

# CESANESE REVIVED

AN ANCIENT ROMAN GRAPE FOR MODERN TIMES.

By Patricia Thomson

**THANKS TO SOPHIA LOREN**, I knew about the Ciociaria hills long before I knew about its wine. In *Two Women*, Loren plays a WWII widow who flees Rome with her daughter before the German troops arrive. It's a tale of privation and betrayal based on Alberto Moravia's *La Ciociara*, and the novel seared in my brain a picture of the rugged Ciociaria mountains south of Rome and the refugees' harrowing life there.

Those same Apennine foothills are now known for something completely different and much more positive: cesanese, the most exciting red grape in Lazio.

It's an antique varietal, first cultivated by the native Ernici people, then adopted by Roman epicures as their go-to red. Cesanese enjoyed another flush of fame during the Middle Ages, when Popes and Roman nobles purchased land in these parts to produce their supply of red wine. (Their white grapes and summer villas were in the Castelli Romani nearby.)

Today's cesanese is an immediately appealing wine. It announces itself with a pretty bouquet of red fruit, typically cherry and cassis, sometimes veering darker towards blackberry. That fruity nose combines with floral or earthy/spicy/savory overtones, depending on style and age. It's medium-bodied with soft tannins, which makes it an excellent food wine for every day.

Based on DNA, researchers think that cesanese is wholly unique, unrelated to any other wine grape in Italy or beyond. Its home turf is so isolated and far enough inland that grapes brought from Greece—widespread in Campania—wouldn't have arrived here.

That isolation was prized by 19th century Romantic painters looking for “the picturesque”—pastoral landscapes with traces of antiquity, and perhaps a shepherd playing his flute.

Today the landscape feels just as agrarian as it did in the paintings of Corot, Samuel Morse, Joseph Anton Koch, et al. Tracts of forest are interspersed with small vineyards and fields of grain. Medieval hilltop towns still have quarters where garbage is collected by mule. Compared to Tuscany and Piedmont, this part of Lazio feels like it hasn't changed in decades—until it comes to the wine, that is, which has completely reinvented itself for modern times.

#### Cesanese then and now

“Cesanese was born here, but our grandfathers and preceding generations brought it all to Rome as a sweet wine, because in the 1950s and 1960s that's how they liked their reds,” says Antonio di Cosimo, president of the Cesanese del Piglio DOCG consortium and owner of Corte dei Papi winery. “They waited to do a late harvest, then made



PHOTO: PATRICIA THOMSON

Three cesaneses that are ready to drink now.

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wine with a little residual sugar. Fortunately, that method has been abandoned under the Cesanese DOCG.”

Old-style cesanese was not only sweet, it was fizzy, like a Lambrusco. That style lasted “from the Romans to the other day,” attests Piero Riccardi, co-owner of the boutique biodynamic winery Cantina Riccardi Reale.

“The sweet wine was very appreciated in the Rome market,” he says, where unbottled cesanese was sucked up by the gallon in countless trattorias. “But that [sweet, foamy style] was difficult to age, so people said cesanese is impossible to age. But some producers started to make cesanese a different way: with longer time on the skins, not overly ripe, more acidity. The standard is now that you can age cesanese for years, like a Burgundy.”

Among the pioneers of this change from sweet to dry was Paolo Perinelli. His family had made wine for generations under the Perinelli name, but he started afresh in the early 1980s, replanting all their vineyards and changing the winery name to that of the old farmstead, Casale della Ioria.

“When Paolo replanted, our choice was to plant international grapes or cesanese,” says his wife, Marina Perinelli. “Paolo was sure he wanted to make cesanese come alive again. But at the time, nobody [in Lazio] was interested in red native varieties. They wanted wine to be white, fresh, and very simple.”

After taking cuttings from their old vineyards and propagating the best, Perinelli bet on a dry style. It was a risk, both in the marketplace and in the vineyard. Cesanese is notoriously tricky at harvest time; it ripens suddenly with a rapid sugar spike, so there’s little margin of error in the pick date when attempting a dry, modern style. Plus, when you limit yields (as you must in order to concentrate flavors), cesanese can easily become a *vinone*—a big, fat wine, in Marina’s parlance.

Casale della Ioria aims for elegance, not power. They were among the first to dignify cesanese with maturation in wood barrels. Their first label, Tenuta della Ioria, was aged for six months in large, neutral casks of 2,000 liters. Eyebrows shot up in 1999 when they aged their second cesanese label, Torre del Piano, in small French barrique—becoming the first winery to do so.

“It was really strange for some people here, putting cesanese in this expensive wood,” recalls daughter Silvia Perinelli. Her mother adds, “When we started with Torre del Piano, everybody thought Paolo was a foolish man because it was impossible to sell the wine at the price.”

