



Monte di Grazia Winery-An Organic Winery in the Clouds

Charles Scicolone (July 13, 2009)



Wine, Beans Called "Lizzard Eggs" and Hard Bread. A Walk in the Clouds- Azienda Agricola Biologica Monte di Grazia Winery.

It was raining on the Amalfi Coast as we left Praiano headed toward Amalfi. We were driving to the Monte di Grazia winery in Tramonti and the traffic was terrible because of the holiday weekend. We passed Amalfi and the turnoff for Ravello, and then back down to the beach and Maiori and Minori. Here the traffic became lighter as we began our ascent toward Tramonti and the Monte di Grazia winery. Up and up we went until we were some 500 meters above sea level--it looked like we were in



the clouds.

Laurie Howell of [Amalfi Life](#) [2] had put us in touch with her partner, Giocondo Cavaliere, who is from the town of Furore. He is also the [Slow Food](#) [3] representative in the area and became interested in the Monte di Grazia winery because they make excellent wine and are certified biological (organic cultivation). Also Sabine Emmy Eller, a friend of Giocondo's, was with us. She suggested we stop to visit a cheese producer, Anna Dora Campanile whose cheeses are not sold commercially. You have to go there to buy it. There were two large posters on the wall one stating that the place was Caseificio Artigianale and the other simply stating Tramonti -- Il Paese della Pizza. Michele brought Mozzarella, Fior di Latte and Provola. We then made our way to the winery.

When I saw the hillside vineyards I was taken by surprise. The vines were very old; in fact I have never seen a vineyard with such old vines that were still producing. Some were over 100 years old and most of the others seemed to be more than 50 years old. The vines were planted in the tendone method. This is the traditional method for planting vines in Southern Italy. The leaves are trained to form a canopy that protects the grapes from the sun. It is like a pergola with an overhead trellis from which the grapes hang down. In one of the vineyards an old vine looked like it was holding up the whole tendone. The poles that hold up the tendone are made of chestnut wood from trees in the nearby hills and the vine "branches" are attached to the tendone by willow shoots.



We were met by Alfonso Arpino, a doctor who took over his family's vineyards as a hobby, though they soon turned into his passion. He took us to his winery, the smallest I have ever

been in. The winery produces only three wines and the total production is less than 6,000 bottles. After a very quick tour, Dr. Arpino took a bottle of his 2007 white wine and said we could drink it upstairs. He led us to a comfortable and modern apartment above the winery that he rents to travelers. The terrace had a panoramic view of the surrounding mountains. Since it was still raining we tasted the wine inside. The white, called Monte di Grazia Bianco, is made from local grapes that are handpicked, like all his wines.

Three grape varieties are used:



Pepella has only a few large grapes on the bunch, the rest being the size of peppercorns, though they all ripen at the same time.

Ginestra, the name comes from the yellow-green color which is similar in color to the gorse flower.

Bianca Tenera (Biancolella). The wine had hints of citrus with undertones of pear and almond a very nice mineral character and good acidity. The white, like his other two wines, are fermented and aged in stainless steel tanks.

I liked the wine so much that I stopped tasting it and began to drink it, and Dr. Arpino just smiled.

Dr. Arpino invited us to stay for dinner in his home, where we would taste the other wines. His wife



Anna prepared farro e fagioli bianchi, a dish of farro and beans, in this case uova di lucertole or lizard's egg, one of several types of beans that grow in the vineyards. The beans and farro are cooked separately, and then are simmered in a tomato sauce seasoned with rosemary. It was hearty and delicious. Dr. Arpino said that the coexistence in the vineyard of both vines and beans improves both. The vines shade the beans and the beans provide nitrogen for the soil which improves the vines.

With the farro and beans we drank the Monte di Grazia Rosato made from 70% tintore grapes

which have dark pink juice (hence its name) and 30% mosiro, even more obscure, an ancient red variety from Campania. This grape also has pink juice, though not as dark as the juice from the tintore, and with a more delicate skin. There was no skin contact in the making of this rose, just the juice from these two grapes to get a dark rose wine with good fruit and hints of strawberries and blueberries. It had good mineral character and acidity with a dry finish and aftertaste.

Anna also had made pizza di scarole, a double crust pizza stuffed with escarole, anchovies, olives, capers and garlic. Michele remembered her mother making the same escarole pie. There was also a frittata di zucchini and local chesses and salami.



The last wine was Monte di Grazia Rosso. We tried both the 2005 and 2006 vintages made from 90% Tintore and 10% Pediroso so-called because it has a red triple-branched stem that looks like a dove's claw.

The 2005 was drinking very well with red fruit, hints of black pepper and spice. It had a long

finish with a great after taste of red fruit and black pepper. The 2006 was very different with more earthy aromas, fruit and only the slightest hint of black pepper. It needed more time to develop. These wines have the qualities that ensure they will last for a long time. All of the wines had very good acidity so they are perfect with food.

We had such a wonderful time with Alfonso and Anna that we invited them to come to dinner at our rented house in Praiano. Giocondo wanted them to see the great view of the sea and Positano. They brought a large assortment of local cheeses and hard bread known as pane biscottato. Anna and Alfonso showed us how to dip the slices in water to soften it. It was great with the cheese and salami. Michele loved the whole grain flavor and texture and even took some back to NYC with her. She plans to serve it with the first ripe tomatoes of the season.



With the meal, we drank the 2007 Monte di Grazia Rosso which has the same characteristics as the 2005 but needed more time and the 2008 Bianco and Rosato. Meeting Alfonso and Anna was a very special experience. It has been a long time since I encountered a new winery that has left such an impression on me. At this point, the only place that you can find the Monte di Grazia wines in this country is at [Balthazar Restaurant in Soho](#) [4].

[5]

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