

THE SOURCE
MADONNA DELLE GRAZIE
AGLIANICO DEL VULTURE CRUS AND AGLIANICO BIANCO



The extinct volcano Monte Vulture, whose eruptions shaped the soils of northern Basilicata

I will relentlessly contend that Aglianico is one of the world's most undervalued red grapes, one of its most unexpectedly versatile, and perhaps one of its most misunderstood. Madonna delle Grazie's range of six Aglianicos is alone worthy of that claim. They are a one-stop shop for a full range of Aglianico options: white, rosé, medium-light red, a black but elegant red, and two longer élevage wines both built in a classic style for extended aging that still deliver upon opening young.

But, white Aglianico? The Latoracca brothers, Paolo and Michele, both enologists with the latter a university professor of enology, make what is now a very sought-after white wine from this famously black grape. We brought in ten cases the first year, expecting little more than a handful of novelty purchases, but people went crazy for it. There's a big thirst for it, and with only 300 cases each season against demand for well over 1,000, we're still short by a wide margin.

Their white Aglianico, Leuconoe, comes from a single high-altitude plot in a parcel called Montalbo, planted to a lighter-colored biotype that Paolo describes as "a kind of Aglianico" with larger berries. Paolo isn't entirely sure what to call it, in fact. The biotype may technically be Aglianicone, a related but officially distinct cultivar recognized in Italy's national catalog of vine varieties, though he's

quick to shrug off the distinction: “At the end, we are talking always about the family of Aglianico.” The larger berries yield a greater proportion of free-run juice before meaningful skin extraction occurs, and even when vinified as a red wine this biotype produces noticeably less color than the darker selection used for Messer Oto, the lighter red wine in the range grown on more limestone cobbles from the erosion of the Apennine mountains than volcanic materials.



Liscone and Bauccio share an older biotype chosen roughly sixty years ago for entirely different reasons: not concentration, but productivity and balance, favored for its large, generous clusters at a time when reliable yield mattered more than power. After World War II, much of Italy, especially in vast and sparsely populated areas like Basilicata, quality wasn't a guiding principle; it was about survival.

The biotype for Leoconoe gives Paolo a head start and was likely the lightbulb that went off in his head for a white wine from Aglianico, but harvest timing is the second major factor. He now picks earlier than he did with Leuconoe's first vintages, not only to retain more acidity, fresher flavors, and even lower alcohol, but because “the texture of the skin is not well ripe.” The skins still have what he calls “a kind of green ripeness” and release far less anthocyanin during pressing. “The first free-run juice is completely white,” he says. As pressing continues, the must gradually develops a faint pink hue, but much of that color naturally settles to the bottom of the tank during fermentation and *élevage*, leaving behind a remarkably pale wine.

It's not trickery at all. “It's about chemistry,” Paolo says with a laugh. It's the same principle that underlies any blanc de noirs.



Paolo Latoracca in our home in Salerno, where we lived throughout 2018 and 2019.

Paolo also emphasizes the relationship between color, low pH, and sulfur dioxide. “The sulfites protect the wine and mitigate the color,” he explained. At Leuconoe’s naturally low pH, even modest additions are effective at slowing oxidation while temporarily suppressing the trace pigments that remain after pressing. As the protection from sulfites gradually diminishes during bottle aging, the wine slowly evolves from nearly white toward pale ivory or old soft gold color.



Paolo and Michele outside the Jewish Catacombs of Venosa, among the most important surviving Jewish archaeological sites in southern Italy.

Paolo and Michele’s first attempt back in 2012 blended Aglianico with a touch of Malvasia, and neither brother liked the result. The following year they tried again with 100% Aglianico, and the quality caught them by surprise. They’ve made Leuconoe every year since, refining it a little further with each harvest.

Leuconoe isn’t just novelty, either. It’s a complex southern Italian white wine that holds its own among far more famous Italian white varieties. Wine textbooks and classrooms traditionally teach that red wine’s complexity comes from the skin, not the juice. I’ve tasted the world’s most noble red grapes pressed quickly to make still white wines before, and in many cases, there’s a hollowness, a complexity gap between the white version and what the same grape would normally deliver as a red. Leuconoe is a rare exception. Aglianico seems to be the rare exception. The juice is already complex without the skins involved. It doesn’t taste diluted like many white wines made from red grapes. If

you didn't already know this wine, the likelihood that you'd guess it was blanc de noir would be well beyond the expectations from even the world's most talented Master Sommeliers.

