

2016, December 22

Donnafugata's Mille e Una Notte: 1995-2011

<http://www.vinous.com/articles/donnafugata-s-mille-e-una-notte-1995-2011-dec-2016>

by IAN D'AGATA

Sicily's red wines, even the good ones, carry a monkey on their shoulders. Namely, most people think of them as broad, fleshy behemoths sporting superripe if not downright overripe aromas and flavors and unwieldy alcohol levels. But this is clearly not the case with the region's best wines made from its two mostly widely known native red grapes, Nerello Mascalese and Nero d'Avola. This Vinous exclusive, a report on the first complete vertical tasting to date of Donnafugata's Mille e Una Notte, demonstrates how refined and harmonious truly great Nero d'Avola wines can be.

The Birth of a Modern Southern Italian Icon

Donnafugata launched their Mille e Una Notte red wine in 1995, in collaboration with Giacomo Tachis, perhaps Italy's most famous modern winemaker. Tachis was responsible for many other famous Italian red wines, including Tignanello, Sassicaia, d'Alceo, Sammarco, Turriga and Pelago). In the early '90s, Tachis started creating new wines for Donnafugata, either made with international grapes alone or from blends of international and native grapes. These included a Nero d'Avola-Cabernet Sauvignon blend called Tancredi (first made in 1990) and the oak-aged Chardonnay named Chiarandà del Merlo (1992 was the first vintage; the blend has changed over the years, and the name of the wine was later shortened simply to Chiarandà).



It was perhaps inevitable that, sooner or later, a top monovariety wine from the island's most abundant and iconic red grape, Nero d'Avola, would be born. In 1995, while tasting the best lots of Nero d'Avola in the Donnafugata cellar and being blown away by their quality, Tachis suggested that the time was right to launch just such a wine. Antonio Rallo, whose family owns Donnafugata, still remembers vividly how, upon tasting the first Mille e Una Notte ever made, he immediately rushed home to tell his mother Gabriella that "today we have made the best wine ever at Donnafugata!" Clearly, she was of the same opinion, and she decided the wine's name should be Mille e Una Notte (or The Thousand and One Nights) because, in her view, the wine was so good that each bottle told a new, different and magical story, much like in the Arabian tales of the One Thousand and One Nights (in which the beautiful and crafty Sheherazade repeatedly prolongs her execution by keeping the Persian King Shahryar up each night by telling one marvelous tale after another).

Originally, Mille e Una Notte was a blend of Nero d'Avola with a little Perricone, another Sicilian native red grape that is currently back in fashion. In reality, at the time this blend was unavoidable, because the estate's oldest Nero d'Avola vines were co-planted with Perricone vines, as was commonly done in Sicily. Clearly, co-planting has always been typical of the Italian countryside, because this enabled farmers to hedge their bets in weather-challenged years when one hardier grape variety might help make up for poor quality or short crops in the others. Of course, it didn't hurt that Perricone is an ideal partner to Nero D'Avola, and for many reasons, the most important of which is that Nero d'Avola is especially rich in tartaric acid, and so it benefits greatly from the addition of a little Perricone, which is much higher in pH and therefore has a welcome



2008 2009 Marsala, September 27th 2016 2015

softening effect on the blend. Also, Perricone's intense fruit flavors nicely complement those of the more famous, more floral Nero d'Avola.

With the beginning of the 21st century, Mille e Una Notte became essentially a monovariety Nero d'Avola, thanks to new plantings of Nero d'Avola having reached the age at which their fruit could finally be used in what had become the estate's top wine. In 2009, a little Syrah was added, and since 2010 a bit of Petit Verdot has also found its way into the blend. It is to the Rallo family's credit that, over the years, these international varieties have never been allowed to camouflage the Nero d'Avola's aroma and flavor profile. Thus Mille e Una Notte has remained a distinctive wine that speaks of its land's history, soil and climate. With Mille e Una Notte, Nero d'Avola's ability to produce fresh, spicy wines of real refinement comes through clearly, in contrast to the many overripe wines from the island.

Mille e Una Notte is made from vineyards planted in the Contessa Entellina DOC, situated in central Sicily at 200 to 600 meters (656-1968 feet) above sea level. The soil is mainly calcareous clay rich in mineral elements such as potassium, manganese and iron. Although different consulting winemakers have been involved here over the years (Tachis until 1999, Carlo Ferrini in the 2000s), the winemaking hasn't changed much, with total time on the skins lasting roughly 14 days and fermentation temperatures reaching 28 to 30 degrees Celcius (82-86 Fahrenheit). The wine is aged in mainly new French oak *barriques* for roughly 14 months, depending on the vintage, and is then held back for another 36 months in bottle prior to being released.