But the naysayers were wrong. It not only sold, the 2001 vintage was awarded a silver medal at Vinitaly, the country’s largest wine fair, in 2004. That was a turning point for the whole area, says



The town of Oleyano Romano and surrounding landscape haven't changed since this 1823 painting by Heinrich Reinhold.

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Marina Perinelli. “Everything changed really, really quickly.”

### The new generation

Since then, a new generation has stepped into the void left by Lazio’s lost farmers. “An entire generation, from the end of the 1960s to the 1980s, went to Rome and abandoned agriculture,” says Pietro Riccardi. Now they’re returning to start or rekindle small wineries, taking a markedly different tack from their fathers and grandfathers, who prized quantity over quality and sold everything to wine cooperatives (which are now mostly out of business). Riccardi ticks off some of the new wineries—Marco Antonelli, Vineria Neri, Le Cerquette—one started by a former computer technician, another by an economist who gave up their city jobs to return to family land near the town of Olevano Romano.

Riccardi himself is a case in point. For 35 years, he’d been a video producer at RAI Television in Rome, where he met his partner, Lorella Reale, a camera operator from Sicily. The two made a number of programs on sustainable agriculture and climate change, and that lit the fire. “We wanted to experience what we were thinking about,” Riccardi says, “to explore natural farming and demonstrate that there are alternative ways.” He recites an alarming fact: “Just two percent of the farmland in Europe is for vineyards. But 70 percent of all pesticides used are for vineyards—for fungicides, for disease, for herbicides, for fertilizer. It’s incredible.”

In 2010, the couple begat Cantina Riccardi Reale, planting six hectares of vines on inherited and purchased land. They set their ideas in motion regarding organic and biodynamic viticulture, despite skepticism from colleagues. “We began the second change of cesanese” following its 1980s makeover from sweet to dry, says Riccardi. “We introduced natural wine.” A number of new producers have followed suit.

One of cesanese’s characteristics is its hypersensitivity to *terroir*, “similar to nebbiolo, nerello mascalese, and pinot noir,” Lorella Reale observes. Seeing that their vineyards had clear striations of red volcanic soil and white sandstone, they decided to play up these distinctions with separate labels: Neccio comes from volcanic soil, while Cãlitro comes from sandstone and is thus slower to mature in bottle.

Both wines are vinified exactly the same way: spontaneous fermentation on native yeast, unfiltered and unfiltered, and aged a year or more in chestnut cask. (As the grandson of a chestnut barrel-maker, Riccardi finds chestnut more neutral than oak and feels it better highlights cesanese’s inherent flavors and texture.)

A third label, Colle Pazzo (“crazy hills”), mixes the two soil types. It also macerates on the skins for half the time and ages in cement rather than



Cesanese grapes, popular in Rome since ancient times.

PHOTO: PATRICIA THOMSON

wood. The result is a fruitier, less tannic expression of cesanese, ready to drink now. A fourth label is a cesanese rosé called Tucucu.

While Riccardi Reale and Casale della Ioria are the only wineries to make a rosé, most offer a range of cesanese styles.

All start with an easy-going version done in stainless steel or concrete that showcases the juicy fruit (like Casale delle Iorio’s Campo Novo, redolent of cherry pie; Corte dei Papi’s bright-toned Colle Ticchio; or Damiano Ciolli’s earthier Silene). Then there’s an upper tier with more structured, age-worthy wines. These might come from historic vineyards, and they usually mature in wood (like Corte dei Papi’s barrique-aged San Magno or its mixed barrique/cask OttavoCielo Superiore; or Damiano Ciolli’s Cirsium Riserva, matured in French oak cask).

### Cesanese appellations

When drilling down into cesanese, there are three appellations and two varieties to know. Most important is the grape, of which there are two types: Cesanese commune is a big-berried grape, prized in the past by farmers seeking high-volume production. The smaller-berried cesanese di affile is the favorite today among quality producers, especially in the three appellations in the Ciociaria hills. Two are DOCs (*denominazione di origine controllata*): Cesanese di Olevano Romano and Cesanese di Affile. A third DOC was elevated to DOCG status (G for *garantita*) in 2008: Cesanese del Piglio. All permit either cesanese variety to be used, with a minimum of 90% in the DOCG and Affile DOC, and 85% in the Olevano DOC. There are no requirements for wood aging.

These distinctions are largely academic to the American consumer, who’d be lucky to find a choice in the average wine shop. Though exports are on the rise, cesanese production on the whole is quite limited. The average size of a winery in Frosinone province is just seven acres, according to Marina Perinelli. All three appellations combined make less than 1 million bottles. That number is sure to grow, given the rise in consumer interest, but it’ll take time.

“They’re replanting vineyards, but those are still young,” says Piero Perinelli, who served two terms as DOCG president.

For now, cesanese remains a tiny island in Lazio’s vast sea of white wine. But it’s worth seeking out. Who wouldn’t want to try a distinctive indigenous grape over the millionth merlot? If you’re in that camp, cesanese is calling your name.

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