

Premium reds from the south

Campania and Basilicata are Italy’s prime territory for the increasingly well-regarded Aglianico grape, while Puglia, Italy’s heel, is home to a range of other characterful local varieties. Tom Hyland guides us on a tour, and picks his favourite wines from the country’s warm southern regions

Below: Morabianca restaurant is surrounded by vines at Mastroberardino’s Radici Resort

AGLIANICO IS GENERALLY believed to be one of the three best Italian red grapes,’ says Piero Mastroberardino, proprietor of the historic winery in Campania, ‘along with Nebbiolo and Sangiovese.’ Given that his most famous wine is a Taurasi DOCG, produced exclusively from Aglianico, you can easily understand his

opinion. But taste vintages of this wine from the 1950s, ’60s and ’70s, which are still drinking beautifully, and you realise that his statement is anything but parochial conceit. In Basilicata, to the east of Campania in the ‘boot’ of Italy, Vito Paternoster, proprietor of the eponymous winery, is equally bullish

about Aglianico. ‘These wines can proudly be compared to the best Barolos,’ he states. His finest examples of Aglianico del Vulture, the region’s most famous wine, also offer the structure and stuffing necessary for remarkable longevity. So while other grape varieties, such as Piediroso, Casavecchia and Pallagrello Nero are the foundation of numerous first-rate territorial offerings, it is Aglianico that is the symbol of these two regions’ tradition of distinguished red wines.

Aglianico is one of the oldest red grape varieties cultivated across southern Italy, according to Mastroberardino, who notes that it was introduced by Greek colonists under the name Ellenico or Ellanico (a direct reference to Greece) in the 7th to 6th centuries BC.

Today, the variety is planted in all five provinces of Campania, and while the most famous example of Aglianico is Taurasi from the Avellino province in the centre of the region – commonly referred to as Irpinia, its historical name – wines of notable typicity

also emerge from Caserta and Benevento further north, above Naples, to Salerno further south, where it is bottled under the Paestum IGT designation.

