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The Remarkable White Wines Of Campania



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Food & Drink

I write about wine from around the world.



Vineyard in the Greco di Tufo production zone PHOTO ©TOM HYLAND

There are outstanding white wines from many parts of Italy. While most people think of the wines of Alto Adige and Friuli in the northeastern reaches of the country, there are also some beautiful whites from Piedmont in the northwest as well as Marche, along the Adriatic Coast in eastern central Italy. I love all these wines, but my vote for the region that is home to Italy's finest white wines is Campania in the the country's southwestern sector.

Viticulture in Campania dates as far back as several thousand years ago, when Greek colonists started to plant vines in this region, which they named *campania felix*, meaning “fertile countryside.” In fact, one of the principal white varieties in the region is Greco, literally named for the Greeks.

Today, there are five provinces in Campania, each of them a wine-producing territory. The most renowned is the province of Irpinia, which is the historical name of the province of Avellino. This is the home of the two most famous Campanian whites, Greco di Tufo and Fiano di Avellino, wines that are regularly considered world class whites. (The name of the wines come from the variety and a particular commune, so Greco from Tufo and Fiano from Avellino.)

Despite the fact that most versions of these two wines are aged in steel or cement tanks and not in oak, these are distinct differences. “Fiano di Avellino is one of the most complex and elegant white wines of Italy,” comments Ilaria Petitto, proprietor of Donnachiara, an estate where both whites are produced. “Fiano has a big aging potential of ten years and more, easily.”

For Petitto however, she sells twice as much Greco di Tufo, and truly loves this wine. “Greco di Tufo is different than Fiano di Avellino as it is less aromatic, but with a bigger structure.” Antonio Capaldo, proprietor at Feudi di San Gregorio, one of the region’s most acclaimed producers, agrees with Petitto about the richness of Greco di Tufo. “Greco grows on chalky mineral soils and is characterized by very low yields and a very delicate skin of the grape. This explains the minerality and the strong concentrated personality of the wine. The depth and richness in mouth surprises everyone.” Continuing, Capaldo expresses a thought shared by other producers in Irpinia. “For some of us, Greco is a ‘fake red.’” Try the Pietracupa Greco di Tufo—in my opinion, Italy's finest white wine, year in and out—and you'll understand what Capaldo means.

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Both wines have very good levels of acidity, and offer excellent aging potential, as much as 10-15 years in the finest vintages, such as 2010 and 2015, which were exceptional years in Campania. While most versions of these two wines are blends of grapes from several communes, recently a few producers have specialized in single vineyard offerings that tend to have greater depth of fruit and persistence. Among the finest examples are "Cutizzi" Greco di Tufo and "Campanaro" Fiano di Avellino from Feudi di San Gregorio, "Ventidue" (22) and "Alimata" Fiano di Avellino, and "Contrada Marotta" Greco di Tufo from Villa Raiano, the Fiano di Avellino "906" from Ciro Picariello, and the "Radici" Fiano di Avellino and "Nova Serra" Greco di Tufo from Mastroberardino.

While Greco is primarily at home in Irpinia, Fiano is also grown in the province of Salerno, south of the Amalfi Coast. While the local climate is quite cool, which helps preserve acidity, the soils are different than in Irpinia, which is more dominated by volcanic soils, while Salerno, especially in the district of Cilento, has more clay and limestone based earth. This results in fruit-driven wines with less minerality than those from Irpinia; highly recommended examples include "Pian del Stio" from San Salvatore and "Kràtos" and "Pietraincatenata" from Luigi Maffini, this last wine an example of a barrel-fermented and matured Fiano.

A third important white variety in Campania is Falanghina, planted in all five provinces, most famously in Benevento and Caserta. Falanghina has very high acidity, and for years, that's about all these wines offered, as little effort was made to bring about a more complex wine.

