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Decanter

Exciting ITALY

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this
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Panel tasting: Bolgheri reds

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Expert's choice: Aussie big names



Campania whites

DOCG wines made from Fiano and Greco may be the stars here, but two other grapes are also making a name for themselves. Tom Hyland reviews this exciting white region

CAMPANIA IS THE home of some of Italy's most singular white wines, especially those made from indigenous grapes.

Eruptions of Mount Vesuvius over the centuries have laced the soils with ash and other volcanic deposits; this imparts a distinct minerality to the wines, especially in Montfredane, one of the most important towns for Fiano di Avellino. The finest versions are powerful, in some years quite lush, with aromas of lemon zest, papaya and magnolia commonplace. The versions from Lapio, further east and slightly higher in altitude (480m elevation versus 400m) tend to be more delicate with jasmine and golden apple aromas but with a less pronounced minerality. The finest examples from both zones drink well for five to seven years, and fine 10- to 12-year bottlings are not uncommon.

Greco di Tufo is a more refined wine with slightly higher acidity than Fiano di Avellino. Where the latter can often be more fruit forward, Greco tends to be more subtle; minerality is quite pronounced. This is a much smaller zone than that of Fiano di Avellino; important sites include Santa Paolina (home to the Cutizzi vineyard of Feudi di San Gregorio) and Montefusco. Vineyards in the latter town reach heights of 600m – ideal results for vibrant wines that highlight expressive aromas of pear, lime and lemon zest, along with a trademark note of almond. While many examples of Greco di Tufo are ideally consumed within three to five years, some can last well up to 20 years.

Beyond Greco & Fiano

Falaghina tends to be a more humble wine, with its textbook high acidity and notes of green apple and citrus. Much is grown in the inland province of Benevento, while the historic roots of this variety are actually in the province of Caserta. The Campi Flegrei district is another stronghold for the variety; the seaside versions tend to be more floral, while those from Benevento are fruitier in nature.

Coda di Volpe is another variety attracting attention. For years, this grape has been known as the main one in Lacryma Christi – a simple wine meant for early drinking. Throughout Irpinia, Coda di Volpe is sometimes used as a blending grape (up to 15%) in both Greco di Tufo and Fiano di Avellino, but now a few local estates are making a varietal wine. These emphasise citrus fruit and white flower aromas in a mid-weight framework. They are not cellar candidates, nor do they possess much in the way of minerality, but they are attractive wines that display immediate charm.

Campania can get very hot in summer, so rain is a key factor; indeed Irpinia records some of the highest rainfall totals in Italy on an annual basis. Lack of rain in September can actually result in less than optimal conditions; as in 2011, which produced powerful, forward whites that while quite flavourful, lacked the structure for lengthy cellaring.

Ongoing viticultural research has resulted in wines of greater refinement throughout Campania in recent years; the region's whites are among the finest in the country. Now the area's most dedicated producers are raising the stakes with more single-vineyard offerings, no doubt to gain the attention of the rest of the wine world.

Highly Recommended

17–18.25pts (90–94pts)



Di Meo, F, Fiano di Avellino 2012

Decanter average score: 18.25/20pts

(94/100pts) Individual judges' scores: Ian

D'Agata 18 Michael Garner 18 Emily O'Hare 18.5

N/A UK www.dimeo.it

Notes of greengage, peach and kiwi with overtones of hazelnut and dried herbs. Full, round and ripe with mature flavours of liquorice and white peach. Good intensity and concentration. **Drink** 2014–2017 **Alcohol** 12.5%

My top three Michael Garner

■ Di Meo, F Fiano di Avellino 2012

The nose on this excellent example remains for now quite restrained but the palate is a real pot pourri of ripe fruits laced with spice, herb and mineral notes. I was particularly impressed by its overall balance and poise and how those ripe fruit flavours don't lack focus. **18 (93) Drink** 2014–2017

Campania: know your vintages

2012 Huge snowfall in the winter meant good water supply in the soil. A long, hot and dry summer followed by welcome rains in mid-October. Yields were low and the resulting wines are of fine quality with notable structure and perfumes. Cellar for five to 10 years.

2011 Less-than-average rainfall meant an early harvest. Powerful wines with excellent varietal character, with lower-than-usual acidity. Good vintage meant for earlier consumption; best over the next two to three years.

2010 Above-average rainfall; wines of great freshness, notable structure and outstanding aromatic qualities. For Sabino Loffredo of Pietracupa, 2010 was the finest vintage for Irpinian whites in the past 20 years. A classic vintage with great ageing potential; 10 years plus.