Tantalising Taurasi

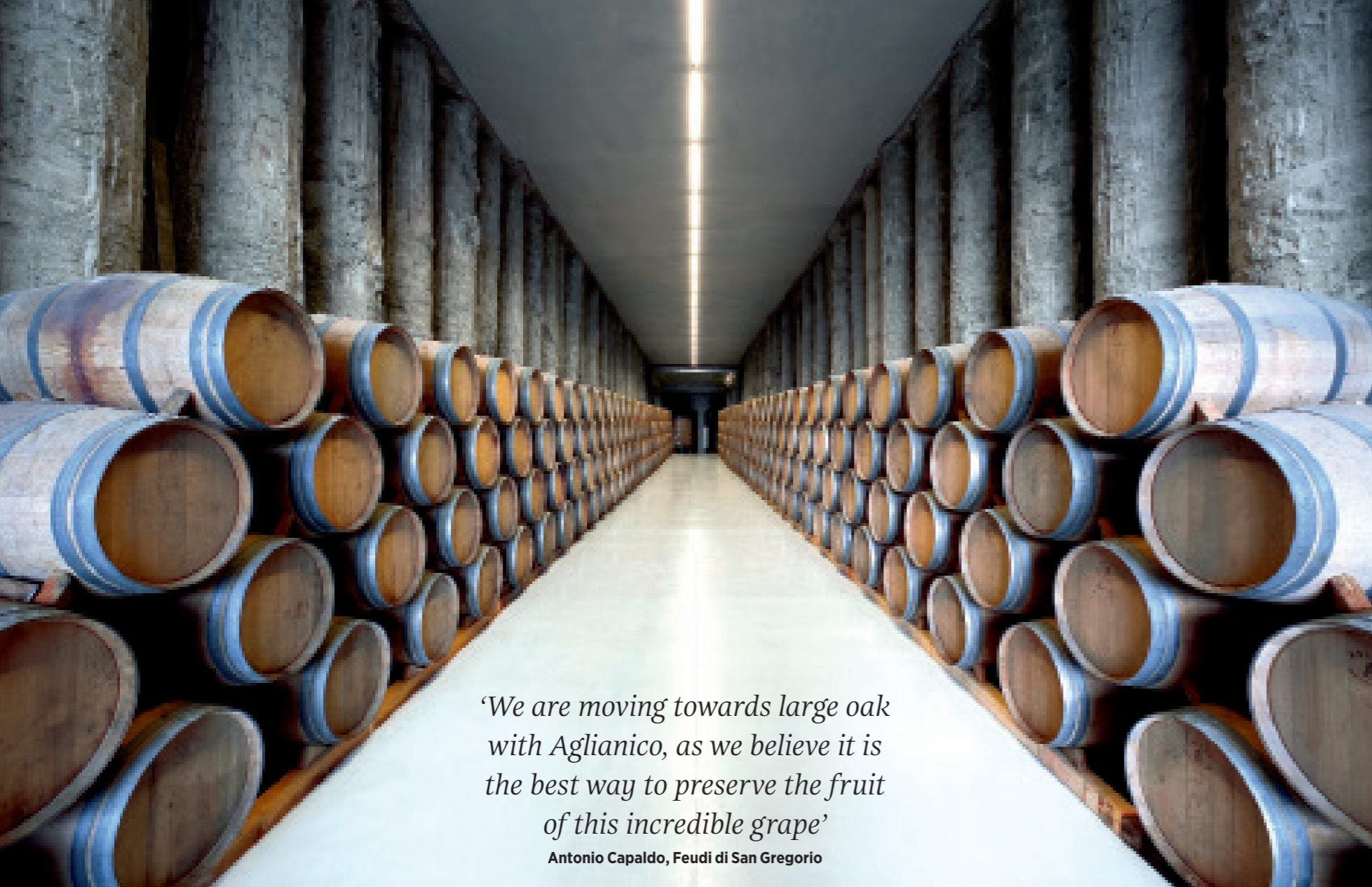
Taurasi DOCG wines are produced in a small zone that encompasses 17 Campanian communes, including its namesake village; Mastroberardino points out that Irpinia was the most productive district in Italy at the beginning of the 20th century, due to the planting of pre-phylloxera Aglianico vines. ‘Thanks to the presence of volcanic ash in the soils, built up over centuries from eruptions of nearby Mount Vesuvius, these vineyards have had a natural resistance to phylloxera,’ he says. The vineyards were planted using the pergola system, with the canopy overhead; today a few hundred hectares of these 80- to 100-plus-year-old vines are still currently in use, while many sites have been replanted in the modern Guyot system. ➤



Above: Piero Mastroberardino, 10th-generation head of his family-run estates in the Campania region



Photograph: Franco Cogoli/SIME/4Corners Images



‘We are moving towards large oak with Aglianico, as we believe it is the best way to preserve the fruit of this incredible grape’

Antonio Capaldo, Feudi di San Gregorio

Caggiano, Luigi Tecce, Salvatore Molettieri and Fonzone, this last a promising newcomer.

At Feudi di San Gregorio, owner Antonio Capaldo crafts an Irpinia DOC Aglianico that rivals the finest Taurasi; named Serpico (after Sorbo Serpico, the village that is home to the winery), this is a top Campanian red. What makes this wine so remarkable is that the source vineyard is home to 150-year-old vines; contrast that with vines aged 20-30 years used for the two versions of Taurasi produced by the winery. These old vines naturally result in lower yields and higher concentration, but also ‘stronger balance already at a young age of the wine’, according to Capaldo.

For that reason, Capaldo and his winery team decided to reduce oak ageing for Serpico to 12 months, primarily in large oak casks; previous vintages were matured as long as 18 months in barriques. On the subject of small versus large oak with Aglianico, Capaldo has definite opinions. ‘We are moving towards large oak with all of our versions of Aglianico, as we believe it is the best way to preserve the fruit of this incredible grape,’ he says. ‘It is the case for Serpico, of course – the more valuable the fruit, the less intense the oak needed.’