But there has been a renewed interest in this variety and more examples these days display greater depth of fruit, offering notes ranging from pear and orange blossom in many examples from Benevento to more tropical fruit notes such as pineapple and kiwi from Caserta. The Falerno del Massico zone, one of the birthplaces of Falanghina, is home today to Villa Matilde, a producer that crafts several styles of Falanghina, both steel and oak-aged. Also look for Falanghina from a small area known as Campi Flegrei, along the coast, just north of Napoli; recommended producers include La Sibilla and Agnanum.

As Falanghina, Greco and Fiano all have very good natural acidity, these are excellent food wines. Luciano Pignataro, one of Italy's leading journalists regarding the wines from Campania and other southern regions, has several recommended food pairings for these wines. "Greco di Tufo is a rich wine that is fine even with meats and fatty sauces," he comments. "Falanghina works with seafood preparations and the vegetable garden, while Fiano is best with well-structured dishes, such as raw fish, meat *carpaccio* and pasta with legumes (such as peas or lentils)."

There are several other excellent white wines from Campania, which I'll cover briefly. Arguably the most underrated is Palagrello Bianco, grown in Caserta; it is certainly unknown to most consumers or even those familiar with Campanian wines. One of the finest producers working with this variety is Massimo Alois, whose "Caiati" offering is stellar. Alois notes that the variety is not as acidic as Falanghina or other local grapes, meaning that producers grow the grape at elevations of 100 feet or higher in order to gain acidity. "What is impressive," says Alois, "is the aroma. Always toward grapefruit, citrus and anise." His 2016 "Caiati" is memorable, with notable texture and beautiful varietal focus.

Aspirinio is a variety found in Caserta, and it is a highly distinctive one. While most plantings of recent years have been arranged in a modern fashion, many acres of the traditional style of planting still exist. These are quite eye-catching, as the vines are trained to poles, and reach as high as 30 feet above the ground; harvest for these vines means climbing ladders to pick the clusters! As Aspirinio has very high acidity, it is produced as a dry white as well as sparkling and even as a *passito*, a sweet dessert wine; each of these versions can age for more than a decade.



Vineyards at Maiori along the Amalfi Coast PHOTO ©TOM HYLAND

Finally, there are multiple examples of stirring whites from the coast. At Furore, a small village on the Amalfi Coast, Marisa Cuomo and her husband Andrea Ferraioli produce one of Italy's most dynamic white wines, which they have named "Fiorduva," a blend of local varieties Ginestra, Ripoli and Fenile. Fermented and aged in small oak, this is a powerful white with tremendous complexity, one that can stand up to veal, pork and even lighter game.

On the island of Ischia, several producers, most notably Pietratorcia, Cenatiempo and Casa d'Ambra, work with the local Biancolella variety, one that is planted here, as the vines are hearty enough to withstand the blustery sea winds. The wines are high in acidity with a strong saltiness and minerality, ideal for pairing with local seafoods.

Finally, if you can locate it, make certain to try the white wine from Raffaele Palma known as Puntacroce, made from several local varieties grown on dramatic vineyards overlooking the sea at the village of Maiori (see above photo). Vincenzo Mercurio, one of the region's most famous enologists, makes this wine, and it is a

beautifully crafted, mineral-driven white that instantly brings to mind the beauty of this land and the dedication of its producers.

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Donnachiara Greco di Tufo 2017 - Aromas of anise, lemon peel and dogwood. Medium-bodied, this is quite dry with good acidity and impressive persistence. Lovely complexity and harmony, this will definitely display greater characteristics with another year or two in the bottle. Peak drinking in 3-5 years. **Excellent**

Le Ormere Greco di Tufo 2015 - Both Greco di Tufo and Fiano di Avellino age very well; this is especially true from an outstanding vintage such as 2015. Aromas of golden apple, guava and notes of pastry cream and almond. Medium-full with very good ripeness, slightly lush fruit, good acidity and persistence. Very nice varietal character; enjoy over the next five years. **Excellent**

