

The Wine of Rome: Frascati and Fontana Candida

Charles Scicolone (July 31, 2011)



Fontana Candida Challenges the Common Perception that Frascati is a Wine to be Only Drunk Young.

The Porchetta trucks were the things I remember most about my first trip to Frascati. Burly men in grease-stained aprons would cut slices from the whole roasted pigs flavored with herbs, salt and black pepper. We would order it to go on hard rolls known as rosette. The sandwiches were delicious! Long tables were set up where you could sit to eat your sandwich and you were given a free glass of very young Frascati wine to drink. "Drink Frascati young, it does not age", I was told by all the Romans I met.

So you can imagine my surprise when I received an invitation to a wine tasting at Eataly stating,



“Fontana Candida invites you to challenge the common perception that Frascati is a wine to be only drunk young”. They were not joking: among the wines to be tasted were a 2001 and 1997 Frascati--I had to go

The speaker was Mauro Merz head winemaker at Fontana Candida. He said that he comes from a family of wine producers in northern Italy's Trentino, a region famous for its white wines. He spoke in Italian and Lars Leight, a vice-president at Banfi translated.

Mauro said that the blend for Frascati includes only native grapes: Malvasia Puntinata del Lazio, Malvasia di Candia, Trebbiano Toscano, Greco, Bombino Bianco and Bellone.

He made it clear that he is loyal to tradition and his goal is to make wine that expresses the territory and the tradition from the area in which it comes. There is a movement on the part of some of the Frascati producers to add 10% international grapes such as Sauvignon Blanc to the blend. He said that this addition would not help the wine. The producers that want to do this are taking the easy way out by adding international aromatic grapes to the blend, as it would be much easier to make wine using these grapes. If this is done, he said, the wine would lose all sense of place and its “personality”.

He also feels that Trebbiano Toscano should be removed from the blend because it was added in the past when producers were more interested in quantity than quality. He feels that the percentage of Malvasia in the blend should be increased as it is a better and more typical grape of the area.

Fontana Candida has its own vineyards but they buy grapes from 210 different growers. Mauro made it a point to say they buy grapes and not juice. In 2005 they started a vineyard-based project to help their growers. They hired a top agronomist and he acted as a consultant to the growers free of charge. Fontana Candida also paid the growers above market price if they produced healthier and more mature grapes.

The grape growing area of Frascati is shrinking. It is very close to Rome; in fact some of it falls within the boundaries of the Eternal City. If a grower can make more money selling his land than he can growing grapes then the grapes will be replaced by apartment houses. In order to keep the growers on the land, Fontana Candida will pay as much as 40% higher than the market price. Mauro said that the company feels that they are not just dealing with individuals but with families that have to make a living. Because of this, more and more producers are bringing their grapes to them. Quality comes above all else when it comes to the grapes, he said.

There were eight wines in the tasting:

Frascati Superiore Secco 2009 DOC Lazio - Made from 60% Malvasia Bianca di Candia, 30% Trebbiano and 10% Malvasia del Lazio. The grapes come from hillside vineyards in the DOC zone located in the province of Lazio, in the communes of Frascati, Monteporzio Cantone, Grottaferrata, Montecompatri and Rome. The grapes are harvested between September and October and immediately transported to the cellar. Vinification takes place in temperature controlled stainless steel tanks and are gently pressed. The wine is fermented and aged in stainless steel and then bottled under nitrogen to protect its freshness and fruit. The wine has aromas and flavors of white peaches and apples. It has good acidity and minerality with a long finish and a nice aftertaste. \$10. This wine would be perfect with a porchetta sandwich.

Vigneto Santa Teresa Frascati Superiore 2004 DOC It is 30% Malvasia Puntinata del Lazio, 30% Malvasia di Candia, 30% Trebbiano Toscano and 10% Greco. The grapes come from a 32-acre vineyard of which seven and a half are planted in Malvasia del Puntinata del Lazio and four acres in Greco. It is in the locality of Santa Teresa, in the commune of Rome. The 30 year old vines are trained using the cordone speronato system at 985 feet above sea level on soil of volcanic origin with a southern exposure. Mauro called it a “light soil that looked like talcum powder”. They are not allowed to irrigate so the roots of the vines have to go deep to find water. Mauro said that 2004 was a difficult vintage because there was a lot of rain and humidity. There is a selective picking of the different grape varieties according to the rate of ripening. Malvasia was picked first followed by the Greco and then the Trebbiano. The Trebbiano and Greco were gently pressed followed by a classic



white wine vinification. The Malvasia was cold fermented on the skins for 12 hours. After a natural clarification the must was fermented with selected yeasts and left to rest in temperature controlled stainless steel tanks until bottling in early spring. Mauro called this an elegant wine. The wine had white peach aromas and flavors and a hint of apple and smoke. It has good minerality, acidity and a finish and aftertaste of almonds. Mauro made an excellent wine in a difficult year.

