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Grape Archaeology

The Resurrection of Arneis

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In 2017 it's hard to believe that Italy was once an emerging wine region, but there was a time when perception of Italian wine quality in this country couldn't have been lower. When I was growing up Chianti was poured from straw baskets, in restaurants with red and white checkered tablecloths. It was the cheapest wine on the list (or on any list, for that matter). The American perception of Chianti began to improve only when the Italian wine law was changed to allow for the inclusion of "foreign" grape varieties, notably Cabernet. Today it would be difficult to find a Chianti Classico with no Cabernet in the blend, and many Tuscan IGTs are fragrant with the aroma of Syrah.

Several Italian wine regions resisted that trend, preferring to take the riskier course of glorifying obscure regional grape varieties. Some even went back in time and resurrected varieties that had once flourished and were now nearly extinct. I call them

grape archaeologists. Mastroberardino was the pioneer in the south, reintroducing white wines such as Greco and Fiano and making history with their Aglianico-based Taurasi DOCG. In the north, the breakthrough grape was Arneis. Traditionally grown in the hills surrounding the village of Roero, it was brought back into circulation about 50 years ago as the result of efforts by two pioneering wineries, Bruno Giacosa and Vietti.

Those two properties still argue about who was the first to resurrect Arneis, but the evidence points clearly to Vietti. The late winemaker Alfredo Currado, sometimes called “the father of Arneis,” devoted a great deal of effort to the grape variety from 1967 onward. It was not an easy task, since the grape is difficult to grow: the yield is low, the wine can easily become oxidized and overripe, and it is prone to powdery mildew in the vineyard. In the Piemontese dialect, the name translates as “little rascal.”

The 2016 Roero Arneis (\$22) is Vietti’s 50 anniversary bottling. It has a pale straw color and a nose fragrant with the aromas of citrus and minerals. In the mouth, the acidity is literally mouthwatering and nearly effervescent, enhancing the flavors of lemon and ripe melon and enticing the taster to take another sip. As the acidity recedes, a rich core of peach and apricot flavors linger from the midpalate onto a long and seductive finish. This is a wine of unexpected substance, one which will enhance a wide range of dishes and add a glimmer of excitement to your day.

Mark Spivak is the author of *Iconic Spirits: An Intoxicating History* (Lyons Press, 2012) and *Moonshine Nation* (Lyons Press, 2014); his first novel, *Friend of the Devil*, is now available from Black Opal Books. For more information, go to amazon.com.