

ROME'S WINE COUNTRY

NESTLED IN THE FRASCATI HILLS NEAR THE ETERNAL CITY, PRINCIPE PALLAVICINI IS THE PERFECT DESTINATION FOR WINE ENTHUSIASTS.

TEXT: PATRICIA THOMSON



• White wine grapes hang in the sun.

Vineyards and Roman watchtower viewed from the olive mill



PHOTO: PATRICIA THOMSON

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE ROME: so much ancient history, so much peerless art to see. But the Eternal City's jostling crowds, long lines, and fleets of tour buses can be overwhelming. At times I find myself wishing a magic carpet would whisk me away to a bucolic countryside setting. If I could add a postscript (and why not?), I'd wish for that carpet to land on a beautiful wine estate with loads of history, scenic vineyards, and quality wine.

The fact is, this doesn't have to be wishful thinking. There *is* such a place just a half-hour's train ride away. It's Principe Pallavicini, nestled in the Frascati hills—perfect for a do-it-yourself day trip to Rome's wine country.

Frascati is one of the most storied wine zones of Lazio, if not Italy. It was wildly popular with the ancient Romans, including such boldface names as Cicero and Seneca, along with *De Agricultura* author Marcus Portius Cato, thought to be the first producer of Frascati wine. Fleeing the heat and disease of Rome's malaria-infested plain, the Roman elites built summer villas up in the cooler, healthier Colli Albani hills that rim the plain's southeastern border. Atop this old volcanic crater, the Romans established 14 towns collectively known as Castelli Romani, one of which is Frascati. A second wave came during the Renaissance and Baroque eras, when aristocrats and popes built their summer palaces here for much the same reason. Frascati's third shining moment was the 1960s, thanks to its proximity to Cinecitta Studios. *La*

Dolce Vita—era actors preferred to lunch there, rather than return to Rome and get mobbed by paparazzi. Where movie stars went, fans followed.

Some spy a fourth wave coming—a distant swell that will crest in due time. The younger generation of producers now taking over are determined to alter the public perception of Frascati, long considered a simple jug wine, and are pursuing quality. Principe Pallavicini, the largest and most historic of Frascati's private wineries, is riding this wave.

A NOBLE PATRIMONY

The train conductor checks my ticket to Colonna Galleria as we pass Rome's sprawling exurbs. Speeding across the plain, the scenery becomes increasing agricultural. At one point I notice Roman aqueducts on either side of the train, their ancient arches straddling fields like towering giants. I later learn these are Aqua Claudia and Aqua Alexandrina, two of 11 aqueducts that supplied water to Imperial Rome. Little do I know I'll be walking inside one of them in a few hours.

Giulio Senni, CEO of Principe Pallavicini, meets me at the station, and we walk down the hill to winery headquarters. Energetic and charmingly mop-topped, Senni is part of the new blood here, recruited after the aging matriarch, Princess Maria Camilla Pallavicini, officially passed management of the estate to her son Sigieri Diaz della Vittoria Pallavicini in



PHOTO: PATRICIA THOMSON

Principe Pallavicini CEO Giulio Senni and Frascati guide Michelle Smith



A tasting is set up in the stone barn.

PHOTO: PATRICIA THOMSON

2017. Sigi, as he's known to family, "is very well-travelled, very astute," Senni says of the 35-year-old company president. "He decided to give new life to this winery, pointing to quality wines in an area known for quantity."

We arrive at a two-story palazzo facing a busy road, once an ancient Roman byway. A marble family crest surmounts the door. For centuries, this was where the noble Pallavicini family made their wine and olive oil. Today it houses administrative offices, a warehouse, laboratory, and small wine shop for impromptu visitors.

The Pallavicini lived elsewhere, closer to the center of power in Rome. Their story begins in 1670, when a branch of the family moved from Genoa to Rome after Niccolò Pallavicini, Genoa's ambassador to Antwerp, married his niece to Giovanni Battista Rospigliosi, who happened to be a nephew of a Rospigliosi Pope, Clement IX. (With that marriage, Niccolò successfully elevated his own ambitious nephew to cardinal.) The newlyweds acquired 1,000 hectares (2471 acres) around Frascati, as well as a magnificent palazzo in Rome large enough to hold the art collection that Niccolò had amassed through his connections with Rubens, Van Dyke, and other Flemish Baroque masters.

