

Regional profile

Calabria

Little known by tourists and wine lovers alike, Calabria is emerging as a source of distinctive wines made from unique local grapes. Walter Speller shines a light on the area's pioneering producers





CALABRIA, THE MOUNTAINOUS, rugged toe of the boot of Italy, is still so off the radar that not even Federdoc, the Italian institute for quality wines, knows how many hectares of vines are planted there. Stefano Coppola, winemaker at Ferrocinto situated high up in the Pollino Mountains north of Cosenza, estimates it is only 12,000ha. 'I have only deduced that from the number of hectares the EU law allows us to plant each year,' he says. In 2017 that was 120ha, or 1% of its total surface.

While its isolation has kept large parts of vineyard land unspoiled, years of neglect eroded Calabria's wine production, making it unknown to most wine lovers. But with some 350 local varieties, Calabria is well positioned to cater for the growing international thirst for anything indigenous, while its beautiful, rugged landscape remains one of Europe's least explored.

Ferrocinto is one of a growing number of estates to push Calabria back into the spotlight. Founded in 1849 by the Salturi barons, the actual turnaround came in 2000

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when vineyards were replanted with local varieties, especially the potentially great red Magliocco Dolce. In 2017 Coppola's strong belief in local vines led to the planting of an experimental vineyard with 110 cuttings from unknown varieties. The lack of a viticultural and oenological research institute or government investment are the main reasons why Calabria still lags behind the rest of Italy, so private initiatives like Ferrocinto's are crucial in moving the region forward.

In the vineyard two distinct Maglioccos were identified: rustic Magliocco Canino and the tannic yet elegant Magliocco Dolce. What Nebbiolo is to Piedmont, Magliocco Dolce is to Cosenza. Magliocco Dolce gives this part of Calabria a strong and much needed identity and signals a shift away from French varieties.

Between 2011 and 2017 Calabria's vineyard area increased by 2,000ha, stemming a >

Left: vineyards below the peaks of Calabria's Pollino Mountains, north of Cosenza province

Photograph: Mick Bisco/Corbis

decline that began at the end of the 19th century, when poverty triggered a wave of immigration, and phylloxera destroyed swathes of vineyards.

Vineyard decline

Through abolition of the *mezzadria*, or sharecropping system, in the 1960s large landholdings were confiscated, cut up and sold to those who had previously only worked the land. Calabria's post-war agriculture was characterised by swapping one crop for a more profitable one, from grapes to mandarins, peaches to kiwis. EU subsidies to encourage growers to pull out vines, in an effort to drain the European wine lake, were the final blow.

Viticulture withdrew itself to hillsides, which proved a blessing in disguise, because here vineyards benefit from cooler night-time temperatures in summer, as well as granite soils high in mineral content. But in the process intimate knowledge about viticulture was almost annihilated. Historically the Calabrians were famous for their sophisticated viticulture, going back to the Bronze Age when the Enotri, the original inhabitants of Calabria, controlled the area. When the Greeks arrived in what would become Magna Graecia they found a highly advanced viticulture.

In the Pollino Mountains you can still find traces of this ancient viticulture. The youthful Giuseppe Calabrese, a true *garagiste* who vinifies part of his crop in his garage due to lack of a cellar, keeps tradition and historic

varieties alive. Calabrese dropped out of agricultural school, preferring to work in his grandmother's vineyards instead.

'I planted my first vines when I was 10,' he says, explaining the irresistible call of the vines. Parts of his vineyards are still trained using the ancient *alberello* system: bush vines with branches tied to stakes. The local white *Guarnaccia* grape as well as *Magliocco Dolce* are Calabrese's protagonists. Since the time



Calabria: six names to watch

'A Vita

Francesco de Franco is one of a handful of young *Cirò* producers who strictly adheres to organic protocols. Due to their highly original expressions of the red *Gaglioppo* grape, these producers have been dubbed '*Cirò* Revolution'. De Franco makes complex, long-lived wines that defy the region's undesired label of rustic and tannic – a reputation that led to a controversial change of rules to allow the blending of international varieties. His complex *Riserva*, which stays on the skins for 40 days, clearly shows the fallacy of that change of rule.