What fascinates me isn't simply that Madonna delle Grazie can produce a white wine from Aglianico. It's that Leuconoe, Messer Oto and, to a lesser degree, Drogone reveal how incomplete the world's understanding of the grape has become. What's more is that for decades, growers responded to international tastes (and perhaps by local tastes, too) by selecting biotypes capable of producing darker color, greater concentration, and more powerful wines. Those became the reference point for what Aglianico was supposed to be. Softer-colored, more delicate biotypes were largely left behind because they didn't fit the prevailing market. Even if Messer Oto is made in an elegant way and is predominantly red more than black, the biotype belongs to that newer regional chapter specifically to chase concentration, while the biotype behind Liscone and Bauccio reaches back to an older, quieter ambition of balance and dependable production, not power.

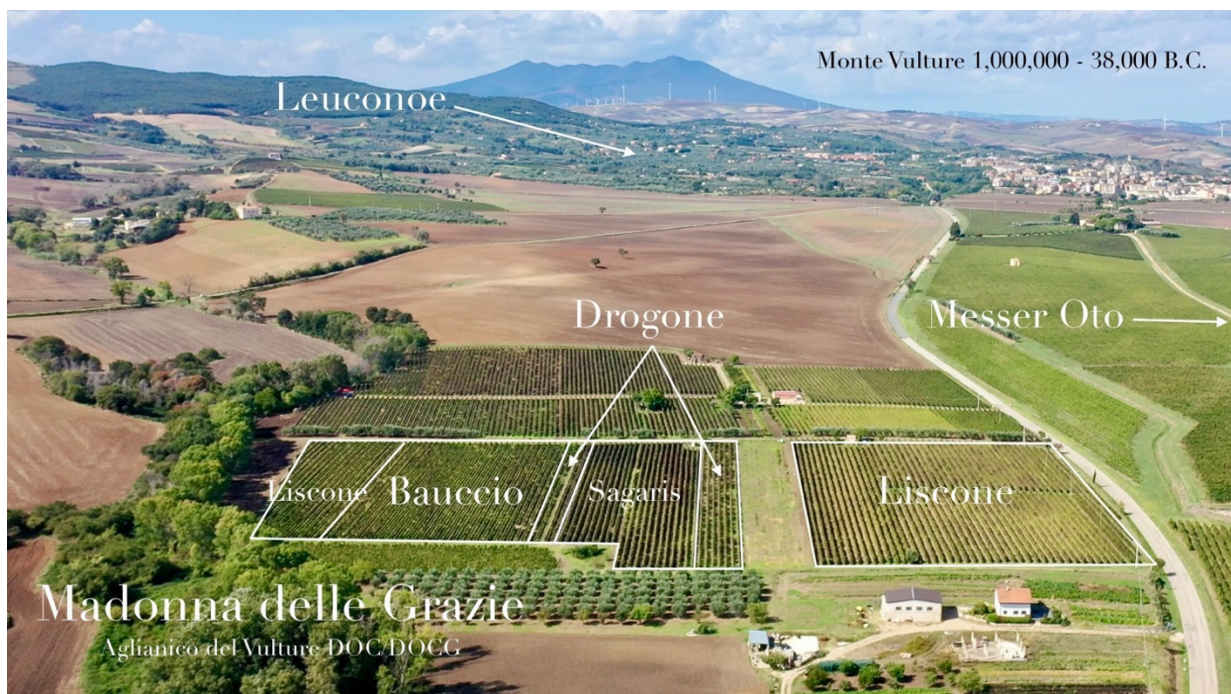
Madonna delle Grazie has quietly built its philosophy in the opposite direction. The lighter-colored biotype behind Leuconoe also finds expression in their rosé, though a second rosé made from young vines in the Iatta parcel near Liscone draws from a different lineage entirely. Messer Oto and Drogone, meanwhile, carry their own distinct selections apart from Leuconoe altogether: Messer Oto's biotype was chosen for the opposite qualities, smaller berries and thicker, polyphenol-rich skins built for color and structure, while Drogone's biotype is older still, an ancient, slow-ripening selection unrelated to either of the others. Rather than chasing maximum extraction, the Latoracca brothers have embraced selections and crafted specific wines around the assets each biotype and terroir that naturally produce less color while still achieving remarkable tannic structure, vibrant acidity, and extraordinary longevity. Drogone, harvested at the end of October and sometimes into November, demonstrates that delicacy of color and structural ambition are not opposing ideas. In exceptional vintages, when the tannins achieve full physiological ripeness, these gentler biotypes can produce wines of immense authority without relying on overwrought cellar practices to beef them up.