Finally, in the north Campanian province of Benevento, Aglianico del Taburno is a DOCG red produced in an undulating, hilly zone of clay and limestone soils north and west of the town of Benevento. At Fontanavecchia, proprietor Libero Rillo points out that this interpretation varies from Taurasi in several

ways, as the area is dominated by one specific Aglianico clone; he comments that these wines have ‘higher alcohol but lower acidity than Taurasi, so they do not age as well’.

Rillo’s Vigne Cataratte Riserva, though deeply concentrated, downplays the fruit in favour of a strong herbal character and a distinct mineral streak; the wine generally shows at its best from seven to 10 years of age.

Basilicata difference

In the neighbouring region of Basilicata, the Aglianico del Vulture zone in the region’s far northern reaches, near the border with Puglia, has emerged as a well-respected, if far less well-known territory for the Aglianico grape. Within this small zone at the foot of the extinct Vulture volcano, soils of mixed composition, from volcanic to sandy with deposits of iron and magnesium, provide an ideal habitat for producing wines of distinct minerality that age for decades.

Many producers craft multiple offerings, the result of particular terroirs and winemaking practices. At Grifalco, Lorenzo Piccin currently produces four examples of Aglianico del Vulture; vine age, site-specifics and cellar technique account for the stylistic variation. The entry-level Gricos, aged in steel and large casks, is sourced from Grifalco’s youngest vineyards in Venosa; Damaschito (meaning ‘from Maschito’, a small town) is from vines aged more than 70 years; given a maceration of more than 25 days and then ➤



Above: Antonio Capaldo, proprietor of Feudi di San Gregorio

Top: barrel storage at Feudi di San Gregorio’s winery in Campania

Though regulations allow for as much as 15% of other local red grapes in the blend (usually Piediroso), virtually every Taurasi is Aglianico *in purezza*. Typically identified by its black cherry and bitter chocolate aromas, with healthy natural acidity and firm but not aggressive tannins, oak ageing – in large or small casks – is a necessity, and the wine must be aged for a minimum of three years before release, with at least one year in barrel.

While Mastroberardino has carried the torch for Taurasi for decades, today a few dozen artisan producers have also embraced this wine. One of the elite craftsmen is Luigi Tecce, whose estate in Paternopoli in the southern sector of the production zone is planted to vines of 80 years or older. His first release was the 2001, and today his Taurasi with the proprietary name Poliphemo is a brilliant representation not only of the typicity of the Aglianico grape, but also a stellar illustration of local terroir. The current release from the excellent 2012 vintage, matured in a combination of tonneaux and botti, offers an

explosion of fruit on the palate backed by a finish of brown spice notes and tobacco with a defining streak of minerality.

Many noteworthy examples of Taurasi focus on the tantalising fruit of the Aglianico grape; Tecce goes beyond that sensation to present a wine of great complexity combining notable persistence with a distinctive sense of place, all the while maintaining ideal equilibrium. Tecce himself calls this wine ‘profound, but always subtle, one that is full and luminous, and extremely long-lived’.

Around Campania

As for other regional examples of Aglianico, Campi Taurasini – from a production zone that covers the Taurasi territory along with an additional seven neighbouring villages – is also produced from a minimum of 85% Aglianico, but has no requirements regarding oak treatment or release date. These wines are lighter than Taurasi, yet compare favourably, especially in flavour profile and typicity; notable versions have emerged from Antonio



Photograph: Tom Hyland/Cephas



Above: Libero Rillo of Fontanavecchia

Left: Aglianico vines on the Fontanavecchia estate, to the west of the city of Benevento

aged for three years solely in large casks, this wine is a stellar example of the fruit quality and winemaking improvements in Vulture. The Damaschito 2012 should display its best qualities in 10-12 years, but will drink well for another decade or so after that.

Back at Paternoster in Basilicata, Vito Paternoster says that the ageing potential for his wines is ‘up to 30 years when they reach their peak of taste and aromas, and the tannins become velvety, silky and smooth’. Other top examples of Aglianico del Vulture built for the long haul include Elena Fucci’s Titolo, Cantine del Notaio’s La Firma and

the Pian del Moro from Musto Carmelitano. Given recent improvements, the question arises – are the wines from Vulture as noteworthy as those from Taurasi? Piccin certainly thinks so: ‘They have a harmony of acidity and structure, and an elegance that is difficult to achieve even in Taurasi.’ Capaldo of Feudi di San Gregorio, who produces both types of Aglianico, says that he does love both wines, and while it makes no sense on one level to compare the two, he adds: ‘I do agree that Aglianico del Vulture is more elegant. But if we broaden the argument to complexity and depth, the story is quite the reverse.’