Vigneto Santa Teresa Frascati Superiore 2001 DOC

Grapes, Vineyard and Vinification same as the above.

Mauro said that 2001 was an excellent vintage.

In the area they have an Indian summer which helps the grapes to ripen later

This a 10 year old Frascati and it was not showing its age. Round, balanced and elegant, white peach aromas and flavors with grapefruit on the palate and a long finish and lingering aftertaste.

Vigneto Santa Teresa Frascati Superiore 1997 DOC

Grapes, Vineyard and Vinification same as the above

1997 was an excellent vintage in all of Tuscany

The 1997 was much like the 2001 but with aromas of white peach and fuller bodied and a touch of smoke.

Mauro said something very interesting about the older wines. He said that he did not know if they improve with age but they stay in "character" as they mature. He gave Gregory Peck and Sophia Loren as examples, both were great when they were young and remained the same as they matured.

Luna Mater Frascati Superiore DOC 2010 Made from 50% Malvasia di Candia, 30% Malvasia del Lazio, 10% Greco and 10% Bombino. Harvesting began in the final 10 days of September and continued until the end of October, producing perfectly ripe, healthy grapes with a golden color and high sugar content. The grapes are grown in selected hillside vineyards ranging between 650 and 1,300 feet in the communes of Frascati and Monteporzio Catone. The volcanic soil is loose, porous and dry but not arid. It is rich in potassium, phosphorous and microelements. Spalliera, Guyot and Cordone Speronato training systems are used. First selected bunches of mature grapes are picked by hand. Then the best grapes from each bunch are chosen. Mauro made it very clear that the grapes are transported in small baskets directly to the cellar so that they will be in perfect condition when they arrive. The wine has floral aromas with hints of white peach and honey with bitter almond in the finish and a very pleasing aftertaste.

The vinification of the grapes for the Luna Mater is a process that he invented and takes place in three different stages. In the cellar the grapes are separated into two batches. This he called the "modern" stage. The first batch is cooled immediately prior to a gentle pressing to ensure maximum aromatic qualities. The second batch is destemmed, cooled and fermented in contact with the skins to produce a marked varietal character. This is done without oxygen to keep the grapes fresh. After 6-7 days the skins were removed, any longer then this and there would be too much extract.

Three days later a small quantity of the best grapes were destemmed by hand and added whole to the fermenting must with their own natural yeast for bouquet and flavor. The berries remain in the must until the end of February. Mauro said that the alcohol helps extract tannin from the skins and pits.

The wine is aged in 10HL acacia wood barrels. According to Mauro, this is the best wood for the Malvasia grapes. He made the point that the barrels were not toasted and were steam folded. He did admit that in the 2007 vintage, the wine did see some toasted barriques. He felt that barriques did not give him the type of wine he wanted to produce and they are not traditional. He now uses 10HL



barrels. He is thinking of using 20HL untoasted acacia barrels in the future.

The bottled wine is then left to age in bottles laid horizontally in the ancient tufa tunnels under the Frascati hillsides.

Mauro said that Luna Mater means Mother Moon; it reflects the wine's close ties to nature and the 50 old vines that are used to make this wine. He also said that the moon was very important in farming but did not go into detail.

All of the Luna Mater wines are vinified in the same way.

Luna Mater Frascati Superiore DOC 2009. Harvest began in the second half of September and continued until the end of October. The fruit was healthy, mature, and rich in sugar and gold in color. The amount of fruit gathered was somewhat lower than average. This is a full bodied wine, well balanced with white peach aromas and flavors, bitter almond in the finish and a lingering aftertaste. \$23

Luna Mater Frascati Superiore DOC 2008. The harvest period was sunny and dry and the quality of fruit was excellent. The quantity of grapes picked was even lower than in 2007. Mauro said that 2008, like 2007 will be remembered in Frascati as one of the best vintages of the past decade. This is an elegant wine, well balanced, with aromas and flavors of white peach with a long finish and pleasing aftertaste.

Luna Mater Frascati Superiore DOC 2007. The quantity of grapes harvested was lower than the preceding year. It was an outstanding vintage. This is the wine where Mauro used some toasted barriques but I did not notice it. It seemed lighter in style with good minerality and acidity. It was showing no signs of age and was drinking very well.

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