Mastroberardino Greco di Tufo "Nova Serra" 2016 - Lemon peel, citrus fruit and hyacinth aromas. Medium-full with good concentration and acidity, this has very fine varietal character, with a subtle touch of minerality in the finish. Straightforward, this is a bit lighter than previous vintages, but nicely balanced. **Very Good**

Villa Raiano Greco di Tufo "Contrada Marotta" 2015 - Engaging aromas of orange pekoe tea, chamomile and lemon zest. Medium-full – excellent richness and texture. Excellent persistence, great complexity. Hint of almond in the finish along with distinct minerality. Beautiful wine! This is so good now, but it will reveal greater complexities over the next 7-10 years. **Superb**

Feudi di San Gregorio Fiano di Avellino 2016 - Light yellow; inviting aromas of golden apple, lemon zest and hyacinth. Medium-full, with beautifully ripe fruit, good acidity, very good persistence and a light minerality in the finish. Excellent varietal character and wonderful character. Very good value. **Excellent**

Vinosia Fiano di Avellino "Le Grade" 2017 - Aromas of fresh lemons, jasmine and white flowers. Medium-bodied with good varietal character. Tangy, citrusy, acidity and good balance, though it lacks some punch. Nicely styled, this is a lighter style of Fiano di Avellino, that is clean and refreshing. Enjoy over the next 2-3 years. **Very Good**

Villa Raiano Fiano di Avellino "Alimata" 2015 - Aromas of golden apples, dried pear and geranium. Beautiful texture, excellent persistence, light nuttiness on the finish. 3-5 years, perhaps longer. **Excellent**

Villa Raiano Fiano di Avellino "Ventidue" 2015 - Marvelous aromas of golden apples, mango, banana and lilacs. Medium-full; excellent persistence. Great freshness; layered palate; outstanding concentration. Very good acidity. Peak drinking in 7-10 years. **Outstanding**

San Salvatore "Pian di Stio" 2017 - 100% Fiano. Very pretty aromas of lime blossom, melon and acacia. Medium-full with very good concentration. Great varietal purity and focus. Good acidity and persistence. 2017 was a challenging vintage, so this is a bit lighter on the palate and in the finish than in previous years, but this is such a well made wine, appealing with with lovely finesse. Enjoy over the next 3-5 years. **Excellent**

Pierluigi Zampaglione "Don Chisciotte" 2016 100% Fiano from what the producer labels as Alta Irpinia. Don Chisciotte translates, as you might guess, to "Don Quixote," and Zampaglione sees himself tilting at windmills with this wine, an orange Fiano, made from organic grapes, grown 2400 feet above sea level. Light orange color; exotic aromas of butternut squash and orange poppies. Medium-full with very good concentration and persistence. Lovely silky texture. Peak drinking in 5-7 years. **Excellent**

Tenuta Cavalier Pepe Falanghina "Lila" 2017 - Aromas of pear jelly, lime and yellow iris. Medium-bodied, this has very good acidity, ripeness and freshness and excellent harmony and varietal character. Enjoy over the next 2-3 years. **Excellent**

Alois Caiati 2016 - 100% Palagrello Bianco. Brilliant light yellow with golden tints. Aromas of quince, banana and jasmine. Medium-full with lovely texture; lengthy finish with bright acidity and notable persistence. Beautiful harmony and varietal purity. Focused and beautifully styled. Best in 3-5 years. **Outstanding**

Vestini Palagrello Bianco 2016 - Lovely nose! Aromas of jasmine, Anjou pear and dogwood. Medium-full, excellent persistence, good acidity. Bright fruit. Quite delicious; lovely complexity and varietal character. Enjoy over the next 3-5 years. **Outstanding**

*I am a Chicago-based wine writer, educator and photographer, with 37 years of experience in the wine industry. For the past 20 years, I have been a freelancer, writing professionally about wines from around the world, based on visits to wine regions from Napa Valley to Champ... **MORE***

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