2009 Heavy rainfall, otherwise typical growing conditions. Slow ripening resulted in wines of excellent aromatic expression. Impressive richness, complexity and structure. Drink now and over the next three to five years.

Recommended 15–16.75pts (83–89pts)

| Wine | Score | IDA | MG | EOH | Tasting note | Alc | Drink | Price | Stockists |
|-------------------------------|---------------|-------|----|------|---|-------|-----------|--------|--|
| Di Meo, G, Greco di Tufo 2012 | 16.75 (89) | 16.75 | 16 | 17.5 | Rich, sweet and creamy with lemon oil and marmalade aromas and flavours. This is juicy and lots of fun; a good food wine. | 12.5% | 2014–2017 | N/A UK | www.dimeo.it |

The results

No Outstanding-rated wines, but nevertheless a very positive tasting that reflected the improvements in wine quality here in recent years – and with Greco and Fiano the highlights. Christelle Guibert reports

A DECADE AGO, who would have predicted that *Decanter* would host a tasting of the whites of Campania? But here we are, and with an impressive 76% of wines recommended, we can see how far the region has come in terms of quality.

'Structurally, Campania whites have the potential to be incredible – perhaps some of the best in the world,' said Emily O'Hare. Her fellow judges agreed. The region has everything going for it: great grape varieties, great climate, great terroir and passionate people,' said Ian D'Agata.

So, all very positive, but why no Outstanding wines? 'The overall standard was very good,' noted Michael Garner, 'but most of the samples are from 2012 – a big, hot vintage. As a result, some of the wines lacked subtlety and fragrance.' D'Agata agreed and didn't find any wines that 'knocked his socks off', feeling that 'this hot vintage compresses the aromas and decreases the acidity so the wines end up being less focused, and with less clarity to them'.

With so many native grape varieties to choose from, what should consumers look out for or leave on the shelves? The panel was unanimous; Greco and Fiano were the stars of the show. O'Hare described the Greco di Tufo wines as 'exhilarating and stimulating' and Garner defined them as

'Structurally, Campania whites have the potential to be some of the best in the world' Emily O'Hare

more consumer friendly. 'Greco has got this fleshy, ripe, honeyed quality with a good whack of acidity. It's a hedonistic style of wine and can be quite explosive on the palate.' While Fiano 'can have very distinctive aromas and elegance' explained Garner, 'the wines are more cerebral – they have a sort of waxy, floral, honey quality, with various fruit sensations.'

The Falanghina and Coda di Volpe varieties were judged works in progress. Garner compared Falanghina with Chardonnay: 'It's a kind of blank canvas upon which the winemaker can paint his own picture.' D'Agata said it was a hard grape to define as it lacks the typicity or character of Greco or Fiano – and yet it gets lots of attention. 'Falanghina is like a starlet with no talent who's on all the magazines, half naked. At least when the wine is well made it's soft, creamy and inoffensive and perfect for wine by the glass.'

Opinions were divided on Coda di Volpe. Garner found the wines hit and miss: 'There were a few very good examples, but also a few very nondescript ones. It's a chameleon-like variety and until recently it lived in the shadow of Greco and Fiano.' D'Agata feels Coda di Volpe deserves to be better known: 'It does have typicity but it was always blended with Greco because it's a very high acid grape, so consumers don't really know its personality yet.' When made well, he said, it has a honey, white flower and peach character with vibrant acidity and lots of structure. 'It takes the middle ground: not quite as tannic as Greco, but bigger bodied than Fiano.'

In terms of ageability, Garner feels Fiano has potential if the wines have the balance to develop well in bottle. 'But few of the examples I tasted had the integrity and harmony.' With Greco, D'Agata felt 'producers haven't been making it well enough for long enough to tell how long it can age,' adding that this would improve in time. He said all the wines were drinking well now. O'Hare also noted the suitability of Campania's whites as food wines: 'They are loaded with flavours and aromas that enable you to pair them with bold, full-flavoured dishes.'

D'Agata said this was an exciting region for wine lovers. 'If you were to list the 10 top white winemakers from Italy today, four would be from Campania. That's how good the region is.'

Expert summary: Tom Hyland

A good tasting in which the 2012 vintage performed well, and Fiano came out top in the scoring. It also highlighted several unheralded estates that deserve recognition



Tom Hyland is the author of *Beyond Barolo and Brunello: Italy's Most Distinctive Wines*

DESPITE IT BEING a hot and dry vintage, the results show a clear preference for 2012 as compared to the 2011 vintage. The former is along classic lines with more pronounced aromatics while the latter vintage offered wines that are a bit more forward and ripe, but which lack the overall power and mineral expression of the 2012s.

