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# Decanter

## Best of ITALY

### 10 STUNNING DISCOVERIES

From Campania, Puglia,  
Basilicata and Sicily

### The Petrus of Tuscany

### NORTHERN STARS

Amarone, Barbera d'Asti  
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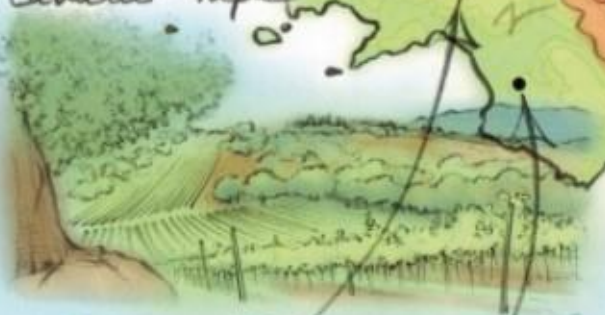
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CAMPANIA  
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# Southern Italy's 10 hidden gems

You may have to go off the beaten track a little, but there are top-quality wines to be found in Italy's hot south, says Susan Hulme MW, who selects great examples from 10 of her favourite producers

SOUTHERN ITALY HAS so much to offer in terms of value-for-money wines, but you can also find great quality and excitement.

With a warm Mediterranean climate, distinctive and characterful grape varieties and a long history of winemaking that goes back to the time of ancient Greece and Rome, it has the potential to rival the great wine regions. Yet as recently as the mid-1990s, southern Italian wines were still languishing in the doldrums. Happily, in the last 20 years, much has begun to change; new sub-zones like Campi Flegrei DOC, Cilento and Paestum have created a buzz alongside the historically famous DOCGs of Fiano di Avellino and Taurasi, and the recently trendy Etna DOC. It is clear the south has a very strong hand to play.

One might assume the region is too hot for fine wine, especially with the warming effects of climate change, but that isn't so. Climate change is about erratic weather patterns just as much as increased temperature. For example, the 2011 vintage saw long periods of drought and record high temperatures, while in 2014 producers experienced prolonged, heavy rain.

Southern Italy has late-ripening grape varieties, such as Aglianico and Nero di Troia, and warm autumns to cope with wet vintages (in 2014 quality was badly affected in the north of Italy, but Sicily had a great vintage). It also has grape varieties that have adapted to the intense summer heat, and vineyards are

*'What they have created is an explosion of vivid, delicious wines that are full of personality'*

often located in high-elevation sites with big diurnal temperature differences, allowing vines to cool down at night and slow grape ripening in hot and dry vintages.

When it comes to grape varieties, the south has an abundance of riches: Carricante, Falanghina, Fiano and Greco make top-quality whites; black varieties include Aglianico (capable of rivalling any of Italy's best black grapes), Frappato, Nero d'Avola, Nero di Troia, Primitivo and many, many more.

Add to that distinctive volcanic soils, a range of elevations and the skill and daring of a bunch of passionate winemakers and you have a heady and intoxicating mix. What they have created is an explosion of vivid, delicious wines that are full of personality.

There's so much going on that it's difficult to limit the number of producers represented here to only 10; these are the ones that have impressed me most in the past 18 months. Coincidentally, many are farmed organically or even biodynamically. While some are new and others are established names, they remain relatively undiscovered. In other words, here are a few of southern Italy's hidden gems.

## Feudo Montoni Sicily

Feudo Montoni is a very special place. Surrounded by wheat fields, the vineyards are 500m above sea level in Cammarata in the province of Agrigento, in central western Sicily, about a two-hour drive from Palermo.

The estate produces a range of white and red wines from local varieties: Catarratto, Grillo and Inzolia for the whites; rosé from Nerello Mascalese; reds from Nero d'Avola and Perricone. But it is the flagship wine Vrucara from Nero d'Avola which really stands out. This is a single-vineyard wine from 80-year-old, ungrafted, pre-phyloxera vines – the producer's very own special clone of Nero d'Avola, identified as such by noted oenologist Giacomo Tachis, of Tignanello fame. He believed it may have developed partly due to the isolation of the vineyards.

Feudo Montoni is one of Italy's true hidden gems, revealing a more elegant and ethereal side to Nero d'Avola than is usually seen. The wines have a lovely purity of expression and fantastic ageing potential. I recently opened a magnum of the Vrucara 2007, which seemed hardly to have aged at all.

**Below: the isolated vineyards of Feudo Montoni, at 500m elevation in Cammarata, Sicily**

Owner Fabio Sireci comments: 'Nero d'Avola is like a crazy horse, it needs time to be reined in.' Perhaps, like a thoroughbred, it also needs time to show its best.



### Feudo Montoni, Vrucara Nero d'Avola, Cammarata, Sicily 2009 95

POA Ester Wines

This is not your typical Nero d'Avola, but from 80-year-old, ungrafted vines of a special clone from the Vrucara vineyard and made by one of Sicily's best producers. It's not a blockbuster, but has elegant, pure aromas and flavours of tobacco, spice, cedar, lavender and sweet cherries, all encased in vibrant, juicy acidity. There is plenty of depth of flavour but it is mainly a refreshing, lively wine that dances on the palate and keeps you coming back for more. **Drink** 2017-2028 **Alc** 14%

