

Robert Camuto: Letter From Europe

Calabria Rocks

Can Cirò be Italy's next big thing? A new generation is on the move



Photo by: Robert Camuto

Cataldo Calabretta is part of a new wave transforming Cirò's native Gaglioppo grape.

Camuto from Europe

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Cirò is the kind of wine place I want to root for.

This ancient Calabrian wine region in sun-baked southern Italy offers a gorgeous countryside of ancient olive trees and undulating vineyards planted with a unique and often-misunderstood red grape—Gaglioppo. What's more, a new generation of winemakers is working to turn Cirò from a backwater to an appellation worthy of our attention.

"It's a moment of foment," says 40-year-old enologist and local producer Cataldo Calabretta, walking through a freshly plowed clay-limestone hillside vineyard.

Cirò, located in the ball of the foot of the Italian boot, encompasses some 5,000 acres of vineyards that stretch from the hillside-perched medieval village of Cirò down to the Ionian Sea where the tacky, modern coastal town of Cirò Marina sits. Though Cirò does produce white wines and some unusually dark rosés, most of the vineyards are planted to Gaglioppo—a highly tannic grape that's been genetically linked to Sangiovese.

Up until recently, Cirò was known as a hub for growers who sold grapes throughout the region for home winemaking. That and some not-very-exciting supermarket wines.

But in recent years, a younger generation at larger producers, such as Librandi and Vincenzo Ippolito, has turned to producing better wines in smaller quantities.

"Our idea was that it was more interesting and more inspiring to make quality wine," says Gianluca Ippolito, 39, who took over Vincenzo Ippolito a decade ago with his brother, also Vincenzo. They cut production at the 250-acre estate by more than half, to the current level of about 70,000 cases, while taking more care in the vineyards and winery.

"In Cirò, we are only at the beginning," he adds.

Meanwhile, peers from grower families—armed with agronomy and enology degrees—have turned to winemaking. Cirò is now home to nearly 50 wine labels, including a string of boutique organic estates like that of Calabretta, a fourth-generation grower who began bottling wines with the 2012 harvest and now produces about 3,000 cases.

Good Cirò reds can be fine food wines that pair deliciously with spicy cuisine like Calabria's. Because young Gaglioppo tends to be astringent and bitter, the challenge has been to smooth out its rough tannic edges.

"Gaglioppo—like all beautiful things—is difficult to cultivate," says Giuseppe Ippolito, 51, who in 2007 stopped selling grapes to his cousins to make his own small label, Du Cropio, now at 3,000 cases.

For Giuseppe, one of the keys to silkier Gaglioppo is extremely ripe grapes. He removes shading foliage from the vines in late summer—allowing the grapes to bake in the hot Calabrian sun—and is one of the last vintners to harvest, in mid-October. "The more sun Gaglioppo has, the better it is," he says.

He also leaves these grapes to macerate for up to a month to polymerize the tannins into bigger, less-bitter molecules and thus make them more palatable.

Though not everyone agrees with those specific methods, they do agree that Gaglioppo is a grape that needs time on the vine and in the winery.

"Everyone has their own system," says Francesco Maria De Franco, 50, an architect turned winemaker who produced his first vintage in 2008 under his 'A Vita label, about 2,000 cases. "The only thing you can do to soften the tannins is wait."

For Cirò reds that means years in tank, barrel and bottle before release. Local DOC rules require more than two years of aging for Cirò riservas, but most new-wave producers wait three or four years to release their top reds.

Will Cirò rock the wine world? That won't likely happen tomorrow. But Cirò wines are increasingly available on American wine lists, where they provide some bargains and southern spice.

"Twenty years ago, there wasn't much quality," says Giuseppe Ippolito. "Now we are arriving—slowly, slowly."

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