

RECENTLY-TASTED ITALIAN WINES
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It has been quite a few years since I last wrote a general feature on Italian wines that did not focus primarily on the great traditional estates in Piemonte. I did write a fairly long article on the wines of Campania (including the tremendously underrated reds of Taurasi) more recently, but I have been overdue for another broader feature on the wines from this lovely country. As this project has been quite a while on the “to do list”, and comes on the heels of the longest issue of the newsletter I have put together in many years, I decided to primarily focus this report on red wines from Italy, and to leave the deep waters of Italian white wines for another article. However, as a few importers sent me along some very good white wines as well as a roster of reds, there are still some white wine notes included in this report. Beyond requesting primarily red wines for this report, I went a step further in my selection in not trying to taste wines from estates that I already knew and loved. It is hard not to imagine that I could have found great pleasure focusing primarily on new releases from estates such as Giacomo Conterno, Giuseppe Mascarello, Bartolo Mascarello, G. B. Burlotto, Giacosa, Marcarini and the like, but it would not really have provided any particularly useful new information, as these estates always make fine wines and are currently the gold standard for quality and consistency in Italy. So, for this report, I went in the other direction and asked importers for red wines that they were fond of and felt

would be crafted stylistically in a traditional manner that I would find merited recommending. Beyond, this, I left the selection primarily up to the importers in the hopes that there was an ocean of fine, old school-styled Italian red wines out there that I was unfamiliar with previously and that readers might like to add to their list of producers worthy of investigation. Happily, a few importers went ahead and also sent some well-known estates, so there was no shortage of blue chip wines to taste as well!

While the overall quality level was exemplary for the wines that I did receive, not everything I tasted for this article was life-altering. However, there was one new producer to me who will absolutely earn a corner of my cellar going forward for his stunning wines, and this was Michele Braganti of the Chianti estate of Monteraponi. *Signor* Braganti's wines were absolutely beautiful and unequivocally the finest examples of Chianti that I have tasted since I wrote my feature on the Monte Vertine estate ten years ago! Michele Braganti farms twelve hectares of vines here, in the tiny and timeless village of Monteraponi (from which the winery takes its name), with his vineyards tucked in on the estate amongst eight hectares of olive trees and one hundred and eighty hectares of rolling hills of clustered woodlands of ancient oak and chestnut trees that comprise the remainder of the property. The village of Monteraponi, which dates all the way back to the tenth century, lies just southwest of the better-known town of Radda, from which this sector of the Chianti region takes its name. *Signor* Braganti took over the management of the estate from his father in 2002 and the in 2003 crafted his first vintage. His father had been managing the property since 1974, but only made a small amount of wine as a hobby, being content to primarily sell of the grape production from the property. Michele Braganti farms organically and the estate's vineyards are now all officially certified as such. The vineyards lie at an altitude of between four hundred and five hundred and sixty meters above sea level, planted in an amphitheater with a soil foundation of limestone and clay topsoils, over a substrata of marl. Harvest time comes in early October here, as the village sits at one of the higher altitudes in the entire Chianti region, with the grapes at Monteraponi hand-harvested, fermented solely with indigenous yeasts in cement and aged in a combination of older oak *botti* and *tonneaux*. Michele Braganti likes to give his Chianti bottlings a traditional, long maceration prior to de-vatting for aging in wood, so that the *normale* spends twenty-five days macerating on its skins and the Riservas forty-five days. They are bottled unfined and unfiltered. However, the old school maceration times do not detract from the inherent elegance and beautiful transparency of these wines, as these are some of the most soil-defined examples of Chianti I have tasted in a long, long time, and their style takes me back to the late '70s and early '80s, when such beautifully transparent wines were the norm in this region, rather than the exception.

While many of the producers whose wines are covered below are not presently to be counted among the "blue chips" of old school Piemontese producers who are usually covered in these pages, many are certainly well-known traditionalists in their own rights and deserved far more frequent coverage in this journal than I have been able to afford them in recent times. In this regard, I was very happy to be able to taste a couple of vintages of new releases from Luigi Tecce in Taurasi, whose wines stand above his neighbors in much the same way that Bruno Giacosa's did over most of his contemporaries in Barbaresco back in the day. I was very fortunate that his US importer, Portovino, kindly sent me samples of both the newly released 2014s and the 2013 bottlings as well, so I had a chance to catch up with the current releases from the *Maestro* of Taurasi. As I have written in the past, for those who may not have the sufficient

discretionary income available to load up the cellar with the top, old school producers in Piemonte these days, whose prices often rival those of the top estates in Vosne-Romanée, building a cellar around the wines of *Signor* Tecce would not be a bad alternative by any stretch of the imagination! They are not inexpensive wines, but if the labels said “Chambertin” or “Monfortino”, rather than “Taurasi”, I think that many would find their price-tags relative bargains and would not hesitate to stock up on them!