"Here's an important thing," says Senni. "The Pallavicini family has maintained their patrimony—unlike many Roman families, or Italian families in general." He flips through a book on Palazzo Pallavicini, whose facade is

featured on the winery logo. Princess Maria Camilla still lives here and oversees a truly astounding private art collection that includes works by Botticelli, Claude Lorrain, Lorenzo Lotto, Signorelli, and a ceiling fresco by Guido Reni.

The Pallavicini supplied two Popes and various cardinals with wine. While most of those 1000 hectares have dispersed over time, the family still retains a kernel of 65 hectares, plus 15 on the coast. It's a significant holding—the largest in Frascati, whose overall vineyard acreage has been shrinking as Rome's suburbs press in. "We're the defenders of the environment," says Senni. "Without agriculture, Rome would invade everything."

A PET PROJECT

Senni takes me to an abandoned olive mill that Colonna's olive growers used in the 1800s, courtesy of the Pallavicini. "We have a project to build an incoming center here," says the CEO, who aims to boost tourism at the winery. The building is filled with rubble, so much work needs to be done. There's also the fact that archaeologists would first need to investigate a Roman villa that lies beneath, discovered only last year. But if this olive mill becomes a tasting room, there'd be no better location. It has a sweeping view of their vineyards and picturesque Roman watchtower once used for spotting Saracen invaders. On a clear day,