Perhaps that's why Aglianico may be misunderstood to many. The market came to celebrate it as one of Italy's great bruisers, but based on the multitude of biotypes that wasn't always the identity these volcanic and limestone hills expressed. Horace, himself a native of modern-day Venosa, then Venusia, wrote lovingly of the wines of this landscape nearly two thousand years ago, though the grape would not acquire the name Aglianico until the end of the fifteenth century. As Jancis Robinson notes in *The Oxford Companion to Wine*, it was known as *Ellenico* or *Ellenica* until that time.

Any grape variety can be planted almost anywhere, but terroir reveals where it reaches its highest expression.

If Aglianico ultimately became the dominant variety of Basilicata, it was almost certainly because generations of growers recognized qualities that reached well beyond color and power. What Madonna delle Grazie demonstrates is that those possibilities still exist. Their range also reminds us that in this remarkable polycultural agricultural landscape dominated by one red variety, people have never lived by powerful red wines alone.

The Latoracca's principal vineyard, Liscone, is home to their top three Aglianico del Vulture wines: Liscone DOC, Bauccio DOC and Drogone DOCG, all grown within rows of each other, the Drogone flanked by the other two. Black to dark brown volcanic clay soil dominates, with varying levels of topsoil depth and soil grain composition of rock, sand and clay. The first wine from the vineyards, bottled as "Liscone," displays a dark nighttime Chagall-esque dreamscape that captures perfectly the wine's characteristic calm and cold earthy characteristics and darkness of the overall profile. The soil is a mix of dark/black clay and coarse sand from the blondish-gray, extremely friable sandy tuff (lithified volcanic pyroclastic debris—consolidated ash rather than cooled lava), giving the soil a slightly lighter shade of blackish grey. There are uncountable variations of different structures of tuff, depending on the volcano, each specific eruption and each individual deposition. Bauccio has less tuff, and the soil is darker and deeper before the tuff bedrock further below the surface, making for a wine with a more substantial body and material from the start. Drogone, what I consider the most compelling of this already compelling range, is made in only special years where the season allows for this micro-parcel to ripen very late; thus far, they've bottled seven vintages between 2003 and the newly landing 2016. Located between the Liscone wine parcels and Bauccio, the balance of the soils is between the two: deep, black clay and a medium depth of topsoil before the tuff bedrock.



Despite Liscone being the central hub of the Latoracca's Aglianico red wine range, the starting point is Messer Oto, a more red-fruited than black Aglianico del Vulture. The site is like a roller-coaster slope, with a big dip in the center and uptick on the other side. Principally grown on sedimentary limestone soils from Appenine erosion from the west, the rootstocks were planted in 2002 and grafted using the chip-bud grafting technique in 2003.

By contrast, the Messer Oto biotype was selected deliberately for concentration and structure with more color, tannin and sugar potential than the others. Paolo remembers the grafting happening that

February, during a rare snowfall, using material his grandparents recalled from a vineyard once known for producing wines of unusually rich structure.

In the middle range of red wines is the duality of Messer Oto and Liscone. With all the labels designed by the third and youngest Latoracca brother living and working in Canada as an architect, they highlight the overall impression of the wines in bottle and are connected to various monuments, edifices and artifacts of ancient Venosa. Built in the middle ages and named after the medieval Fontana di Messer Oto designed with a repurposed Roman lion rock sculpture, Messer Oto's white label and its daytime motif relates to the wine's brighter and more festive style.



The two-hectare parcel that makes up the 2021 Aglianico del Vulture 'Messer Oto' is the family's youngest vineyard in Venosa's Fiano di Camera district, inside the Aglianico del Vulture DOC. A location 420 meters above sea level on volcanic soils full of limestone cobbles bears this highly expressive and often bright Aglianico, surrounded by more beastly dark brethren grown from Liscone. The grapes are a massale selection of small berries with thicker skins and elevated polyphenol content that result in a deeper red color: a distinct separation from the near-black hue typical of the cantina's older vines rooted in black volcanic clay. These grapes are typically picked in mid-October and are the first brought in for red wine production. While the climate is consistent across their holdings, this site ripens earlier due to its better drainage than parcels like Liscone, Bauccio, and Drogone.