Hyland’s picks: 10 top reds from Campania & Basilicata

**Luigi Tecce, Poliphemo, Taurasi, Campania 2012** 95
£48.50 **Berry Bros & Rudd**
One of Taurasi’s greatest exponents; extreme attention to detail. Aromas of morello cherry, smoked meat and tar. Beautiful ripeness and weight on the palate. Extremely long on the finish, outstanding complexity and persistence. Mineral-driven with stunning harmony. **Drink** 2018-2035 **Alcohol** 15%

**Contrade di Taurasi, Taurasi, Campania 2010** 94
£29.50-£35.99 **AG Wines, Les Caves de Pyrene, Raeburn, The Smiling Grape Co**
From an artisanal Taurasi producer crafting ultra-traditional style wines. Varietally pure Aglianico aromas of baked black cherry, coffee and leather. The palate shows subdued wood notes and reveals a graceful and elegant wine balanced by silky tannins. Lengthy on the finish. **Drink** 2020-2035 **Alc** 14.5%

**Feudi di San Gregorio, Serpico, Irpinia, Campania 2010** 94
£43 **Corking Wines, Dulwich Vintners, Find Me That Wine, Just in Cases, Roberson, Strictly Wine, Wine Direct, Wine Poole**
100% Aglianico, this is the showcase red from this celebrated Irpinian producer. Ripe cherry and black mint aromas; excellent weight on the palate; very good acidity, impressive varietal character. **Drink** 2018-2025 **Alc** 14.5%

**Grifalco, Damaschito, Aglianico del Vulture, Basilicata 2012** 94
N/A UK **0039 0972 31002**
From a family that formerly made wine in Tuscany, there’s great purity in its releases. Currant, morello cherry and soy sauce; beautiful ripeness; rich tannins, superb harmony. **Drink** 2018-2030 **Alc** 13.5%

**Mastroberardino, Radici Riserva, Taurasi, Campania 2006** 94
£76.69 **Mondial**
First produced in 1986, this riserva Taurasi is from a single vineyard. Balsamic and bitter chocolate aromas; excellent persistence and fine tannins. Powerful and still quite young. **Drink** 2018-2030 **Alc** 13.5%

Fontanavecchia, Vigna Cataratte Riserva, Aglianico del Taburno, Campania 2012 92
N/A UK **www.fontanavecchia.info**
Aglianico del Taburno tends to be more robust than Taurasi, and this is an excellent example. Dried cherry, tar and leather aromas; powerful, assertive tannins and excellent structure on the palate. **Drink** 2018-2025 **Alc** 14.5%

Luigi Maffini, Kleos, Paestum, Campania, 2012 92
£16.50 **Lea & Sandman, WoodWinters**
100% Aglianico from southern Campania. Maffini’s wines are always graceful. This one shows earthy cherry

and charred meat aromas, and is quite complex on the palate, with impressive harmony. **Drink** 2017-2022 **Alc** 14%

**Paternoster, Don Anselmo, Aglianico del Vulture, Basilicata 2012** 92
N/A UK **www.paternostervini.it**
One of the most celebrated wines of the zone, this has excellent depth of fruit, but is never too forward. Intense aromas of black plum, bitter chocolate and graphite. Quite ripe, with tannins that are rich but non-assertive. Notable persistence. **Drink** 2018-2030 **Alc** 14.5%

Antonio Caggiano, Salae Domini, Irpinia Campi Taurasini, Campania 2013 91
N/A UK **www.cantinecaggiano.it**
Caggiano is one of the area’s great Taurasi producers; he also excels with this 100% Aglianico wine. Black cherry, violet and sweet tobacco aromas. Elegantly styled, with great varietal purity. **Drink** 2017-2025 **Alc** 14.5%

