



Pirro Varone: Organic Wine In Southern Italy

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Piero Ribezzo, owner of Pirro Varone Winery, talks about roses, cellphones, and organic wine among his Primitivo grapevines in Manduria, Italy.

Pure and simple, [Pirro Varone Winery](#) [1] has a hands-off philosophy of winemaking; it's not what the winery does, but what it doesn't do, that takes so much effort. Each and every wine that Pirro Varone produces is guaranteed to be 1) a mono-variety, 2) made from grapes sourced from a single vineyard, and 3) aged in stainless steel; the winery does not possess a single wood barrel. "We tried it once, but, after four days, we couldn't take it anymore," says Piero Ribezzo, owner of the winery, whose family history in the area dates back to at least 1587.

Piero and I meet at 6pm in Manduria to visit the family villa, which was home to Pirro Varone during the 15th Century. The doorway of the historic villa is the winery's logo, featured on every label. Inside, icons of the Virgin Mary and other religious figures are built into the walls, and the rooms smell of antique furniture. When Piero retires, he will move his family from Torino (Turin), in the north of Italy, into the villa. For now, he splits his time between Torino and Manduria, spending at least one week each month among his grapes. World-renowned winemaker Cosimo Spina heads the winemaking operations at Pirro Varone.

When we reach the Pirro Varone vineyards, the sun begins to set, throwing a spectacular eruption of rosy red across the vines. We pull up to a tiny cottage in the middle of the grapes, and Piero opens a bottle of his 2008 "Scirocco" rosato (100% Negroamaro). The rosé is clean and dry with wonderful structure. Negroamaro, Puglia's most important native grape, has so much intrinsic character that it requires only a short maceration of 2-8 hours to extract its flavors. We carry our glasses to the roof of the cottage, where Piero points out the various vineyards: Negroamaro, Primitivo, Fiano.



Rose bushes are planted at the ends of the rows—but their purpose is more than aesthetic. “The roses warn us of maledictions such as oidio and malbianco, and other types of mildew,” explains Piero. “The mildews affect the roses first, and when we see these effects, we have time to protect the vineyard.” Fungus is a major danger in Puglia’s hot, sun-soaked environment, and if it were not for the crosswinds flowing from the Ionian and Adriatic Seas, the grapes would simply rot on the vines. This technique of organic farming seems more like simple common sense than ingenuity when Piero explains it, but such techniques are what made the winery a certified organic wine producer distributed by Delinat. Delinat is a German distributor of organic products throughout Europe. The Swiss organization Bio-Inspecta certifies all of Delinat’s products. At the time of writing, Pirro Varone wines are not available in the United States.

When our glasses of rosato are finished, Piero descends for another bottle. He returns with a rose that he’s clipped for my girlfriend and a bottle of his Primitivo di Manduria. The Primitivo di Manduria DOC is one of the most famous in Puglia. The Primitivo grape was determined identical to Zinfandel by scientists at the University of California in Davis in 1973, but it wasn’t until the 1990s, when advertising firms recognized the potential for marketing Primitivo wines in relation to Zinfandel, that Primitivo made a splash in the United States. The history of Manduria’s fame within Italy goes back much farther, although not without controversy.

“The Manduria name was born from vino sfuso [bulk wine],” explains Piero. “The vino sfuso came from zones all over Salento, but because the railroad came to Manduria to pick up the tanks of sfuso, all of the cisterns were labeled ‘di Manduria.’” This resulted in many people believing that all the wines were from Manduria. Says Piero, “It was wrong to say ‘Manduria, Manduria’ when the wines came from all these different wine-growing zones.”

The Manduria region is, of course, deserving of its fame, because of both its unique native grape varieties and its ideal growing conditions. The vineyards of Pirro Varone are located near the top of a dramatic slope that ends in the Ionian Sea. The growing region is known as the Surani—one of the best in Manduria. The clay topsoil is red from a balance of potassium and iron, and underneath, it is rocky and composed mostly of limestone, which results in excellent drainage. The Pirro Varone Primitivo di Manduria shows the effects of Puglia’s environment. It is soft and round, with deep, dark fruit and a juicy friendliness that makes it very approachable. The spice is polite rather than forceful, though the finish lasts and lasts. The tannins are mild, and its succulence makes it a great accompaniment to barbequed meats or lasagna.

In total, the winery grows 7 varieties of grapes: the native grapes Primitivo, Negroamaro, Malvasia Bianca, Fiano Minutolo, and Grecale, and the international grapes Syrah and Grisola. Grisola is similar to Barbera, the grape commonly found in Piedmont, “but not the same,” says Piero emphatically. Grisola is a rarity in the south of Italy, and it comprises Pirro Varone’s “Le Vigne Rare” Rosso Salento.

The winery’s “Le Vigne Rare” Bianco uses the little known but highly expressive grape Fiano di Pugliese Minutolo, which is similar in some regards to Trauminer, only with more body. The grape is highly prized on the Salento peninsula because it pairs well with seafood, particularly gambieri crudi, or raw prawns, a specialty of nearby Gallipoli. The use of the name “Fiano” is causing some alarm among winemakers in the Campania region, which has a DOCG classification that features the Fiano grape. Winemakers in Campania say that Fiano is native only to Campania, and that the Pugliese variety is not truly Fiano. Winemakers in Puglia counter that their Fiano is native to Puglia and has just as much right to the name. Whether or not one is the true Fiano, the grapes create distinctly different wines. Campania’s Fiano, which is used in the delicate Fiano di Avellino DOCG, is much lighter in color and character, and is more floral. Fiano Minutolo has greater structure and more body.



After the sunset, we descend from the rooftop in the half dark and accompany Piero to his beach house, a few kilometers down the road. On the beach looking over the Ionian Sea, Piero Ribezzo serves espresso instead of wine. He introduces his wife and his daughter and, at one point in the evening, playfully chides his daughter when her cell phone interrupts the quiet mood. “I don’t like it at all,” says Piero. “Cell phones are being made so that they can do anything—email, texting... who knows—maybe they’ll make movies.”

“Or wine,” I say.

Piero smiles. “Now that would be a sad day, wouldn’t it?”

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[1] <http://www.pirrovarone.com/eng/index.html>