Fermented and aged entirely in stainless steel, Messer Oto is perhaps their most versatile red. Its time in steel preserves its bright fruit, earthy mineral tones, and vivid acidity, with a nose filled with red and purple fruits and a palate both lifted and slightly dense. The 2021 vintage was remarkably balanced with typical spring conditions, a dry July, and helpful rains in August and September. No harvest rain meant clean fruit and optimal timing. From 2020 onward, they've been adjusting to climatic shifts by picking a bit earlier, resulting in what Paolo Latoracca describes as "surprisingly low pH levels—sometimes even lower than in cooler years." In Messer Oto, this translates to a freshness that underscores its drinkability and makes it a standout for those seeking a more playful summertime-like expression of Aglianico.

While the 2020 Aglianico del Vulture 'Liscone' is only the second Aglianico up in the cantina's range of reds, it can easily rival many producers' flagship bottlings. Liscone is made from 30+ year-old vines that sit at 430 meters—just three kilometers from Messer Oto—but harvested a week later,

typically at the end of October. The difference lies in the volcanic rock-derived clay soils, which retain more water and slow ripening, not in air temperature or exposure.

Few compelling wines feel this unmade. With every vintage, Liscone drinks like fruit that grew wild in black volcanic clay and arrived untouched in the glass whole. It's fitting that its dark label carries the color of the actual clay of Liscone when wet, a crescent moon over the hillside as the wine itself feels like something poured at night, born of the same quiet Vulture has offered since long before Horace wrote of wines like these from Venosa. That it costs so little feels almost like an oversight.

The 2020 season had a regular winter and spring, a summer without heat spikes or extended dry periods, and helpful August rains that set the stage for a strong finish. September brought sun without searing heat, making it ideal for tannins that teeter between fine and gritty. The resulting wine is floral, fruit-laced in darker shades, white pepper, and impressively integrated with equal parts structure and charm. The extra time before release allowed it to settle into its form, and it was firing on all cylinders when it first arrived last year and continues to blossom. Liscone is a complete expression of clay-grown and sand-kissed Aglianico with a dangerously low price for what's in the bottle. I tasted the 2021 version in May of this year. It will arrive in a few months. It's also a gloriously pure terroir wine.



Bauccio is the wine that Paolo and Michele talk about most, and what they believe to be their flagship. It takes its name from the fifteenth-century Prince of Venosa, Pirro del Balzo, whose legacy includes the unexpectedly impressive and well-kept castle that still anchors the town's historic center and appears on the wine's label. It's also the wine in the range that finds a touch more global

influence than the others. One of two wines to receive any new oak, it reflects the same dialogue between local heritage and broader horizons embodied by the castle itself. The brothers keep the wine in the cellar for several years, allowing their handprints to integrate before release.

Tasted two weeks after arrival in July and again the following week, the 2020 Bauccio has the best initial impression of all Bauccios I've had. It's always darker than Drogone (a biotype difference to start with), and immediately takes me back to Basilicata's earthy color palette of volcanic charcoal, black clay, red clay, limestone off white, beige tuff, pastel green sage, wheat gold, exotic green volcanic flora and vine-filled arid countryside. Its nose starts with pencil graphite and wood, wet black earth and sand, a drying attack and a big iron, metal, mineral palate charmed up with licorice and creamy back palate. The second glass jumps an octave, digging deeper into black earth, effusive resinous plants, and chalky texture. I'm so happy the wood notes don't exist in this wine like in the past, and I hope that stays true to each bottle opened. In August 2019, I visited Paolo and teased him about too much new wood aromas on the 2013, 2016 and 2019 Bauccio because I don't think new wood aromas and flavors belong on gorgeously savory wines. The third glass continued its upward aromatic trajectory with more eucalyptus/peppermint/resinous plants, marinated cherry, amaro bitter and spice and citrus peel, dessert flower. This is a Bauccio that I know they've been working toward and yet another giveaway on price for this level.