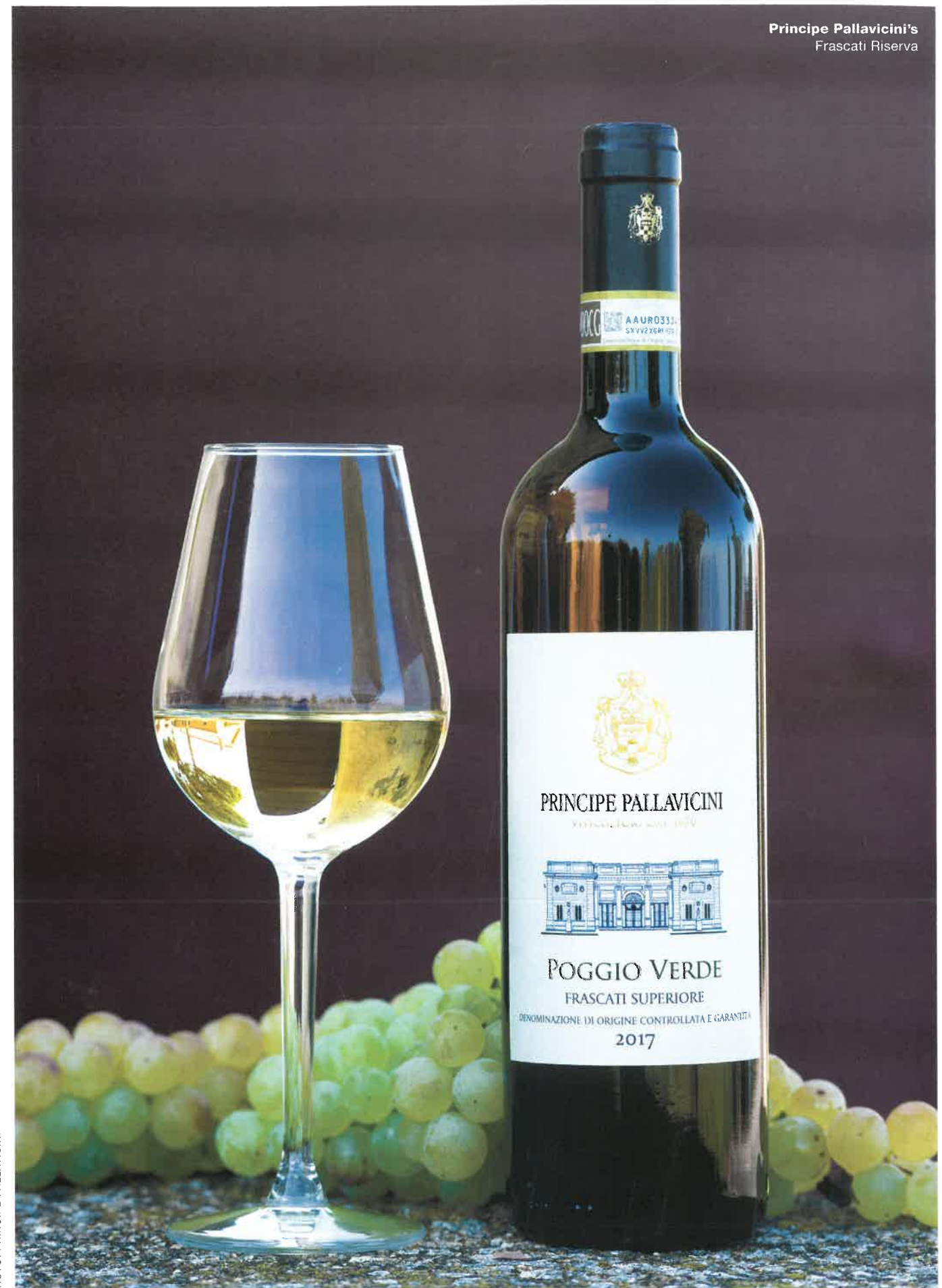
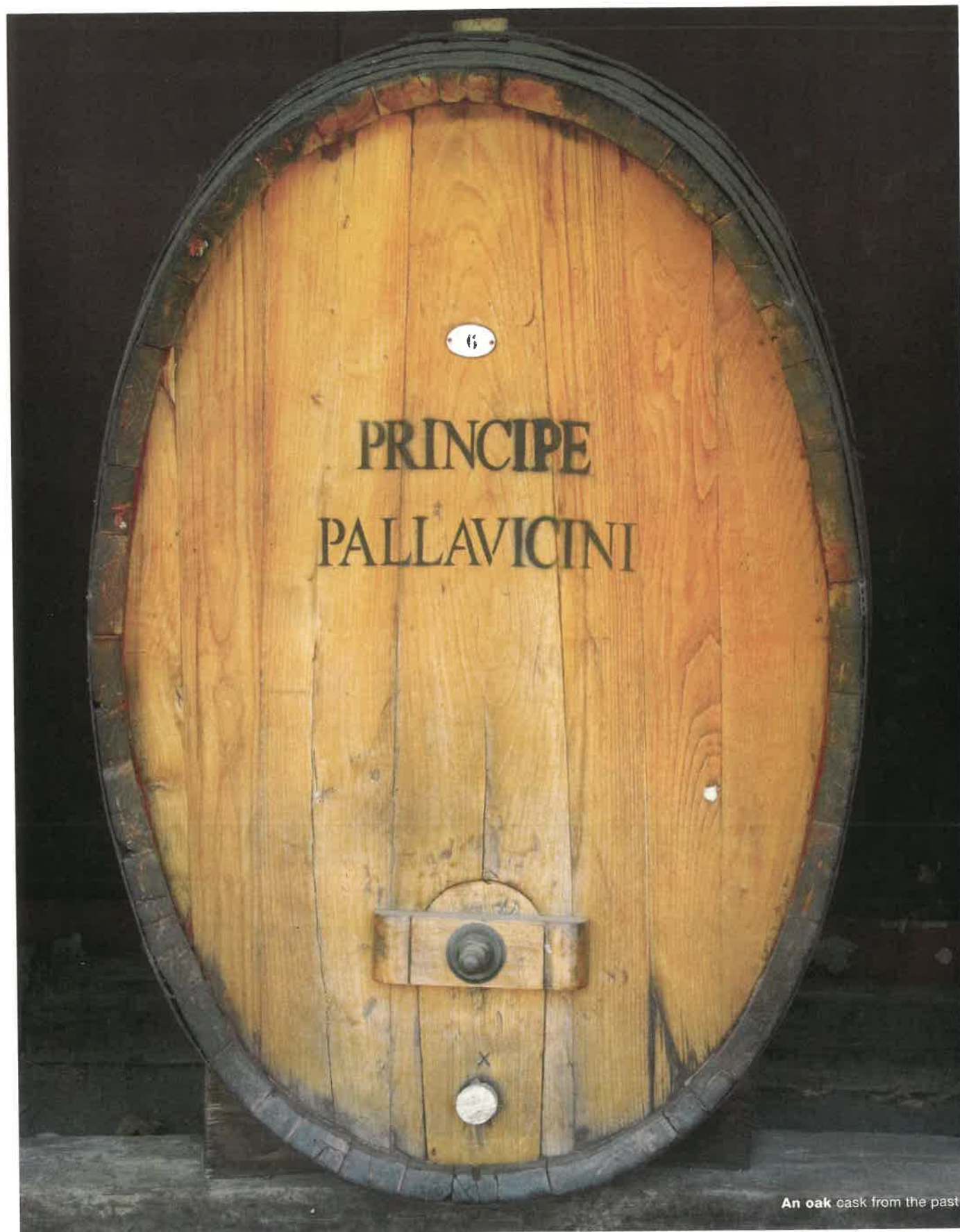
