

# TAURASI

## THE IRPINIA REGION OF CAMPANIA AND THE TAURASI MASTERCLASS

**The province of Avellino, known as Irpinia, is a district of the Campania region in southern Italy, located in the heart of the Southern Apennines. Rustic and wild, Irpinia, with its green hills, beech and chestnut forests and mountainous landscapes with peaks of over 1,800 meters, criss-crossed by streams and rivers, is home to Aglianico, an extremely ancient grape variety, whose origin dates back to Greece, the main ampelographic base of Taurasi Docg red wine.**

An impervious, isolated and largely rural area which, due to its position, has maintained a commanding productive identity over the years, in many ways becoming the oenological "capital" of the region (including famous whites such as Fiano di Avellino Docg and Greco di Tufo Docg). A land of the South, but an atypical South: the climate is wet with strong winds, winters are cold while summer features substantial temperature differences. A rugged territory with powerful connotations and intense sensations, where vines almost hide among the mountains and where everything seems to taste of the earth, rock and isolation, almost in denial of an origin that actually came from distant seas. There are no extensive vine plantations, only a mosaic of small vineyards that differ in exposure, altitude and soils.

A viticulture that requires no irrigation and invigorates the Aglianico grape, one of the latest harvest in Italy (often finishing at the end of October, or even at the beginning of November). A vigorous

yet delicate grape, particularly due to its thin skin, it laboriously reaches full polyphenolic ripeness, a fact linked to the not always favourable climate of Avellino province. Aglianico could now benefit from global warming here.

The vineyards are on high hills, sometimes over 600 meters above sea level, with steep slopes, and the territory features a great variability of soils: the whole area has a clayey-calcareous base combined with elements of volcanic origin (tuffs, pumice, lapillus, ash), sandstones and shale with very different deposit traces even in adjacent areas. One can still come across vines that are more than a hundred years old, ungrafted, trained to grow high and attached to a tree or supported by a pole, the so-called "alberata taurasina or starza". Unlike Irpinia Aglianico (which does not require ageing), Taurasi is produced in a more limited area with lower yields and is subject to a three-year evolution (of which at least one in wood) or four-year for the Riserva (of which at least eighteen months in wood). Taurasi Docg counts 386 hectares with approximately 700,000 bottles produced by about 100 bottlers.

### *A bit of history*

The golden age for Irpinian wine was undoubtedly the beginning of the 20th century when the area became one of Europe's most important wine-growing districts. In 1928, around one million hectolitres were produced (the third largest Italian province in terms of production), mainly in the Taurasi area. Most of the wine was purchased from producers outside the region (Tuscany, Piedmont,

but also France), since the phylloxera epidemic, an insect that attacks the roots of the vine causing it to die and which practically wiped out European viticulture between the end of the 19th century and the 1940s, had not yet spread to the south. Wine produced in Irpinia was collected in Taurasi from where wagons loads departed every day arriving in Avellino via the railway line, which went down in history as the Wine Railway. Phylloxera arrived late in Irpinia, in the 1930s and, together with the outbreak of the Second World War, caused a total abandonment of the countryside. In reality, phylloxera did not take hold everywhere and completely, sparing vineyards on sandy soils of volcanic origin. Reconstruction was slow and difficult and, in the post-war period, agricultural inspectorates encouraged planting non-native varieties to make quantity and we must thank the Mastroberardino family, the area's historic winery, if viticulture was not upended (they paid farmers more for traditional grapes). The scenario began to change in the late 1980s, after the infamous earthquake of 1980, and especially in the 1990s, when many winegrowers transformed their raw materials and created their own brands, marking a new approach to the market and higher sales volumes in the decade between 1990 and 2000. At the same time, a number of small entrepreneurs and professionals in the area began to invest in vineyards, recovering old family traditions. Small companies linked to a family and artisan approach, thus found space alongside the larger wineries.

### *Taurasi*

The regulations for Taurasi, DOCG since 1993, identify a rather broad and extensive area that falls mainly in the Calore River Valley and embraces seventeen municipalities, including the village of three thousand inhabitants that gives its name to the denomination. In terms of acidity, sapidity and longevity, Taurasi wines share many similarities with others from the north rather than with those produced in neighbouring areas, and at the same time, is irreplaceable at the table in combination with the local cuisine.

The territory has been mapped (Feudistudi, by Paolo De Cristofaro) and divided into four sections by following the course of the Calore and Fredane rivers. The north-eastern section, the right bank of the Calore river, includes the municipalities of Bonito, Mirabella Eclano, Taurasi, Luogosano, Sant'Angelo all'Esca and Fontanarosa, at an average altitude of 400-450 meters, characterised by deep, clayey, calcareous soils with loose surface layers and the presence of volcanic black ash. This



Photo Paul Balise



Photo Paul Balke

is where the most classic Taurasi wines should come from with their spicy and smoky aromas, recognisable by their slender, flavoursome sip, tense structure and absence of alcoholic excess. The south-east sector (Upper Calore Valley) includes the municipalities of Castelvetro sul Calore, Montemarano, Castelfranci and Paternopoli, at an average altitude of between 500 and 650 meters. The soil is clayey-calcareous but in the more superficial layer, the sediments are of volcanic origin (tuff, pumice, lapillus), which gives the wine its distinctive strength. The considerable temperature range also contributes to forging its character. This is usually where the strongest, most alcoholic and tannic Taurasi come from, difficult to approach when young but suitable for lengthy evolutions. The north-west sector, on the left bank of the Calore river, includes the municipalities of Pietradefusi, Venticano, Torre le Nocelle and Montemiletto, at an average altitude of 350 meters. This area can produce Taurasi wines that, apart from being more accessible from the early stages, are also more elegant rather than strong and tend to be more measured than those from the other sectors.