Keys To Understanding Nero d'Avola and Mille e Una Notte

Mille e Una Notte has gone through four distinct periods in its two-decade history. The first phase, from 1995 to 1997, yielded three outstanding wines that are varietally accurate but perhaps less polished than those made in subsequent decades. The second phase, from 1998 to 2002, was marked by drought-year conditions. Wines from 2003 through 2008 are nearly 100% Nero d'Avola and were made in slightly more favorable weather conditions, and the grape variety was better able to show off its great potential. The current phase of Mille e Una Notte's existence began with the 2009 vintage, when international varieties were added to the blend.

Mille e Una Notte is a wine I know extremely well, having tasted almost every vintage numerous times over the course of the last 20 years, and having followed the development of the wines very closely. That said, I came away from my comprehensive tasting genuinely blown away by the quality of many of the wines. In fact, I have rarely tasted so many outstanding Nero d'Avola wines at the same time. The fact that many vintages of Mille e Una Notte display remarkable elegance and ageworthiness will only add to its reputation. Although it must be noted that those vintages that were unimpressive at the outset have remained so, it is also clear that the 1995 and 2008 bottlings are knockout wines that rival the best that Italy has produced in the last 20 years. And the young 2011 looks to be a classic in the making.

A Note About the Vintages

The tasting at the winery in late September of this year, which included every vintage of Mille e Una Notte yet made, was, simply put, one of the most memorable vertical tastings of a southern Italian wine I have ever had the pleasure to attend. (In fact, it was such a unique event that siblings Antonio and José Rallo, who now run the winery, both quietly attended, along with their marketing and technical directors). I was riveted by the precision and perfume of wine after wine. And even the vintages from drought or very wet vintages acquitted themselves admirably. All of the wines came directly from Donnafugata's cellars.



Wine Reviews

Mille e Una Notte 2011 **95**

Purple-ruby. Captivating floral lift to the aromas of plum, blackcurrant, star anise, cocoa and cinnamon; this is a great deal more perfumed than the 2010. Smooth, lush and round, with a fresh, juicy quality lending precision to the suave flavors of dark berries and cocoa and contributing to an impression of early personality. I love the combination of texture and focus here. Finishes broad and long, with ripe, polished tannins and a repeating violet nuance. This is one of the best young Mille e Una Notte wines I have tasted to date. A blend of mainly Nero d'Avola with small additions of Syrah and Petit Verdot. Drinking window: 2019 - 2029.

Mille e Una Notte 2010 **91+**

Fully saturated purple-ruby. Deep aromas and flavors of ripe blueberry, graphite, chocolate and vanilla. This brooding wine hints at considerable depth but is still tough as nails. Finishes with chewy tannins and an obvious saline slant, not to mention outstanding length and freshness. This is the first Mille e Una Notte in which 5% Petit Verdot was also added to the Syrah and the Nero d'Avola. The product of a cool, late-ripening year that produced low volume. Drinking window: 2021 - 2031.

Mille e Una Notte 2009 **90**

Full ruby. Aromas of blackberry, quinine, camphor and marzipan are lifted by mint and a strong floral quality. Not especially expansive or large-scaled presently but intensely flavored and well delineated, offering a nice combination of ripeness and energy for this rainy, cool year. Finishes with a firm backbone of slightly gritty tannins. This is really tough to judge now; my guess is that it will develop well, so my score may look ungenerous in the years to come. This was a tough year weather-wise: Donnafugata had to green-harvest aggressively because of the rains and the warmer-than-normal summer, and production was ultimately down 30% from normal. This is the first Mille e Una Notte in which 5% Syrah was added to the Nero d'Avola. Drinking window: 2019 - 2026.

Mille e Una Notte 2008 **96+**

Deep ruby-red. Very deep, penetrating, spicy aromas of red and black fruits complemented by flinty and floral nuances. Fresh, dense and complex, with the very suave blueberry, blackcurrant, mineral and balsamic flavors conveying uncommon precision and cut. Finishes multilayered and refined, with outstanding clarity and a zingy mineral overlay. Check out these numbers: only 13.3% alcohol, with 6.2 g/l total acidity (expressed as tartaric) and a pH of 3.53. An epic wine in the making: I especially love its purity and sense of balance. Roughly five years ago, I wrote that this was the best Mille e Una Notte in a long time; it has continued to improve and is now entering an especially graceful phase of its evolution. I am not sure Nero d'Avola can get much better than this. Drinking window: 2016 - 2035.

