

FONTEFICO (Italy, Abruzzo, Vasto)

BACKGROUND: In 1996 Nicola and Emanuele Altieri established Fontefico, an estate comprising 15 hectares of vines located in the beautiful Vasto gulf on the Southern Abruzzo's coast. Supported by their dad Alessandro, an expert agronomist, the two brothers began to experiment the different estate's vineyards with lots of micro-vinifications, always with the aim to obtain wines marked by pure fruit. After ten years of research and attempts, they decided to bring the different soil's expressions to the market, starting to produce 20.000 bottles with their debut's harvest in 2006.

Throughout the years the estate has gained more popularity. In 2018 the current production is now up to 40.000 bottles per year from the 15 hectares available which potentially could



allow the bros to bottle definitely more wine. The rest of the fruit is sold to other bigger estates as deciding to contain production bottles' levels has always been a key asset in order to preserve expected quality's levels.

TWO WINE RANGES: Nowadays Fontefico is acclaimed in Italy as an organic certified winery, always quality driven with focus

on the territorial varieties including Montepulciano, Pecorino and Trebbiano d'Abruzzo. After several years of soil's research, a small parcel of land was also regarded suitable for the planting of Aglianico which is very rare to find here. So far Fontefico produces two different wine ranges.

The first one comprises 6 wines bringing on the table the various facets of a particular territory: Pecorino Superiore, Trebbiano d'Abruzzo, Cerasuolo Superiore, Montepulciano d'Abruzzo, Titinge Montepulciano Riserva and the Costetoste Aglianico Riserva. Vigorous wines, characterized by fresh acidity and deep fruit influenced by Vasto breeze coming from the Adriatic sea.

The second wine range includes only experimental garage wines. Added to the above mentioned official line of six wines, the Altieri bros. deliver an alternative bottling outside the DOC schemes and producing spontaneously fermented wines marked by plenty of experimental attitude and sometimes with an extreme approach. These micro vinifications started basically in 2006 and are gaining more awareness among buyers and consumers who already know Fontefico wines. Once almost considered limited production wines, now it's a bit easier to come across these wines labeled simply as "Vino", whose classification system does not permit any reference on the label of both grape varieties and vintage.

ORGANIC FARMING & HARVEST: The estate covers about 15 hectares and all the single vineyards are meticulously tended, therefore the wines display unique and unrepeatable characteristics, always respecting vintage's characteristics. In Vasto the seaside breeze is fundamental and keeps grapes always dry, maintaining excellent health conditions without invasive agronomic interventions.

As an organic certified estate, Fontefico has always been aware of the environment by joining from the very beginning the “Integrated Pest Management” (Regulation EEC No 2078/92.), which provides sustainable agricultural practices with low environmental impact. Organic farming techniques include not using any synthetic products, and promoting antagonism relations between living organisms in order to contain the populations of the harmful ones. Pruning is done to not overload the vines, leaving only the buds strictly necessary. Fertilization is made only if the soil really needs it and only with organic



fertilizers for a better balance between leaf and fruit. Yields are reduced and hence the development of pathogenic organisms is reduced as well. Moreover, due to the natural grassing, a balanced nutrition for plants is achieved because the herbaceous cover acts both as a solar panel in winter and as an insulator in summer, also limiting soil erosion. The moth, whose presence in Vasto area is found only in certain years, is fought with the *Bacillus Thuringiensis*, a bacteria harmless to humans but able

to harm the larvae avoiding their proliferation. Quality needs a lot of work. Grapes are harvested by hand, placed in small carts or in 20 kg boxes and destemmed within 20 minutes. No time is wasted for the beginning of the fermenting process which starts in the cellar where everything is under careful supervision.

ABRUZZO IN THE NEW CENTURY ... : Abruzzo carries just one DOCG (Colline Teramane) and some other DOC appellations that are little known abroad and misjudged as cheap, generic, supermarket bottling. This has changed though and the region already underwent a gradual transition from bulk-wine production to bottled artisanal wines. In other words, a transition from a strictly industrial wine culture to one in which quality is the key asset bringing pride and prosperity to the local community. Geographically speaking, Abruzzo is not even to be considered a southern region belonging definitely to center Italy. Italian wine critics are actually looking with more interest to some forgotten regions and Abruzzo has never really been forgotten and left in oblivion. It seems that some American critics are a bit slow to accept the new wave of young and small producers that are rising to the scene year in year out, many of them with an organic mindset. This contemporary scenario noisily contrasts with the stereotyped American cliché on Abruzzo’s wines described as just darkhorse and rustic.