Terre degli Svevi, Re Manfredi, Aglianico del Vulture, Basilicata 2012 90
N/A UK **www.cantineremanfredi.com**
An established producer, making wines of excellent structure. This is a meaty, earthy syle of Aglianico with notes of charred meat. Good balance of acidity, though it’s a touch astringent at present. **Drink** 2018-2025 **Alc** 14.5%

For full details of UK stockists, see p104

Progressive Puglia

TO THE EAST of Campania and Basilicata, the Puglia region is characterised by numerous grape varieties, often delineated by local territories. In the north, it is Nero di Troia, specifically in the Castel del Monte zone, west of Bari, that produces the best red wines. A notable example is Rivera’s Puer Apuliae, a 100% Nero di Troia sourced from a single vineyard and aged in barrique. Owner Sebastiano de Corato notes that this wine is a leading example of Nero di Troia as a standalone variety, rather than in the traditional blend with Montepulciano. He describes the wine as ‘modern, deep and very true to the variety’.

The far southeast – the Salento Peninsula, near the towns of Brindisi and Lecce – is most famously home to Primitivo and Negroamaro. The former – the same grape as California’s Zinfandel – yields powerful wines, generally high in alcohol (15%-17%) with distinct peppery qualities, while the latter gives wines that are often more subdued with red fruit notes and rounder, less assertive tannins. Negroamaro’s most famous representation is that of Salice Salentino, one of the region’s most appealing and trustworthy DOC reds; look for examples such as the Selvarossa Riserva from Cantine due Palme, as well as the stellar Donna Lisa Riserva from Leone de Castris.

There are numerous value-oriented Puglian examples of Primitivo. Worthy of note are Tenute Rubino’s Punta Aquila and Conti Zecca’s bottling. On a more ageworthy note, Cantine Polvanera’s 17 Primitivo from the Gioia del Colle zone, located farther north in Bari province, is a dazzling offering from 60-plus-year-old alberello (bush-trained) vines, aged solely in stainless steel; expressive aromas of sour cherry, rose and liquorice, along with elegant tannins and good acidity make the 2012 a standout.

An alternative style of Primitivo is that of Gianfranco Fino, whose wines are from the Primitivo di Manduria zone in the far southwestern reaches of the region, not far from the Gulf of Taranto. His outstanding Es 2012 is made from partially dried grapes and aged exclusively in French barriques; despite the 16.5% alcohol, the heat does not come across on the palate or on the finish.

A third successful red variety in the Salento peninsula is Susumaniello; its name is derived from local dialect for ‘donkey’. Traditionally used as a blending grape, a few



Above: vineyards outside Locorotondo in Puglia, between Bari and Brindisi

producers, such as Tenuta Li Veli and Tenute Rubino, have recently started to bottle it as a monovarietal. At the latter firm, winemaker Luca Petrelli captures the succulent fruit and a melange of spice – coriander, clove and cinammon. Two versions – one called Torre Testa, aged in barriques and rather Port-like; the other, Oltremé, given no oak ageing, being juicier with modest tannins – offer a glimpse into the progressive stance taken by so many Apulian producers today.



Above: Manduria’s Gianfranco Fino

Based in Chicago, Tom Hyland is an author, photographer and educator specialising in Italian wines. He is in Italy several times a year

Hyland’s picks: a taste of Puglia

**Rivera, Puer Apuliae Riserva, Castel del Monte Nero di Troia 2011** 92
£37.48 (2010) **Mondial**
This 2011 vintage marks the initial DOCG release of this riserva. Aromas of red cherry, tobacco and anise. Impressive depth of fruit and balanced acidity, quite ripe with strong herbal notes. **Drink** 2017-2024 **Alc** 14%

**Tenute Rubino, Oltremé, Susumaniello, Salento 2014** 91
£14.99 **Alliance**
Deep colour, with iodine, black ink and violet floral aromas. Steel-aged, this is quite juicy and ripe, but is balanced with zesty acidity. **Drink** 2017-2022 **Alc** 13.5%
For full UK stockist details, see p104