Mille e Una Notte 2007 **94**

Full ruby-red. Spicy blueberry and licorice on the perfumed nose. Dense, rich and suave but at the same time bright and juicy, showing sneaky concentration to its ripe flavors of sweet dark plum, camphor and licorice. Still youthfully chewy on the long, bright finish, which features lingering nuances of spices and flowers. Drinking window: 2016 - 2028.

Mille e Una Notte 2006 **91**

Luminous red. Pungent notes of camphor and bay leaf complicate aromas of ripe black fruits, tobacco and licorice. Juicy, bright and very suave, conveying a seamless quality to its dark red fruit and floral flavors. This wine boasts lovely perfume and balance but strikes me as less concentrated and complex than some other

vintages of Mille e Una Notte--something I originally felt when I first tasted it upon release. Finishes smooth and minerally, with ripe, fresh red fruit flavors. The 2006 sports a highish 6.33 g/l total acidity. Drinking window: 2016 - 2026.

Mille e Una Notte 2005 94

Deep red. Bright violet lift to the aromas of sour red cherry and minerals. Juicy, bright and quite suave, showing a strong saline underpinning to its fresh red fruit and floral flavors. Extremely well delineated (6.26 g/l total acidity) and nuanced on the very long, minerally finish, which echoes with violet and peony. "This reminds me of spring," was the spot-on comment of José Rallo, and I really couldn't have described it better myself. The cool, rainy 2005 vintage showcases the gentler, more floral side of Mille e Una Notte and of Nero d'Avola. Drinking window: 2016 - 2025.

Mille e Una Notte 2004 93

Dark red-ruby. Mineral and saline nuances complement refined aromas and flavors of spicy black cherry, menthol, botanical herbs and old leather. Rich, dense and chewy, showing excellent grip, verve and spicy cut to the long, dense, slightly minty-herbal finish. This very youthful, somewhat austere Mille e Una Notte exudes a cool-climate personality (spring and summer were especially rainy and the summer was not too warm), displaying a hint of a green menthol quality and noteworthy medicinal reserve. While slightly more ripeness might have resulted in an even higher score, it's so fresh and refined that it's hard not to be impressed. Drinking window: 2016 - 2028.

Mille e Una Notte 2003 91+

Deep red with a palish rim. Very showy, opulent aromas and flavors of superripe red fruits, spicy plum, coffee and cocoa. A rich, dense version of Mille e Una Notta with a tactile, chewy mouthfeel. Finishes spicy and long, with a touch of alcoholic warmth (at 14.2% alcohol, this was only the second Mille e Una Notte to top 14%), but boasts remarkable focus and balance given the hot (but not especially dry) year. This gorgeous wine is easily one of the most successful Italian reds of 2003. Drinking window: 2016 – 2020

Mille e Una Notte 2002 87

Dark red with a brick rim. Evolved, slightly tired aromas of red cherry and tar. Dense and rich, with ripe red cherry and dark plum flavors framed by slightly gritty tannins. Finishes quite ripe and moderately persistent, with a hint of faded flowers. This is the Mille e Una Notte that Antonio Rallo likes least: "It was just too dry a year," he said, "and the grapes were shriveled on the vine. The wine has always lacked freshness." Due to the lack of water, the yield was a remarkably low 22 hectoliters per hectare, which is never a good thing with Nero d'Avola, as ultra-low yields tends to give jammy, heavy wines. Drinking window: 2016 - 2020.

Mille e Una Notte 2001 88

Deep ruby-red. A strong pyrazine note (green bell pepper) camouflages the aromas and flavors of dark fruits and herbs. This deep, rather brooding wine is smoother and better-balanced than the 2000, and fresher than the 2002, but is also very chewy and herbal. The persistent finish features hints of rosemary, camphor and pine needles. Although this wine seems to be developing at a snail's pace, I don't think it has as much potential as I originally believed. And I'm not thrilled about the intense green element, which reminds me more of unripe Merlot or Cabernet Sauvignon than of Nero d'Avola. Drinking window: 2019 – 2024.