... STILL FACING SOME IDENTITY PROBLEMS: Once again the local renown Montepulciano grape has nothing to share with *Vino Nobile di Montepulciano*. The latter is a small town in Tuscany where the Sangiovese clone Prugnolo Gentile rules. To create some extra confusion not only the grapes used are masquerading as wines, but even Pecorino is thought to be related to the same name cheese production area from other parts of Italy. Step number 1: Think of Pecorino. Step number 2: Type it into “The Oracle” (i.e. Wikipedia) and all you will get is a kind of cheese produced in different Italian areas. Beside the most celebrated Pecorino Romano, the other four mature PDO cheeses are the Pecorino Sardo, Pecorino Toscano, Pecorino Siciliano and Pecorino di Filiano from Basilicata.

You have to specify “Pecorino Grape” to finally get some viticultural information. The Pecorino grape is cultivated in south Marche and in Abruzzo primarily, plus some extra enclaves in Lazio. According to local legend, Pecorino gets its name from the sheep (*pecora*) who would snack on the grapes in the vineyard.

MONTEPULCIANO, the ever changing grape: The grape is widely planted throughout central Italy, most notably in Abruzzo (where it has its undisputed roots), Lazio, Marche, Molise, Umbria and Puglia (that makes 6 regions out of 20), and is a permitted variety in DOC wines produced in 20 of Italy's 95 provinces. Montepulciano is not found in northern Italy because the grape has a tendency to ripen late and can be excessively "green" if harvested too early. When fully ripened, Montepulciano can produce deeply colored wines, with moderate acidity and noticeable extract and alcohol levels. Abruzzo's Montepulciano wines differ widely according to production's location and considered the vast influence of the Apennines mountain range. Fontefico's rendition reflects seaside Vasto microclimate and is more filled with subtle earthy components lifted by some dark licorice and toasted coffee at the back end of the palate, providing "salted" freshness and with the alcohol completely integrated in the wine structure.

SO FAR PECORINO IS NOT RELATED TO THE CHEESE. What else? Pecorino is a white grape variety of ancient origin, native of the Adriatic coast. Its earliest traces date back to the time of Cato the Elder (2nd century BC) that included among the varieties shipped to Italy during the migrations. Characterized by a premature ripening of the grapes and from low yields quantitative, it has never been much loved by producers who gradually replaced it with more prolific grape varieties, decreeing almost extinction in the late '70s.



Who has been credited of rediscovering this varietal? Discussions and arguments are still going on, but probably Marche region played a slightly more important role than the southern cousin Abruzzo. In 2001 it has been established in Marche the Offida DOC where Pecorino has been meantime replanted after 20 years of agricultural studies.

The story begins in 1982 when Guido Cocci Grifoni, a producer in south Marche, found old vines of an unknown variety in Arquata del Tronto and extended lab researches established that ... Pecorino was back. Cocci Grifoni's first harvest dates 1990, after several years spent in micro-vinifications and vineyard experiments. Strange enough he bottled the wine simply as "Vino da Tavola" and without mentioning

the grape variety on the labels. He is the true Pecorino hero and without him the variety would have been definitely lost.

The grape name still remains a mystery, but among the various hypotheses, primary credit has one that links it to the practice of transhumance, typical of Abruzzo: it seems that the sheep would go crazy for this type of grape that, maturing before the other regional varieties, was a sweetheart in the time of their passage, in mid-September.

The variety, in order to achieve excellence, needs good and cool ventilated hills with wide temperature changes. In addition to mature early, Pecorino presents natural medium to high sugar levels, which cause quite high alcohol levels and creates wines with good structure and marked acidity.

THE STRANGE CASE OF CERASUOLO: THE ROSE' - NON ROSE': Beginning from 2011 Cerasuolo has its own specific DOC requiring lower yields in the vineyards. The name Cerasuolo originates from *cerasa* (or *cirasce*, in Abruzzi dialect), meaning cherry and it was attributed to the lively colour, "cherry red", which this wine made from Montepulciano grapes traditionally always had. "*Technically speaking is a rose* - quoting the Alfieri bros -

but at the very heart of its nature, this wine behaves more like a light red to be consumed even at room temperature. Versatility is simply huge here: from a chilled wine to be sipped by the pool during lazy hot afternoons, to a noble companion for tuna steak garnished with Mediterranean cherry tomatoes (in Italy are called pachini) and capers, cooked in crumbled bread. Don't sleep on ethnic cuisines as well: Cambodian amok is a great pairing as well". Generally speaking Cerasuolo is the darkest among the Italian rosè.