On that same trip to Basilicata in August 2019, I traveled with Enrico Nicoletta, who had just retired from his post as the Italian specialist for importer/distributor, Wine Warehouse. There are few people who know Italian wine to the level of Enrico. We went to the visually stunning limestone cliffside city, Matera, and happened to be there while the James Bond film, "No Time To Die" was being filmed for the famous lovers' spat, Aston Martin destruction scene. At a restaurant in one of its iconic troglodyte dwellings, we greedily nabbed not one, but two consecutive bottles of 1999 Mastroberardino Taurasi Radici Riserva for a mere 60€ each, twenty years after vintage date! Even if this is a grower that wouldn't normally fall into my radar, this bottling is always worth a look, and these two were exceptionally fine wines. Next to them we had Madonna delle Grazie's 2009 Drogone for a whopping 45€—incredible deals on all three sides. We knew Madonna's price would be fair, but 60€ for the Riserva was a damn near theft, and I think the restaurant realized it after we ordered them.

The side-by-side comparison between Taurasi's restrained power and elegance grown in the cooler and wetter inland hills of Irpinia over limestone and volcanic soils, and Drogone's finely textured elegance from Venosa's warmer and drier volcanic landscape of sandy tuff and black clay, offered a glimpse into two distinct worlds separated by barely fifty miles as the crow flies. It was a compelling display of two faces of Aglianico inside the classically made wines of southern Italy. And while Bauccio is often the headliner in the minds of Paolo and Michele, Drogone has always been mine.

Like all the cantina's labels, Drogone's has a special local connection. Drogone d'Altavilla was the Norman prince whose rule ushered in one of Venosa's most prosperous periods and saw the beginning of the great Abbey of the Santissima Trinità, whose unfinished extension (the Incompiuta) appears on the label.

What makes Drogone special is first the genetic makeup and second, the vines planted around 1960. It's an ancient massal selection more compact cluster and more red than black tinted grapes of Aglianico selected by the Latoracca's grandparents. The deciding factor each year if Drogone is

produced is whether this unique, late-ripening ancient biotype achieves the extra-phenolic maturity to properly ripen the seeds before the heat of summer is exhausted. With an extended fermentation maceration that typically lasts 40-45 days, the seeds “must be absolutely perfect, or the tannins will be ever so slightly coarse,” Paolo said. “It really has nothing to do with the quality of the vintage, but only if the seeds can reach maturity in those last weeks on the vine.”



*Top: The streets of Venosa reveal the region's geological duality: limestone from the Apennines alongside the volcanic rock of Monte Vulture.
Below: Paolo easily breaks apart a piece of Monte Vulture's porous volcanic tuff.*

Tasted mid-July next to the 2020 Bauccio, the 2016 Aglianico del Vulture Superiore “Drogone d’Altavilla” barely seems ten years old despite its lighter but vibrant paler color. It spent six years in affinamento—two in steel, nearly four in 500-liter French oak split 80% old and 20% new. But the color has as much to do with the biotype itself as with the years in barrel; this is a naturally lighter-skinned Aglianico, and the wood aging and four years in bottle only draws that paleness out further. The nose of the first glass is ferrous like Bauccio but redder oriented than black, but only by a bit. Ten years past vintage year, its mid-palate is beginning to find its stride, and the elegance would surprise even those familiar with this variety; it plays in the color range of G. Mascarello Nebbiolos and I Fabbri’s high-altitude Lamole Chianti Classicos—an admittedly unusual comparison for an Aglianico, but an honest one—much more than the typical Aglianico. I like the inverted mineral notes at the start: first layer is mineral and ferrous, then beige and red earth, then sun-wilted pink and red flowers and gentle soft light and dark fruits. The palate is chalky, metal and generous but on a tight frame. The third glass grows in a different way than Bauccio’s third—horizontal expansion rather than Bauccio’s verticality—with a deeper dig into the earth while Bauccio climbs further above ground. There’s nothing sweet in these wines, which is one of their most rewarding qualities, only finely tuned textures that vibrate with savory but charming characteristics.



At the end of this bottle’s day, I happened to bring it to a surprise birthday party put on for me by my sister—sneaky girl. Among family were most of my Source team, and my old group of local winemakers and wine professionals. Open for six hours already, all who tasted this wine understood its relevance and quality. Drogone is a wine that people should experience.

Despite Aglianico's brutish tendencies in Basilicata, the Latoraccas manage to craft a range of elegantly rustic red wines that highlight their beautiful terroir while quietly challenging its historic reputation for power and rusticity above all else.