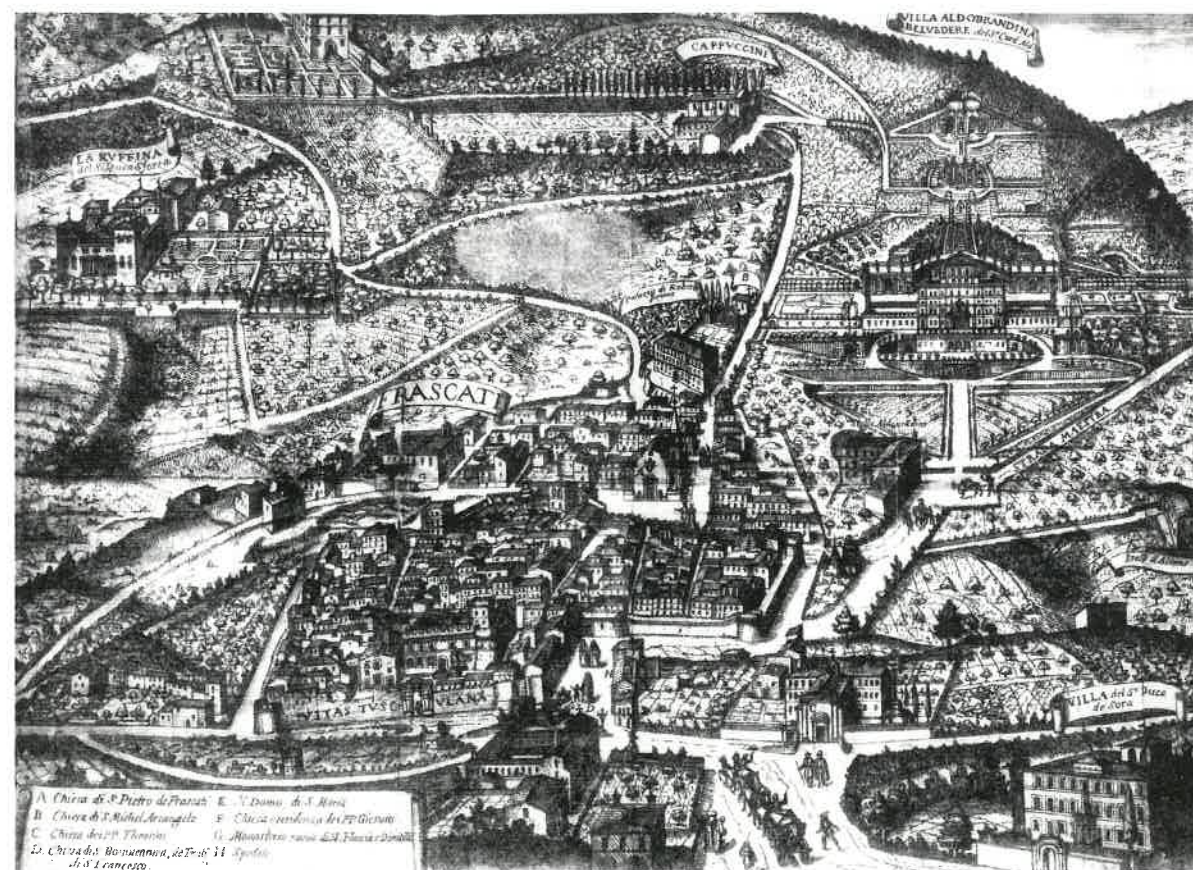