WINES IMPORTED: Steep Hill currently imports 4 wines from Fontefico estate.

Pecorino Superiore DOC 2017 “La Canaglia” (14% AbV): The organic certified Pecorino, coming from the Vigna Bianca vineyard, ferments in tank for 21 days and spends 6 months on the lees before being bottled. It is generally released to the market the spring after the harvest. Described by Slow Food wine guide among the best of its kind, with yields below 60 hl per hectare, this Pecorino is a highly concentrated white with a potential remarkable lifespan. The nose opens with pleasant notes of basil, chamomile flowers and apple trees. It continues with tones of citrus fruit, especially grapefruit and cedar, to turn to the yellow fruits, which typically becomes more evident after 18 months from the harvest. Canaglia in Italian means rascal and the Altieri bros decided to name the wine in such way due to all the potential cultivation problems that this variety can present any given year. Unfiltered. 12.089 bottles produced.



Cerasuolo d’Abruzzo Superiore DOC 2017 “Fossimatto” (14,5% AbV): The organic certified Cerasuolo Superiore comes from the vineyard Vigne del Pozzo where the Montepulciano is planted. Skin and must remain together 18 hrs at a low temperature, while fermentation starts at 19° C in stainless steel tanks. It ages 6 months on the lees and is released the spring following the harvest. All this provides the authentic Cerasuolo d’Abruzzo color: a deep cherry morello with purple shades, a real feast for your eyes. The nose is delicate, yet already releases hints of the minerality that will be unveiled in the mouth. Fresh and crispy, the mouth is filled with a taste of black currant and raspberries, while the finish is marked by a balsamic note and a pleasant feel of licorice root. The Cerasuolo d’Abruzzo is a cornerstone of the wine tradition of Abruzzo. It is not simply a rosè and not a classic red. It is an wine unique, which well matches cuisine styles in balance between strong flavors and elegant taste. Unfiltered. 6.834 bottles produced.



Montepulciano d’Abruzzo DOC 2015 “Cocca di Casa”(14,5% AbV): The Montepulciano



D’Abruzzo originates from a mix of vineyards named Vigne del Pozzo: three contiguous and complementary soils with different characteristics to get the best combination of fruit, spices and acidity. Fermented in tank, the 24 month long ageing process includes both stainless steel vats (70%) and used wooden vessels (30%) plus 6 months in the bottle. Slight resinous notes followed by small flowers and red fruits, such as cherry and blackberry, which fill the nostrils of sweet and delicate sensations. In the mouth, the attack is soft but it early reveals high and pleasant freshness. In addition to the ripe fruit, this wine ends with spices like black pepper spice, liquorice and roasted coffee. Montepulciano d’Abruzzo is Altieri’s privileged grape, the one they cuddle more. This wine is their “Cocca di Casa”, their “beloved little girl”. What a perfect organic everyday wine! 9.582 bottles produced.

The 4th wine imported from Steep Hill comes from the 2nd wine range collection made by Nicola and Lele Altieri which includes naturally fermented and super minimal wines made



with almost no additives or cellar manipulations. The declassified **Malvasia 2016 “Dire Bere Baciare”** (13% AbV) is labelled simply as “vino” and stands outside the Italian conventional classification system. It is not allowed put on the label both the vintage year and the variety. Dire Bere Baciare translation is “Telling, Drinking, Kissing”. Fruit for this wine is sourced from the Vigna Bianca vineyard.

This monovarietal aromatic and exotic Malvasia, naturally-ferments with its own yeast and skins in stainless steel tanks and undergoes a pretty long bottle ageing before the release to the market. Its bouquet is soft and mellow, but its palette reveals a dry and astringent structure, almost reminiscent of green tea leaves. Like “spin the bottle;” where your senses spin and turn ... you wonder where they’ll stop. But there’s nothing more to do, just drink it. This skin macerated wine presents an awesome orange color and

the label’s bare, somehow naked design reflects the minimalistic wine’s style. Total sulfites 28 mg/lit. Unfined and Unfiltered. 2.000 bottles produced only.