

REGIONAL PROFILE

CAMPANIA

On the radar

Alessandra Piubello takes us on a journey to a region in southern Italy with a unique range of wines and a breathtaking variety of indigenous grapes

Aerial view of the vineyards in Irpinia, known for white wines produced from the Fiano and Greco grapes and Aglianico for the reds

The famous film, “The Great Beauty” by Oscar-winning, Campania-born director Paolo Sorrentino, opens with a Louis-Ferdinand Céline quotation: “Travel is so useful, it ignites the imagination...”

So, let's set off for Campania, this land of great beauty in southern Italy where the air is filled with the fragrance of the sea and lemons. The landscape is as lively and original as its inhabitants, where the ground trembles with the energy of dormant volcanoes. Vesuvius-Monte Somma, the Phlegraean Fields (“The area of the universe where volcanoes, history and poetry have left the most traces” wrote Madame de Staël) and Ischia-Monte Epomeo, and the now extinct Roccamonfina and Procida-Vivara. A region with varied landscapes and stories: from the beautiful coastline to the islands and the Apennines; from archaeology to ancient history; from nature to culture. A territory that stretches for 300 kilometres, from Roccamonfina in the north to the border with Basilicata in the south.

Campania is a complex mosaic of different areas characterised by unusual heterogeneous soil and climatic conditions capable of giving the wine-growing territory aspects that are reflected in impressive wines of remarkable variety. Wines whose often unique character cannot be traced back to standardised models nor replicated in other areas, expressing typicity and a sense of belonging. Wines that are a surprising, unexplored heritage that has not yet been expressed to its full potential. Wines that have an ancient and compelling story to tell the world.

The variety of soils is equally remarkable. Broadly speaking, it could be said that intense volcanic activity has generated magmatic soils, ranging from the sands of the Phlegraean Fields with pre-phylloxera vines, to the green tuff of Ischia, the lavas of Vesuvius and to grainy, limestone-rich soils with marls and clays on the surface in the Apennine zone. The geographical areas of the wine are 79% hilly (between inland and coastal areas), 17% mountainous and only 4% are on plains. Campania is ‘Terra Felix’, (literally, Happy or Lucky Country), known for its fertile soil, in which plant biodiversity flourishes. Varieties of vines have survived here for almost three millennia, as revealed by finds at Pompeii and Herculaneum.

Greek and Phoenician settlements in Campania were among the main gateways for many oriental varieties before they spread to various other parts of continental Europe. The best wines of antiquity decanted by Cicero, Pliny, Martial, Tibullus, Roman authors and statesman, and many others, had their home in Campania. It is said that the ancient Romans, and especially emperors, had a particular fondness for Campania wines.

The region boasts 26,000 hectares under vine with the production of red wines (54%) prevailing over whites (46%). There are four DOCGs (Fiano di Avellino, Greco di Tufo, Taurasi, Aglianico del Taburno), and 15 DOC wines. Large wineries are flanked by innovation-oriented entrepreneurial businesses and small, family-owned companies with an artisanal approach, that

Vineyards of Sannio



focus on the special characteristics of sub-areas or single vineyards.

Let's begin our journey from the north, in the area above Caserta. Here we meet Galluccio DOC on the northern slope of the Roccamonfina volcano (prevailing grape varieties: **Falanghina** for whites and **Aglianico** for reds) and Falerno del Massico DOC (with **Aglianico**, **Piedirosso**, **Primitivo** for reds and **Falanghina** for white varieties) on the southern slope of the extinct volcano. Viticulture in the Falerno del Massico production area has ancient origins dating back to the Greek-Mycenaean colonisers. Falerno, the wine of kings, was the most expensive and coveted wine of the Roman Empire, acknowledged by many ancient writers and historians for its absolute pre-eminence within the entire viticulture of southern Italy.



Extreme viticulture along the Amalfi coast, a Unesco heritage site

A little further east, we find the Casavecchia di Pontelatone DOC, based on **Casavecchia**, a local native grape variety with very typical characteristics. Also worth mentioning in the Caserta area are the white and red **Palagrello**, which are undergoing a revaluation process. Mentions of **Asprinio** grapes in the area go as far back as the 15th century and are part of the Aversa DOC, known for its particular form of cultivation, the *aversano alberata*, by which the vine is 'married', that is, trained to climb up poplar trees, reaching heights of up to 15 metres. Efforts are being made to maintain and safeguard this method that dates back to the ancient Etruscans. **Asprinio** often has a citrine and sharp acidity, which makes it good for sparkling wine production.