The south-west sector includes the municipalities of Montefalcione, Lapio and San Mango sul Calore at an average altitude of 400 meters on clayey soils. The wines here show considerable stylistic variability. In reality, this difference in areas often finds little practical application because the Irpinian vigneron are increasingly interpreting the wine not only according to the soils, exposures and climate, but also with their own vision of the variety.

### Taurasi Masterclass

Returning to Irpinia, with its landscapes, wines and authentic and sincere people, is always a joy for me. I was given the opportunity by Paul Balke, a Dutch-born journalist and top wine producer, who, having recently moved to Irpinia, managed to involve the municipalities of Taurasi, Montemarano, Castelfranci, Paternopoli and about fifty producers. So, for three days, despite the bad weather, we were able to visit the Taurasi, Montemarano and Castelfranci areas, the Borgodangelo, Mollettieri Sal-

vatore, Adelina Mollettieri and Tenuta Donna Elvira wineries, share lunches and dinners with the producers and enjoy lively discussions and exchanges. The technical tasting took place on two separate mornings at Palazzo Marchionale in Taurasi, home of the "Enoteca Regionale dei vini dell'Irpinia". We tasted wines from 44 companies, 45 samples on the first morning, 25 on the second.

The range went from a single sample for the 2021 vintage to 8 for 2020, 10 for 2019, 9 for 2018 and 2017, 4 for 2016, 9 for 2015, 4 for 2014, 5 for 2013, 2 for 2012, 3 for 2011, 1 for 2010, 2 for 2007 and 3 for 2005. While it was not possible to establish a clear picture of each vintage with such few samples for each year, the opportunity was there to taste Taurasi wines going back several years, an elective moment to enjoy them to the full.

Taurasi is the noblest essence of Campania's red wines. It is an important wine that can demonstrate its ability to be on a par with great Italian wines after a proper period of evolution. By its very nature, it should be waited for, a well-worthy anticipation that will result in enjoying a polyphonic glass with a deep and voluminous sip and a rapid extension that calls for another glass. The important thing is not to exaggerate with the barrels, which overshadow the soul of this great red, and to be cautious during extraction. An approach that in general not all producers seem to have understood, unfortunately. There are many outstanding wines among the selection of wineries and the vintages offered at the tastings, demonstrating that Taurasi has all the credentials for appearing on the international wine stage.

*The classification foresees the best five, but we would also have included Antonio Caggiano with Vigna Macchia dei Goti 2020, Tenuta Il Meriggio Taurasi 2013, Boccella Rosa Taurasi 2017, Gerardo Perillo Don Salvatore 2015, Antonio Mollettieri D'Oreste 2020, Fonzone Legare Riserva 2019, which stood out in a parterre of Taurasi wines that were nevertheless well expressed and interpreted.*

Alessandra Piubello

## TOP 5

### Michele Perillo 2005

Taurasi Riserva

Twelve hectares divided between Castelfranci and Montemarano with centuries-old vines. Felice Perillo, a gifted young oenologist, has never deviated from territorial coherence, respecting the typicality of artisan and authentic Taurasi.

The fruit still lingers among the balsamic and garrigue layers. The sip is surprisingly fresh, integral and long. It still has a tale to tell.

Score : 18/20 (96/100)

### Contrade di Taurasi 2011

Taurasi Vigne d'Alto

As the name suggests, we are in Taurasi, five hectares owned by the second-generation Leonardo sisters, Enza and Antonella. This is one of the estate's two crus, with vines up to 60 years old at an altitude of 400 meters. The olfactory profile oscillates between spicy and floral notes, the brightness of the drink, its harmonious, fine and sophisticated elegance that never strays from the grape's expressiveness, will make it long remembered.

Score : 17.5/20 (95/100)

### I Favati Terzotratto 2013

Taurasi Riserva

Rosanna Petrozziello and her family's story is one of determination, courage and sacrifice. Step by step, they have managed to take the name of I Favati to the top. Wines that never betray and that, with time, unwind, vibrating with freshness and character.

Score : 17.5/20 (95/100)

### Quintodecimo Vigna Grande Cerzito 2020

Taurasi Riserva

Luigi Moio, professor of oenology at Naples University, writer, scholar and internationally renowned figure (he was also president of the OIV – International Vine Organization) founded the company almost 25 years ago in Mirabella Eclano. From a 2-hectare cru on calcareous clay soil at an altitude of 420 meters, he produced a classic Taurasi, with a multifaceted nose, a remarkably long and compact palate and an expressiveness that will shine even brighter over time.

Score : 17/20 (94/100)

### Fiorentino 2016

Taurasi

Giovanni Fiorentino in the municipality of Paternopoli has 5 hectares of vineyards. After following other professional careers, he founded his company in his home town in 2012, dedicating himself passionately to his dream of making wine.

Full-bodied, with good volume, well integrated in a rich, layered fruitiness. The wine, while impressive, has an excellent progression with refreshing acidity to support the drink and dense, tasty tannins. Its progression has unstoppable strength and elegance.

Score : 17/20 (94/100)