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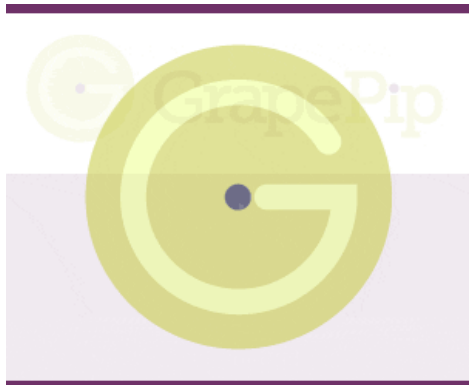
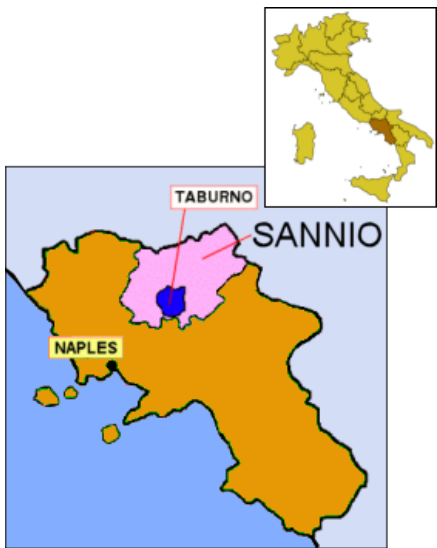
Twenty years ago I wrote on wine-pages that Italy was the one important wine country where I felt I lacked detailed knowledge. Italy is just such a large producer of wines, with so many regions, sub-regions and wine styles, that building intimate knowledge of its wine scene is a daunting challenge.

Two decades on, I have visited Italy 19 times on wine trips, from Alto Adige to Sicily, and I have judged at several regional wine competitions. At last I feel my knowledge is pretty sound. However, an invitation came in recently to visit a region whose name rang no bells: I was invited to spend a few days getting to know the wines of Sannio. That sent me scurrying to Google to find out exactly where Sannio sat on the map, and what I might expect when I got there.

In fact, a search through my 30,000 tasting notes here on wine-pages showed that I had tasted precisely two wines labelled as Sannio over the years, so perhaps I could be forgiven for not immediately recognising it. Sannio lies in the deep South of Italy and is a sub-zone of Campania, a region whose wines I really enjoy, particularly the characterful whites made from local grapes Fiano, Falanghina and Greco. Campania is invariably promoted as a land of vineyards hugging the Adriatic, but Sannio lies inland, relatively distant from the buzz of Naples and the glamour of the Amalfi coast. However, as I was to discover, it has a charm and character all of its own and some excellent wines.

In fact there are almost 8,000 wine growers and 100 estates bottling wine in Sannio, including a handful of large cooperative cellars. It is an area that has overcome decades of decline since just after the second world war. Then, around 70% of its vineyards were planted with Sangiovese, which Neapolitan merchants lapped up, but at barely sustainable prices. They would arrive by train from Naples, and winegrowers would gather in a little square not far from the railway tracks to strike deals, invariably in favour of the merchants in this buyers' market. It was the need to fight back against the power of Naples that led directly to the formation of the large cooperative cellars that form the backbone of Sannio wines today, and a re-thinking of their vineyards. Sannio was awarded DOC status in 1997, its regulations requiring that the grapes be sourced from hillside vineyards, where quality is generally highest.

Sannio is a region with some really attractive towns, centred on the historic city of Benevento (left) just an hour from Naples, and with some real charmers like the ancient Sant'Agata dei Goti (pictured above), also



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home to interesting wine cellars. There are excellent restaurants, a particular favourite being Locanda della Luna in San Giorgio del Sannio just outside Benevento, a slow food restaurant with an emphasis on home-grown and local ingredients.

Sannio's vineyards

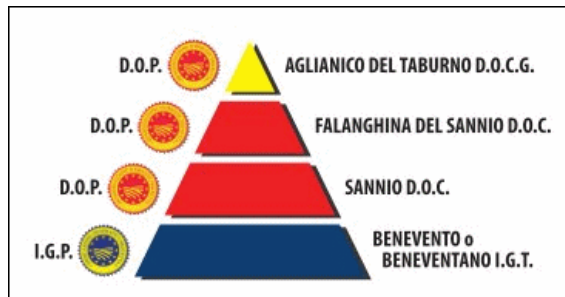
The soils of Sannio vary across the region but are commonly gravel and stones over limestone and sandstone, though there are volcanic soils too in a region dotted with volcanoes and thermal springs. On my spring visit the vineyards were carpeted with vivid blue borage flowers (which also featured heavily in many restaurant dishes) making it a delightful place to visit, feeling relatively tucked away, yet very easy to reach by road or rail from Naples.