Fiano di Avellino received higher marks than its DOCG peer Greco di Tufo – 10 versus three of the top 16 wines. This is a typical result when tasting these wines young, given the more restrained styles of most Grecos as well as their more subtle aromatic profile as the delicate citrus fruit perfumes of Greco are not as showy as the tropical fruit notes that often define Fiano.

The performance of Coda di Volpe, with two Highly Recommended wines, was a pleasant surprise, as this grape is generally used in blending and rarely on its own. Though not as refined as Greco or Fiano, Coda di Volpe does offer attractive citrus fruit and white flower perfumes in a delicate framework; these are wines for early consumption.

While only one Falanghina made the top 16, the variety performed well, if not spectacularly. This can be attributed to the current renaissance of this variety, as some of the area's producers are looking to capitalise on the wine's recent market success. As the grape is planted in all five of Campania's provinces, it's hard to pinpoint a specific style; in addition, quality is varied, given the 'drink-young' approach taken by many producers with this variety. Thus it was gratifying to note the high ratings for Falanghina specialists.

Tastings such as this help to create greater awareness of high-performing unheralded estates; among those justly rewarded were Di Meo.

The tasters' verdicts

Ian D'Agata



The Comitato Grandi Crus d'Italia named D'Agata Italy's best wine journalist in 2012. He is a DWWA Regional co-Chair for Italy, writes on the wines of Italy, Canada and Bordeaux for Stephen Tanzer's International Wine Cellar, and is author of The Ecco Guide to the Best Wines of Italy and Guide to Excellence in Italian Wines. D'Agata is also co-director of Rome International Wine School and lectures on Italian food and wine cultural history for New York University's Food Sciences Master's program. Prior to his

wine career, he graduated in paediatric gastroenterology and nutrition.

D'Agata's verdict

'2012 was characterised by a constant heat that didn't allow for noteworthy aromatic expressions in the wines. Producers made more interesting whites in 2011. Though high temperatures are less of an issue in parts of Campania like Irpinia (a mountainous, often cold, windswept area) than other areas in Italy more affected by heat, in 2012 even usually great wines such as Fiano di Avellino and Greco di Tufo were not very striking; the two wines also resembled each other more in this vintage than usual (constant heat being a flattener of wine diversity). But the 2012s made up in power and mineral expression what they lacked in gracefulness, complexity and floral perfume.

'Despite what many in Italy say, Falanghina confirmed that, with few exceptions, it's a wildly overrated grape and wine, with too many poor renditions and too many different flavour profiles. Coda di Volpe instead confirms itself as a standout white that producers in Campania should increasingly look to.'

Emily O'Hare



O'Hare is head sommelier and wine buyer at London's The River Café, where she has worked for five years. She also writes about Italian wine and sits on judging panels for Decanter and the DWWA. In her spare time she runs a women's tasting group, Women, Know Your Wine! and a wine-focused pop-up restaurant, Whizzbangpop.com.

O'Hare's verdict

'Despite there being quite a few low scores in this tasting, there was still a lot to be positive about. There were many simple, well-made wines, with character and a sense of place, that should have very competitive prices. There are many great co-ops in Campania that make a number of very good wines; I would certainly choose these over many whites from better-known winemaking regions.

'There were some excellent Falanghinas and Grecos, but the Fianos from Avellino really delivered – they had invigorating acidity (many of these wines are from vineyards more than 400m above sea level) intensity, concentration and unique smoky, spicy, saline flavours.

'Surprisingly, although the younger wines from 2012 were drinking well, as expected, the 2011s, now three years old, showed little sign of age – if anything their time in bottle had contributed further complexity. I have long found it tricky to put an ageing bracket around Campania's whites; some are best drunk within their vintage, whereas others can drink well for up to and even beyond five years.'

Michael Garner



Garner has worked in the wine business for more than 30 years and has specialised in Italian wine for nearly 25 years. He is co-author of Barolo: Tar and Roses, is a regular contributor to Decanter and has taught for the WSET.

Garner's verdict

'An excellent opportunity to look at how Campania is shaping up as an important white wine-producing region: a plethora of lesser known denominations waits in the

wings hoping to emulate the success of Irpinia's two famous DOCG whites – Greco di Tufo and Fiano di Avellino.

Overall standards were decent, though the need for separate identities for some of the more minor denominations is, particularly at this stage in the region's development, at best questionable.

Wine quality was, surprisingly, not higher within the two DOCG denominations, where the cool-climate growing conditions come into their own in hot and dry vintages such as 2012. Fiano di Avellino proved to be the most successful wine style: the Di Meo wines were delicious. The Greco di Tufo wines were on the whole slightly less inspiring, though their broad, rich and ripe style offers good short- to medium-term drinking.'