Ferrocinto

No newcomer, *Ferrocinto* was founded in 1658, but the estate's potential has only



been revealed since 2000 with the replanting of its vineyards, located in the Pollino Mountains at 600m above sea level, with a strong focus on indigenous varieties – notably *Magliocco Dolce*. Research in its experimental vineyard has unearthed a further 20 local varieties that are completely unknown and potentially interesting. Winemaker

Stefano Coppola makes blends of *Magliocco Dolce* and the more rustic *Magliocco Canino*, while cask samples of pure *Magliocco Dolce* show huge class.

Giuseppe Calabrese

Agricultural college drop-out Giuseppe Calabrese planted his first vines at the age of 10. He took over old vineyards from his grandmother in 2007 and only started to bottle under his own name in 2013. The tiny plots, scattered around the Pollino Mountains – several of which still have *alberello*-trained vines – have been tended organically, and the approach in the cellar is completely hands-off. Calabrese's pure *Magliocco Dolce* is energetic and a little wild, while his finely chiselled tannins call to mind *Nebbiolo*.

his grandmother owned them, vineyards have been tended organically and his white and red are vibrant expressions of the rugged area. Because of Calabrese's unconscious decision to work in traditional ways, the wines are spot-on for wine lovers in search of authenticity.

Growth and investment

At 650m in a beautiful windy spot in the hills of La Sila, a nature reserve in the centre of Calabria, Demetrio Stancati of Serracavallo has just planted 6ha of Magliocco Dolce. A newcomer to wine, he decided to plant French varieties as well as Riesling in his family's vineyards after a trip to France in 1995. Recognising the huge potential of this area, Stancati's first efforts immediately drew the attention of the Italian press in 1997.

Being one of only two producers in the area, he soon realised that strength lies in numbers. To access EU funding he mobilised 15 people, who didn't have a lot of wine knowledge but had plenty of business know-how, and founded a consortium. In 2005 some €20 million was amassed, half from an EU loan, triggering vineyard plantings and cellar constructions.

Now, in 2017 there are more than 40 estates here, selling bottled rather than bulk wine. 'In the past the region's restaurants refused to list Calabrian wines,' Stancati tells me. Nowadays it is considered a sign of ignorance if a restaurant doesn't offer any.

The region of Cirò is on the eastern side of Calabria, on the coast of the Ionian Sea, where

vineyards are planted on gentle slopes near the town of the same name. It produces a totally different style of red wine based on Gaglioppo. The pale, tannic Cirò red is regularly misunderstood, not least by local producers, who recently decided to blend in French varieties in the erroneous belief that it would increase the grape's appeal. The first winery to produce an award-winning Gaglioppo-Cabernet blend years ago was Librandi (though it must be noted that this staunch Gaglioppo defender never gave up the production of a pure Cirò). ➤

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Above: the barrel room at Serracavallo in La Sila

Photograph: Nina Dargatzis

Librandi

No one has done more for Cirò than the historic estate of Librandi. The release in 1988 of Gravello, an award-winning Gaglioppo-Cabernet Sauvignon blend, paved the way for wider international recognition of the winery's Duca Sanfelice Riserva Cirò, which helped shine a spotlight on the denomination. Librandi was also trailblazing in its research into local grape varieties, planted in its experimental vineyard, and was one of the first producers to realise the potential of Magliocco Dolce, evidenced by the release of Magno Megonio back in 1998.

Serracavallo

A newcomer to wine, Demetrio Stancati planted French grape varieties on his family's estate in 1995, because, as he admits, this attracted the attention of

journalists at a time when very few people had heard about this wild corner of Calabria. The vineyards of his Serracavallo estate are situated in the windy hills of La Sila, a rugged nature reserve, where large diurnal temperature differences render wonderfully supple wines. Several Serracavallo wines are



Serracavallo

blends of Magliocco Dolce and Cabernet Sauvignon, but the most original rendition is pure Magliocco Dolce.

Terre del Gufo

Eugenio Muzzillo is fast advancing as a Magliocco Dolce specialist. All 5ha of vineyards on his Terre di Gufo estate, which sit at 500m altitude, have been planted with this variety. As one of the very few winemakers located here, the production of Muzzillo's Magliocco keeps the tiny, historic Donnici denomination alive. So far, he has been unable to label his Magliocco Dolce as such because - due to a bizarre quirk of fate - only the rustic Magliocco Canino has been officially registered in Italy's national register of grape varieties. Apparently, official correction is underway - not least because of Muzzillo's work.