Continuing along the Neapolitan coastal landscape, we come to the Phlegraean Fields, a volcanic territory with centuries-old vineyards. Here, the **Falanghina** grape, a variety that differs from the 'Beneventan type' which is widespread in the Benevento area to the north-

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east of the region, takes on salinity, sulphurous hints and less acidity. The **Piedirosso** is slender and juicy, and the island of Ischia offers its sunny and well-cadenced white wines, **Biancolella** and **Forastera**.

Next, we come to the majestic **Vesuvius**, whose wild beauty dominates the volcanic lands of this DOC, which includes white and red **Lacryma Christi**, the white made mainly with **Caprettone** and **Verdeca** and topped up with **Falanghina** and **Greco**, and the red with **Piedirosso**, **Sciascinoso** and **Aglianico**. The admirable scenery of the Sorrento Peninsula overlooking the Tyrrhenian Sea and jutting out towards Capri, is known for its sparkling red wines such as the fragrant **Gagnano** and **Lettere** (always drunk here with pizza). A little further on, and we reach the **Amalfi Coast**, a Unesco heritage site, branching out into the **Furore**, **Ravello** and **Tramonti** subzones with vines made from local native varieties: **Ripoli**, **Pepella**, **Fenile**, **Ginestra**, **Biancolella** and **Falanghina** for the whites; **Piedirosso**, **Olivella**,

Tintore, **Aglianico** for the reds. These grapes are trained on pergolas, often overlooking the sea with heroic vineyards that create highly evocative landscapes.

Going further down but still in the province of Salerno, we find the green Cilento area, a treasure chest of biodiversity with its eponymous national park, a Unesco World Heritage Site, where mainly **Fiano** and **Aglianico** are produced.

Now we move to the innermost areas, starting in the north with **Sannio Beneventano**, the region's largest vine-growing area as well as the most productive, where various grape varieties are cultivated. There are four sub-zones: Solopaca, Guardia Sanframondi, Taburno, and Sant'Agata dei Goti. Falanghina del Sannio DOC is the most widespread wine.

A little information about the Campania Falanghina: Its main features are its sweet and delicate nose, with vegetal and floral nuances, and a structure that lends itself well to the production of sparkling and even passito wines. Endowed with sustained acidity, it is normally aged in steel but also integrates well with wood.

But let's continue our journey through the Benevento area of Campania where we can enjoy **Aglianico del Taburno** DOCG with its proud and powerful tannins; before heading further south now towards Avellino through the rustic Irpinia with its green hills, where we enter an isolated territory that, thanks to its position, has preserved a strong identity over the years, becoming the region's high-quality wine leader. In this distinctive area with its highly variable landscape of mountains, hills, valleys and plateaus, vines are cultivated at an altitude of between three and 700 metres on clayey-calcareous soils which are frequently stony and sometimes sandy. A land of the south, but of an atypical south: the climate brings rain, strong winds, a harsh winter and considerable temperature ranges in summer.

Map of Campania: Southern Italy



Irpinia holds a trio of aces: the DOCGs Greco di Tufo, Fiano d'Avellino and Taurasi. White wines that give the area its most important acknowledgments, starting with those obtained from the ancient **Fiano** grape, capable of generating vivid and saline wines of wonderful temperament. The complexity and harmony of this wine have been confirmed by meticulous studies conducted by Professor Luigi Moio (2002) on the aroma of Fiano, which boasts 39 aroma 'peaks' all in perfect harmony with each other.

Greco di Tufo stands out for its rich structure, high acidity and sometimes rather rough and sulphurous tones. Fiano d'Avellino and Greco di Tufo continue to offer a longevity that goes

well beyond the vintage, achieving unimaginable results. We are, in fact, looking at two great whites that can withstand lengthy ageing.

As for the red **Taurasi** (Aglianico grapes), apart from acknowledged peaks of excellence, it seems that the area is struggling to find its own identity in step with the times. The use of wood is not as questionable as in the past, but it could be better managed, allowing the wine to free itself from a cage that restricts its expressive capacity.

This journey through the varied wine mosaic of Campania gives us an insight into the wealth of the region's wine, an area that knows how to conquer and will be increasingly present on wine lists all over the world. ♦

Lake Averno, a volcanic body of water in the Phlegraean Fields, a large volcanic caldera situated to the west of Naples

The admirable scenery of the Sorrento Peninsula overlooking the Tyrrhenian Sea and jutting out towards Capri, is known for its sparkling red wines