The beautiful mosaic of undulating vineyard hills and overlooking mountains in Campania.

2014 Taurasi Riserva “Puro Sangue”- Luigi Tecce (Paternopoli)

The Puro Sangue bottling from *maestro* Luigi Tecce is from one of his younger vineyards, with the vines seventeen years of age in 2014, as this parcel was planted in 1997 to a combination of *selection massale* from his eighty year-old vines and some selected clones from the nursery. The 2014 Puro Sangue Riserva was aged for two years, one in *tonneaux* and one in large, old *botti*, prior to bottling, and then given three more years of bottle aging in the cellar prior to release. It is a ripe wine in 2014, tipping in at fifteen percent octane, but offering admirable purity and precision in its bouquet of black cherries, sweet dark berries, saddle leather, cigar ash, roasted venison, a bit of coffee grounds and a fine base of dark soil tones. On the

palate the wine is deep, full-bodied and rock solid at the core, with ripe, firm tannins, fine focus and grip, the good acidity of this high altitude section of the Taurasi DOCG and superb length and grip on the nascently complex and very well-balanced finish. This carries its alcohol most impressively, and though there is just a touch of backend heat, I have no doubt this wine will age very well indeed. 2030-2075+. **91+**.

2014 Taurasi Riserva “Poliphemo” Vecchie Vigne- Luigi Tecce (Paternopoli)

The Poliphemo Riserva is Luigi’s old vine cuvée, as this is the wine he makes from his eighty-five year old vines that were planted by his grandfather. Like all of his wines, it is fermented in open top, chestnut *tini* and macerates for forty days, prior to being racked into older oak *tonneaux* for its first year of *elevage*. It then is racked into large, old *botti* for its second year in wood, before being bottled. The 2014 vintage is the first that Luigi decided to extend his bottle aging regimen for this Taurasi to a full two years; previously it had been fifteen to eighteen months, depending on the vintage. The 2014 Poliphemo Riserva is again ripe, in the style of the vintage, coming in at fifteen percent alcohol, but offering up great aromatic purity in its constellation of black cherries, cassis, Cuban cigar wrapper, a great base of dark soil tones, new leather, woodsmoke and roasted meats. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, elegant in personality and rock solid at the core, with outstanding focus and grip, a great signature of soil, firm, well-integrated tannins and a long, tangy and complex finish. The old vines here give the wine a more elegant and complete profile. Again, there is just a whisper of backend heat here, but the wine will age long and gracefully. 2030-2075+. **93**.

2013 Taurasi Riserva “Puro Sangue”- Luigi Tecce (Paternopoli)

The 2013 vintage was a more classic one in Campania, so the Puro Sangue Riserva from Luigi Tecce comes in at a more customary 14.5 percent octane. The wine delivers a beautifully complex and classic nose of dark berries, cassis, cigar smoke, hung game, dark soil tones and a topnote of chicory. On the palate the wine is pure, full-bodied, focused and complex, with a marvelous core of fruit, good soil signature and grip, ripe, quite suave tannins and a long, tangy and perfectly balanced finish. The difference in just a half point of octane between the 2014 and 2013 version is quite evident in terms of the precision of the flavors and aromatics, not to mention far more suave texture to the still properly firm tannins. Great juice. 2028-2085. **94**.

2013 Taurasi Riserva “Poliphemo” Vecchie Vigne- Luigi Tecce (Paternopoli)

The old vine Poliphemo Taurasi from Luigi Tecce is stellar in 2013. The wine also is 14.5 percent alcohol and delivers classic complexity and breed in its old vine blend of black cherries, dark berries, saddle leather, Cuban cigar wrapper, a complex base of volcanic soil, fire pit and a bit of chipotle pepper in the upper register. On the palate the wine is deep, full-bodied, focused and absolutely classic in profile, with a great core of old vine fruit, superb mineral drive and grip, firm, ripe and buried tannins and a long, vibrant and very complex finish. This is a young wine and is going to take plenty of time to reach its apogee, but it is impeccably balanced and as fine an example of young Taurasi as I have ever tasted! 2030-2085+. **95+**.