PHOTO: PRINCIPE PALLAVICINI



An oak cask from the past

PHOTO: PATRICIA THOMSON



Frascati as it looked in 1620 in an engraving by Matteo Greuter.

you can see Rome. Senni points to a basalt quarry in the distance, source of the square *sampietrini* stones that pave Rome's medieval streets. A pile of that same volcanic rock lies discarded behind the olive mill. "This is very good for white wine. It gives a good minerality," he notes.

A short drive takes us to the farmstead where wine production happens. I'm greeted by Michelle Smith, a British expatriate and sommelier who handles their English-language tours. She launches into an informative overview that encompasses geography, Roman history, and the Pallavicini family. Then we head down to "the cave."

This turns out to be part of the Claudia aqueduct, built in 62 AD. We step into a stone room. This was a cistern that acted as a pressure chamber for a branch of the aqueduct that fed water to nearby villas. High on opposite walls are 8" pipes, which diverted water here; the build-up of pressure would push water up to the villas. This cistern lay hidden behind the wall of a wine cellar built in 1620, until it, too, was discovered by accident when someone fell through a hole in the ground.

FRASCATI'S FINER POINTS

We head to a vacant stone barn with antique troughs. After harvest, this airy space is where the malvasia puntinata grapes are laid out to dry for their award-winning passito wine, Stillato. The barn is empty now, except for a

formidable lineup of bottles to taste.

We start with a Poggio Verde Frascati Superiore—a lovely wine with great minerality, tropical fruit, and zippy acidity. I ask what changes have occurred since consulting enologist Carlo Ferrini came on board some 10 years ago. In Italy, Ferrini is a superstar, boasting a Who's Who of clients, including Barone Ricasoli and Castello di Fonterutoli in Chianti Classico, and Casanova di Neri and Talenti in Montalcino. What's more, during the 2017 transition, Ferrini brought in one of his disciples from Ricasoli, Marco Cerqua, to be in-house technical director.

Under their watch, says Senni, "the vineyards remained more or less the same, but now they're vinifying every single plot separately. They built a new cantina with 10 truncated conical fermentation vats, like at Ricasoli. So each blend is like a mosaic." Ferrini and Cerqua are also doing longer fermentations at lower temperatures, which enhances a wine's perfume, and introduced techniques like *batonnage*, or stirring of the settled sediment, which enriches a wine's body and flavor.

Cerqua, taking a break from harvest, sits down to join us. "Once, Frascati was a simple wine meant to go with meals without spending too much," he says. "But the vines were trained on trellises and overproductive. There were rivers of wine. Now the DOC doesn't permit that. So Frascati is only now finding its identity, like Lazio."

ITALIAN WINES

The Frascati DOC appellation is a blend by law. It must be minimum 70% malvasia, either malvasia di candia or malvasia puntinata. The balance is typically trebbiano toscano, bombino, and/or greco. Frascati Superiore DOCG has more stringent growing requirements. “It requires higher density planting and lower yields,” says Smith. “You also tend to find the better malvasia puntinata used, which has finer perfumes—typically elderflower and wisteria. You get a hint of peach when young, then more tropical notes, like pineapple, as it matures.”

A winery's choice of malvasia makes a big difference. Malvasia di candia is more common and is especially popular with bulk producers, who love its big, plump bunches. “But it's nothing special,” says Senni. Pallavicini uses only malvasia puntinata, and has planted a full 10 hectares. This is not only the foundation of their two Frascati—which are blended with greco and bombino, rather than the more common (but boring) trebbiano. They've also begun bottling a pure malvasia puntinata under a new *denominazione di origine*, Roma DOC.

Pallavicini is also placing its bets on cesanese, a red grape native to Lazio. They make two versions: Rubillo shows the grape's quaffable side, being done with carbonic maceration (whole-berry fermentation that maximizes fruitiness; think Beaujolais Nouveau). The second, Amarasco, is a single-vineyard cesanese sourced from 45-year-old vines and refined for 12 months in oak. It's a luscious wine, smelling of Marasca cherries and violets. In the past, the Pallavicini would never have made a limited-production (20,000 bottles) wine like this. It was introduced in 2017, as were so many other innovations.

With 300,000 bottles and 12 labels, Principe Pallavicini has something for every palate, from a Brut sparkler to cabernet sauvignon to that delectable passito. So go ahead, take a winery break on your next trip to Rome. If that's not in the cards, then cook up a Roman cacio e pepe pasta at home, uncork a bottle of Pallavicini Frascati, and dream on.

To book a weekday visit to Principe Pallavicini, contact info@principepallavicini.com. Additional Frascati wineries can be toured through www.easyfrascati.com.

Patricia Thomson (@dolcetours) splits her time between Italy and Brooklyn. When she's not writing, she's running tours through her company La Dolce Vita Wine Tours.



TASTES *of* ITALIA

BASICS OF THE ITALIAN KITCHEN

SPRING 2020

IN SEASON
SALLIMI, SPRING RAVIOLI
AND THE AMALFI COAST



Spaghetti with Peas,
Asparagus and Pine Nuts
Page 69

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