in Salento in Puglia, bringing in fresh financing and marketing know-how, yet leaving the everyday management to the estate owners, regional labour and local politics. "Both Primitivo and Nero d'Avola are the driving force of our portfolio of wines when it comes to pricing and sales," says Emilio Pedron, CEO of GIV.

Gruppo Mezzacorona from Trentino, which exports 72% of its production, expanded south, purchasing Feudo Arancio in 2002. The demand came from a request by its American partner, Prestige Wine Imports, aware of the growing demand for softer, warmer reds from Australia, Chile, South Africa and California. "We needed to expand our portfolio



and Sicily was the ideal region to deliver this style of wine to the consumer," says Claudio Rizzoli, CEO of Mezzacorona. "We are backing 'Brand Sicily' 100% as its export potential is enormous. We feel that we could boost our sales even further in markets such as the USA, Germany and the UK."

Sicilian tradition: Nero d'Avola

Although Nero d'Avola had been present in Sicily for centuries, it was internationalised in the early 1990s, thanks to the work of a few wineries, headed by trend-setting Planeta, along with a handful of established estates, such as Donnafugata and Tasca d'Almerita. Tasca d'Almerita was one of the first Sicilian wineries to do so with their 'Rosso del Conte', a premium red based on Nero d'Avola.

"Today it is possible to find Nero d'Avola at all price levels, which is also confusing for the consumer in terms of quality and price ratio," says Alberto Tasca of Tasca d'Almerita. "Production and market speculation have made Nero d'Avola into a southern 'soft' brand. However, I like to think that its popularity is partly attributed to the fact that it is a 'new' varietal in the international panorama, driven by its fruity appeal, good acidity and soft tannins, making it a pleasant wine with cellar potential."

Planeta feels that Nero d'Avola is easier to sell as a blended wine, in particular with Shiraz. "We are still at the beginning of our research on the quality potential of Sicilian wine," says Alessio Planeta. "Give us another ten years and we'll show you the real potential of Nero d'Avola."

Puglia's trio

Antinori's investment in Puglia also dates to the mid 1990s when Piero Antinori and Renzo Cotarella visited the area of Castel del Monte, purchasing the Tormaresca estate. "We based our investment on a series of factors: vineyards, choice of varietals, environment, technical possibilities and market potential," says Cotarella.

Antinori decided to plant Cabernet Sauvignon, Primitivo, Negroamaro and

Aglianico, which in Cotarella's estimation is the South's greatest variety in terms of quality, subtlety and ageing potential; but according to him, Negroamaro shows the best terroir expression in Salento. Although a difficult varietal, due to its generous yields, it is quite versatile. Witness Antinori's Fichimori, a refreshing, light red and the cherry flavoured Calafuria rosé.

"Cabernet Sauvignon blends particularly well with Primitivo and Negroamaro, adding structure when crafting ageworthy wines, which we do from selected plantings in top vintages," comments Cotarella. "The real milestone will be reducing the alcohol levels of these wines, something that we are seriously working to achieve." Antinori, like other northern producers prefers to label under IGT Salento, which gives a geographic orientation, but allows more freedom. Many of the DOCs, with the exception of perhaps Castel del Monte, are still relatively unknown.

Most savvy producers in Puglia, such as Paolo Cantele, started their quest to grow exports by modernising vineyards, using rigorous management to reach international standards. "Puglia is not just for soft fruity wines. We have the potential to produce elegant wines with excellent value for money, but the margin between southern and northern pricing is less evident today than it was before," claims Cantele, whose exports reached a new peak in 2007, in particular for Primitivo rather than Negroamaro, which is less well-known.

The third and least known of Puglia's indigenous varieties is the rising star, Nero di Troia from the area of Canosa. It is a variety that has long been promoted by Sebastiano De Corato's Rivera estate. Once a wine used in blends, it can do very well solo, especially when allowed to ripen to its full potential. According to De Corato, it then shows elegance, finesse, bouquet and depth of character.

To many producers and consumers, the south is where Italy shows great potential. "It's the combination of being approachable, round, alcoholic, slightly sweet and fruit driven with an international style, showing almost no sharp

"Unfortunately, southern Italy has long promised more than it has delivered. However, if the quality continues to improve, then sales will develop."

David Gleave MW

David Gleave is the managing director of Liberty Wines, one of the pioneers of quality Italian wine in the UK.



edges, at a very good price," says Hans Bijouvets, CEO of Anfors in the Netherlands. "I think that these wines' market share will be increasing at the expense of the New World reds."

Bill Kyle of Toscvini in Denmark is not quite so sure. "Primitivo is very popular because of its value," he notes, "but the Danes like red wine with a slight sweetness. Nero d'Avola has not yet broken through on our market, because many wines are still too harsh for the Danes' palate."

'Versatility' is what appeals to many of northern Italy's producers. "As monovarietals, the southern varieties show greater terroir character. When blended, such as Primitivo with Cabernet Sauvignon, they show more international character. It's the best of both worlds" says Pedron of GIV.

And the future? For Nicholas Leong of Trasfa International (Shanghai) Ltd "Nero d'Avola is overwhelming the market. It's like an Australian wine, but made with an indigenous Italian grape. Personally I would like to see more Nerello Mascalese wines coming from Etna in Sicily. It is more complex, has great potential and will be the next trend setter, without forgetting the other great Sicilian red which is Aglianico del Vulture." ■