Mille e Una Notte 2000 87

Deep red-ruby. Still-reticent aromas of ultra-ripe black cherry, stewed plum, underbrush and dried herbs. Amazingly smooth and dense on entry, but the wine's rich red fruit and herb flavors are marred by the slightly gritty tannins that speak of the hot summer. The chewy finish displays moderate length. Despite this wine's higher-than-usual acidity (6.2 g/l), it lacks nuance and grace. Antonio Rallo recalled that "until

August 16, this was the most promising growing season of my life, but for the next seven days it was 40 degrees or more [Centigrade] every day, so we had to harvest immediately. This resulted in slightly tougher tannins and less freshness than I would have liked.” Drinking window: 2016 – 2024.

Mille e Una Notte 1999 95

Bright red with an amber rim. Extremely ripe, complex aromas of red cherry jam, black cherry, tomato paste, sweet spices, tamarind and coffee. Rich, dense and sweet, but with remarkable verve and inner-mouth perfume to its red and black fruit flavors. This is yet another extremely fresh Mille e Una Notte despite its ultra-ripe nose. Finishes fleshy and dense but vibrant and lithe, with a lingering element of woody spices. This knockout wine, which was the first vintage to top 14% alcohol (actually 14.2%), is simultaneously powerful and light on its feet. Although the summer months in 1999 were warmer than usual, nighttime temperatures were quite fresh, which helped to preserve aromatic molecules; September was also cool. Great wine. Drinking window: 2016 - 2029.

Mille e Una Notte 1998 93

Deep red; much darker than the first three vintages of Mille e Una Notte but also shows a amber rim. Ripe red cherry, underbrush and fresh herbs on the deep, enticing nose. Then rich and dense on the palate, with fleshy red cherry and spicy underbrush notes framed and lifted by harmonious acidity. Finishes thick and ripe, with insidious sweetness but also sneaky freshness and a strong savory quality. A much bigger wine than the '95, '96 and '97 releases, clearly showcasing this hotter, drier year in which the Nero d'Avola grapes dehydrated slightly on the vines. Still, there is nothing overripe or weighty about this gorgeous wine. Drinking window: 2016 - 2026.

Mille e Una Notte 1997 93

Dark, bright red with a pale rim. Strong mineral nuances to the aromas of red berries, quinine and orange peel. Delicate flavors of flinty red berries, minerals and quinine show a seamless quality, with a gamey nuance on the back end adding complexity. This less powerful but wonderfully sweet, round, spicy Mille e Una Notte boasts an outstanding balance of fruit, ripe acidity and polished tannins, not to mention outstanding length. The 1997 vintage was not the hot blockbuster it was in other parts of Italy; in the Contessa Entellina area, August was warmer than usual but September was fresh. Drinking window: 2016 - 2027.

Mille e Una Notte 1996 94

Luminous dark red. Delicate herbal and woody nuances complement subdued red cherry and raspberry on the nose. Rich, dense and juicy, offering red and black fruit flavors that are riper than the nose suggests. Conveys a very refined personality and a vibrant mouthfeel, finishing silky and seamless, with hints of underbrush, minerals and tobacco. One of the most savory Mille e Una Nottes but quite classic and suaver than most; not surprisingly, July and August featured moderate temperatures, which contributed to this wine's cool personality. This elegant knockout, which weighs in at a relatively low 12.9% alcohol, is still remarkably youthful. A blend of Nero d'Avola and Perricone. Drinking window: 2016 – 2028.

Mille e Una Notte 1995 95+

Bright, dark red with a pale rim. Extremely complex, floral perfume of red cherry, strawberry, tar, licorice and woody nuances. Rich, dense and sweet, conveying a multilayered palate feel. The fresh flavors of red fruits, botanical herbs and spices are framed by magically mouthcoating tannins. Finishes rich, ripe and round, with terrific length and energy. Made from a relatively cool year, this impeccably balanced wine is a paragon of freshness and seems much younger than its 21 years would suggest. Total acidity is a moderate 5.5 grams per liter, with a pH of 3.64. In a cold cellar, this gorgeous wine will easily last another ten years. Even better, it packs a ton of flavor at only 13.1% alcohol, with the Perricone element adding a luscious dark fruit component. Drinking window: 2016 – 2026.

-- *Ian D'Agata*

Copyright Antonio Galloni *Vinous.com* http://vinous.com/statics/terms_and_conditions