

The cellar at Contucci, one of the first commercial producers of Vino Nobile di Montepulciano.

noblesse oblige

BY ANTHONY GIGLIO

Order!
[Gavel bangs over raucous voices.]
Order in the court!
Will the real noble wine from Montepulciano please stand up?

I admit that I am an insane wine geek. As one, I sometimes imagine that the people of Montepulciano, the beautiful hill town southwest of Siena in southern Tuscany where the excellent wine Vino Nobile di Montepulciano is produced, would like to drag before a judge the unknown person who gave the most important grape grown in the neighboring Abruzzo region the same name as *their* town. If you didn't know that the two wines Montepulciano d'Abruzzo and Vino Nobile di Montepulciano are made from entirely different grapes from different regions, don't worry, you're not alone. So pay attention—this is good stuff.

The confusion stems from the fact that the name Montepulciano refers to two very different things that both have to do with wine. It is first and foremost the name of an old town that produces the respected, if not widely known, wine called Vino Nobile di Montepulciano. But it is also the name of the grape used in the affable and widely popular wine from Abruzzo. Paradoxically, the town of Montepulciano doesn't grow the Montepulciano grape. Anywhere. Who does? Mainly grape growers in Abruzzo, where wines are bottled under the government-designated moniker "Montepulciano d'Abruzzo." The bigger issue, though, is that the "Montepulciano" wine you're likely to find in restaurants is this cheaper, often mass-produced one from Abruzzo. In defense of this inexpensive wine, you can find decent bottles at remarkably low prices. But there's no comparison to the depth and complexity of Vino Nobile di Montepulciano wines, which, next to their more prestigious neighbors in Chianti and Montalcino, are very reasonably priced in their own right. Got that? Good—stay with me.

It might seem a bit ironic that the wines from Montepulciano bear the name Vino Nobile di Montepulciano but are made primarily with the Prugnolo Gentile grape, the name of the local clone of Sangiovese. Well, Montepulciano is technically situated within the large Chianti sub-zone of Colli Senesi. While the foundation of all Chianti wines is, of course, the Sangiovese grape, because the wines of Montepulciano are considered superior to the rest of Colli Senesi, they were given their own appellation and are called what translates into English as Noble Wine from Montepulciano. In fact, Vino Nobile di Montepulciano was one of Italy's first DOCG-certified wines. »

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suggested bottles

The everyday red Montepulciano d'Abruzzo is a far cry from Vino Nobile di Montepulciano. These bottles have a refined complexity, thanks to a noble grape and long aging requirements.



BOSCARELLI
Vino Nobile di Montepulciano, "Nocio dei Boscarelli," 2006
From Boscarelli's best vineyard comes this floral, berry-scented wine spiked with currants and spice flavors on a medium-bodied core. Kudos to consulting oenologist Maurizio Castelli. $87.



LA BRACCESCA
Vino Nobile di Montepulciano Riserva, "Santa Pia," 2005
Oenologist Lorenzo Dongarrà crafted this beautiful single-vineyard wine that brims with floral aromas, black cherry fruit and minerally earthiness, balancing elegance and power perfectly. $36.



LODOLA NUOVA
Vino Nobile di Montepulciano Riserva, 2001
Ruffino's riserva is a complex, concentrated effort that starts out with sweet, spicy aromas, hits notes of leather and earth mid-palate, and finishes with a gaminess that suggests exactly how to pair it. $35.



POLIZIANO
Vino Nobile di Montepulciano, "Asinone," 2006
Poliziano's single-vineyard Asinone is full-bodied in every way, but all of its earthy, smoky, licorice nuances are balanced by rich, round, sweet tannins that make it perfectly ready to drink. $65.



SALCHETO
Vino Nobile di Montepulciano, 2005
Made from 100 percent Prugnolo Gentile grapes, this boutique winery's offering is huge, loaded with powerful waves of dark fruit flavors, earthiness, spiciness and age-worthy tannins that will hold up for years. $38.

All of this juicy info still doesn't answer the most obvious question: Why on earth is Abruzzo's best grape called Montepulciano, the name of a town nearly 200 miles away in a different region? Well, just as the Italian word perché means both "why" and "because," so is the answer here: Because. Nobody knows. What we do know, however, is that these two wines have little in common beyond both being red.

So, how to keep them straight? Consider their translations when looking at their labels: Montepulciano d'Abruzzo means Montepulciano from Abruzzo, while Vino Nobile di Montepulciano means Noble Wine from Montepulciano. In Abruzzo, some winemakers have suggested that that faraway town should just change its name and move on. But as far as most people in Montepulciano are concerned, the word "noble" in the title of their wine conveys, well, a title of royalty that puts their wine in a higher class than that other wine from that other region, far, far away.

Montepulciano's more famous neighbors, namely Chianti and Montalcino, might beg to differ, but Montepulciano is secure in its position as one of the three best regions in Tuscany, even if it's the least known and is often confused with that other wine with a similar name. But the reason it's overshadowed by Chianti is interesting, especially when you consider that the two regions grew up side-by-side in the 1920s and '30s, when producers like Contucci and Fanetti began commercial production, and both received government recognition as areas of quality (by way of DOC status) back in the 1960s. Somehow, Chianti stepped forward to become the iconic Italian wine of the 1970s (for better or for worse clad in the straw-bottomed bottle known, ironically, as the fiasco), while Vino Nobile di Montepulciano shied away from the limelight until the 1980s, when producers like Avignonesi and Poliziano came onto the scene.

Montepulciano's austerity actually makes sense when you compare its production rules to those of Chianti. While Chianti and Vino Nobile must be made from 80 percent and 70 percent, respectively, of their local Sangiovese clones, it is in the aging requirements where they truly differ, and where Vino Nobile di Montepulciano shows its maturity (pun intended). Only the riserva from Chianti Classico matches Vino Nobile's required minimum two years of maturation before release. But unlike Chianti, which makes no specifications for the type of vessel used in aging, the Vino Nobile regulations are quite precise. The winemaker has a little flexibility, but the two-year aging requirement mandates that, if the wine matures less than 18 months in wood, then it must spend at least one year in wood and six months in bottle.

If you didn't know that Montepulciano d'Abruzzo and Vino Nobile di Montepulciano are made from entirely different grapes, don't worry, you're not alone.

Over the past 20 years, Montepulciano's development has mirrored that of nearby Montalcino as gambles by big-name investors have paid off handsomely, delivering much-needed money to the region in exchange for the rising popularity of the Vino Nobile di Montepulciano name. Biggest among them were the SAI insurance firm with their purchase of Fattoria del Cerro, and Fazi-Battaglia from the neighboring Marche region, who set up Fassati. Local gentry with deep pockets followed, including legends like Ruffino with Lodola Nuova, and Antinori with La Braccesca. Then came the smaller producers with big intentions, like Salcheto, Il Macchione and Valdipiatta—all adding to the mix with great results. They keep coming, too. According to Poliziano's Federico Carletti, "there were only 20 producers when I joined my family in 1980—today there are 70 producers in Montepulciano. That should tell you about the direction we're moving in." In other words, the verdict is in: Vino Nobile di Montepulciano is the real deal. □