Q&A with Winemaker Massimiliano Apollonio

Mattie John Bamman (August 18, 2009)



An interview with Apollonio Winery's Massimiliano Apollonio, one of the top 5 winemakers south of Rome.

Massimiliano Apollonio, thirty-nine, is leading Italy's new tradition of winemaking with innovative wines of consistently high quality. Apollonio Winery's long list of wines—over twenty-four—reflects the unique environment of the Puglia region in Southern Italy and its outstanding native grapes. Underground rivers and island-like crosswinds from the Adriatic and Ionian Seas give Puglia wines a distinctive terroir. The reds are soft yet leathery, friendly yet austere, more New World than Old World. At this year's Vinitaly wine convention, Apollonio's 2001 "Divoto" (70% Negroamaro, 30% Montepulciano) was awarded the Grand Gold Medal in the category of "Still Wines with Denomination of Origin" of six years or older. The category is one of the most sought after at the event; that a Puglia wine won the award signals the region's emergence on the global scene.

Massimiliano is busy and loves it. He works closely with his brother, Marcello Apollonio, who focuses on marketing, to make Puglia's Primitivo and Negroamaro grapes household names. When I visit him at the winery, he is dealing with 30,000 wine labels written in Chinese. In order to be successful in the Chinese market, the labels need to specify that Apollonio's wine is not made from rice.

We go for a stroll through a nearby vineyard planted with Negroamaro, Puglia's most important native grape, and Massimiliano quickly leaves the office behind. A dilapidated farmhouse from the 1700s stands among almond trees, peach trees, and cacti. He takes me on a tour inside and points out where the animals were once housed and fed. In this land of plenty, Massimiliano Apollonio is at home, and free to do his experiments on grapes.

Mattie Bamman: What makes Puglia's environment one of the best growing areas in Italy?
Massimiliano Apollonio: I think Puglia is very good for the red grapes. For white it is a little more complicated; our specialty is very big red wines. Before, people thought that to create great red wine you needed hills and south-facing slopes, but thanks to Californian and Australian companies, people see that what you need is sun. Puglia is particularly good at creating wine of high quality for low prices.

MB: Is that because of high yields?
MA: Yes. You must consider that Puglia is the primary or second-largest producer of grapes in Italy. The problem is that we are not good in Puglia at selling our wine. We are good at producing wine, but not selling it. Now this is changing.

MB: Which grapes are best suited for Puglia?
MA: We are lucky because we have many indigenous varieties. We have Negroamaro and Primitivo especially, but we also have black Malvasia from Lecce and Brindisi, and Aleatico. I think that people that use international varieties in Puglia are crazy. But it is still easier at this moment to sell Cabernet Sauvignon than Negroamaro. We are lucky because, whenever you taste a wine from Puglia, you always understand that it's from Puglia.

MB: You make many varietals and blends. You experiment…
MA: Yes. Perhaps I like to experiment too much. At this moment Salento rosè is very famous; Salento is probably the king of rosè. My father always used the best grapes for rosè. We are producing a little experiment called Fanali—but actually it is very traditional. We are bringing back a tradition that is no longer prevalent. We are producing a rosè like my grandfather used to produce. We allow the skins of the grape to remain in contact with the juice until we bottle it. For example, the rosè we bottled in 2007 stayed one year in barrique with the skins. It produces a more structured rosè.

MB: You seem like a man with a vision. Is there one wine that you want to create that you have yet to create?
MA: Ah, yes. I would like to produce one white in particular: a Bianco di Alessano. Alessano is a city close to Lecce but the grape is no longer cultivated prevalently. I would like to produce an important white like the red, like Primitivo and Negroamaro, and I think it will be the Alessano. The primary difficulty is finding the original grape, because the Bianco di Alessano you taste in the market now is not the original. The original was grown alberello [a style of growing vines un-trellised, very common

in Puglia, so that the vines resemble small trees and produce low grape yields of high quality], and you can no longer find that. However, I must find it.

MB: What do you think is the future of Puglia wine?
MA: If this interview were last year, I'd say it would be wonderful, but right now there is the economic crisis. However, I think this crisis is worse for other regions because Puglia is famous for quality wines for low prices, and I think that this is the type of wine people want. They want moderately priced wines, and we are not the cheapest or the most expensive. Also, we never sell our wine for 100 euro and then change our price to 38 euro, as other regions do. Doing this confuses the customer, who of course asks, "Why did I pay 100 euro before and now only 38?" We have always sold for a fair price and people respect the region for that.

MB: I've certainly appreciated it. And now one of the top awards at Vinitaly…
MA: I was very happy because it was in a category that the more famous wines like Brunello di Montalcino, Amarone, and Barolo usually win. And so, winning this prize in that category means a lot. It was the best gold medal of all gold medals, so it feels pretty good. There is new potential here.

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