The region boasts some extraordinary old vineyards, and white varieties include Falanghina, Fiano and Greco, though there is also Moscato and local speciality Coda de Volpe, which is widely planted and most often seen in blends. Aglianico is king of reds, plus there's Sangiovese, Barbera, and a variety of grapes in smaller proportions including Montepulciano and local specialities like Piediroso.

Some vineyards are trained high in an traditional 'umbrella' system called Tendone, with a vertical trunk rising to around 1.5 metres high, with four canes extended horizontally at 1, 3, 6 and 12 o'clock from the top, bunches of grapes hanging beneath. This old system allowed a second crop such as fava beans to be grown underneath, and is still used for some of the old varieties, though Aglianico, Falanghina and the other major varieties have almost all been re-trained on a more modern Guyot system, lower to the ground and running along wires. The Tendone-trained grapes are also said to be very good for sparkling wine base, as yields tend to be higher.

The Wines of Sannio

Over three days in the region I had a chance to visit the two biggest cooperatives and several of their vineyards, as well as visiting one of the most important private estates. The focus of the trip was three major tastings however, specifically focused on the three DOP classified wines of the region. The diagram right shows these with the single variety DOCG of Aglianico del Taburno at the top of the tree, the single variety Falanghina del Sannio DOP below and the more general Sannio DOP that includes all other zones, varieties and blended wines of the Sannio region. IGP wines may be labelled either as Benevento IGP or as Beneventano IGP.



Aglianico del Taburno DOP

These deep red Aglianico wines are produced in communes clustered around Mount Taburno. Like the Aglianicos of nearby Vulture and Taurasi, the wines can have significant ageing potential. Aglianico has been cultivated in the area for centuries, is harvested late well into October, and it is often referred to locally as 'Amaro'. Riserva wines have a minimum of three years in oak, and rosé wines have also enjoyed DOCG status since 2011. There are some extraordinary old Aglianico vineyards in this region: watch this one-minute film from inside the 200-year-old vineyard of Angelo Piazza and Lucia Caporaso.



[CLICK HERE](#) for tasting notes on 30 wines from Aglianico del Taburno

Falanghina del Sannio DOP

The region of Campania can boast 95% of all of Italy's plantings of the Falanghina variety, but Sannio alone makes up 80% of the total, mostly coming from the north and west of the region. Five million bottles of the DOP Falanghina del Sannio are produced annually. This is another ancient variety, its name thought to derive from the Latin word 'falangae', a pole that supported the vine. Falanghina is a very popular base for Spumante wines in the region, as well as still white wines of course, and some dessert wine versions. It is said to be well adapted to soils across the region, but particularly on less fertile hillsides.



[CLICK HERE](#) for tasting notes on 23 wines from Falanghina del Sannio

Sannio DOP

Eleven thousand hectares of grapevine cover Sannio, including over 60 varieties with such speciality grapes as Sommarello, Sciascinoso and Agostinella that are unfamiliar to UK wine lovers. The story here has been repeated in countless wine growing areas around the world, of farmers turning to producers, with far more estates bottling their own wine today than ever before. But the two big coops of La Guardiense and Taburno, plus a smaller third coop, are responsible for around 80% of all wine production.



[CLICK HERE](#) for tasting notes on 18 wines from Sannio DOP

Mustilli

With their headquarters inside the ancient walls of the beautiful town of Sant'Agata dei Goti, the Mustilli winery is family-run and I was greeted by winemaker Ana Chiara Mustilli (right). Her father was the first to bottle the region's DOP white wine, Falanghina, in 1979. As you will see in the tasting notes, Ana was incredibly generous in opening one of the last four bottles of their 1977 Greco for my visit. She explained that Sant'Agata was essentially an island in ancient time, sited on a volcanic plinth and connected to the 'mainland' by a drawbridge. Today the streets are still filled with wild orange trees, a legacy of the farming that dominated the centre of the medieval town. The estate is certified organic, and whilst winemaking moved out of their 17th century cellars in 2002, the ancient cellars can still be visited and the building above now operates as a guest house and restaurant too.



[CLICK HERE](#) for tasting notes on 11 wines from Mustilli

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