



The Judicial Palate

By **Ciro C. Poppiti III, Esquire**



The Joys of Southern Italy

*Editor's Note: We are pleased to bring you another guest column by oenophile **Ciro C. Poppiti III**, this time about Southern Italy and its wine. May his words bring you thoughts of sunny beaches and delicious wine. See you in September!*

—*Michael Sensor*

I recently had the great pleasure of being in Naples, Italy. Naples is known for pizza and cake, and every third person is named **Ciro**. As you can imagine, it was fantasyland for me.

Naples lies on the Mediterranean Sea, about two hours south of Rome by train. The city stands as a gateway to Pompeii and the Amalfi Coast and even more so, the Mezzogiorno. “Mezzogiorno” is a term which loosely refers to southern Italy, meaning all the land below Rome, including the islands of Sicily and Sardegna.

In an effort to increase sales beyond Pinot Grigio and Chianti (both of which come from northern Italy), the wines of the Mezzogiorno have been heavily promoted and advertised in the past few years.

I have welcomed that promotion—chiefly because the wines of the Mezzogiorno are *unique*. And, unique is such a valuable word in today's market.

Wine is beginning to taste too darn similar. Witness Cabernet Sauvignon and the phenomenon of wine ratings from critics. There are so many brands of Cabernet Sauvignon; even more so, the nuances which define one Cabernet from another can be very confusing. As such, gatekeepers in the wine industry—people like distributors, store owners and restaurateurs—use critic ratings as a guideline of what they should buy. The most prestigious ratings are published by *Wine Spectator* as well as *The Wine Advocate*, which was founded by renowned critic Robert Parker.

Once there were winemakers in California, in France, and in Italy, each of whom made Cabernet Sauvignon in a different style. But, then these winemakers realized that the best way to sell their Cabernets was to get a high rating from a critic like Robert Parker. Well, Robert Parker generally likes “big and bold” Cabernets. So guess what? These winemakers all began making Cabernets that were “big and bold.” Gone was artistry, so too any sort of differentiation which characterized one appellation from another.

In contrast, the wines of the Mezzogiorno have still retained that artistry. Indeed, the grapes are so unique from what we know—varietals like Primitivo, Aglianico, and Nero d'Avola—and because they are unique, they have not succumbed to mass-market parity. These wines are for the most part boutique, estate grown and waiting for the adventurous palate to discover their ancient merits.

I always enjoy talking about Italian wines with my friend and colleague, Frank Pagliaro, proprietor of Frank's Union Wine Mart in Wilmington.

“There has been a sea of change in the viticulture of the region in the past few years,” says Frank. “Instead of trying to compete with the famous wines to the north, the new wave of southern Italian winemakers are often embracing the traditions of the region. The climate there is warmer than is ideal for wine grapes, resulting in robust, fruity flavors that tend to lack the subtlety and layers of wines produced in cooler regions. What does all that mean? They're just flat out delicious!”

Here then are our collective favorites from the Mezzogiorno:

- Planeta Chardonnay (Sicily, \$40). A favorite of *Wine Spectator* and critics in general, this full-bodied Chardonnay consistently ranks as one of the top whites in all of Italy.

- Zaccagnini Montepulciano (Abruzzo, \$12). The grape Montepulciano from the state of Abruzzo produces the classic version of Italian table red. (Kindly do not confuse this with a wine called Brunello, from town of Montepulciano in the state of Tuscany, which is one of the continent's premiere offerings.) The brand Zaccagnini uses a clever gimmick by attaching a piece of the vine to each bottle.

- Pisara Primitivo (Puglia, \$12). Primitivo is aptly-named, being one of the ancient varietals that was probably brought to the Italic peninsula by the Greeks. There has been renewed interest in Primitivo after the revelation that it is a genetic twin of the American standard bearer, Zinfandel.

- Marisa Cuomo “Furore” Riserva (Campania, \$40). The name “Furore” comes from the area where the Cuomo winery is located, nestled in the Amalfi Coast. The wine is a blend, 70% Piediroso and 30% Aglianico. It reminds me of the music of Benny Goodman, that is to say, silky, sophisticated, with a lot of kick in each lick.

Adds Frank on a final note: “Mezzogiorno varietals like Nero d'Avola and Negroamaro tend to be sturdy things, while those made from the Primitivo grape show a cushier profile. Recently, technology has remade the whites of the region along the crisp, fruity lines the global market now insists on—a happy turn of events when dinner is fish so fresh it needs only a moment under the broiler and a squirt of lemon to take your breath away. Enjoy the flavors of summer!”

Ciro C. Poppiti III, is a partner in his family firm of Michael A. Poppiti, P.A. He is also the director of wines and spirits with NKS Distributors, Inc., a Delaware beverage wholesaler. For the purposes of disclosure, Frank's Union Wine Mart is a customer of NKS; moreover, NKS sells the Pisara brand.