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Rivera Il Falcone:

A Vertical Spanning More Than 50 years.



Puglia is one of the most important wine producing regions in Italy, and you may be familiar with the wines without knowing it: Though Puglian wines long had a reputation among connoisseurs of being powerful and rustic, and therefore not something one would necessarily want to drink, winemakers from more esteemed Italian and French appellations considered them to be just the thing with which to bolster more renowned wines if they need a little push. And, alas, tank trucks (and ships) still quietly depart Puglia directed to points north.

However, things are changing, and a steadily growing number of producers are turning their attention to quality rather than quantity, and putting their names on their bottles with pride. **Rivera**, a winery north of Bari that was founded in the early 1950s, has been one of the leaders of this Renaissance, and from a frankly surprising direction.

Their first truly successful wine was a Rosé, and it continued to be their top seller until the 1980s, when it was eclipsed first by the whites then in vogue, and then by the reds of the 90s that continue to be the most popular wines today. To make a rosé one must of course have red grapes, and Rivera thus also made a number of Reds in addition to their popular rosé: It was custom in the 50s, says **Sebastiano De Corato**, to make a basic red wine, and a selection of the same name, labeled Stravecchio or Riserva Speciale or some such, and that's what they initially did, using the word Stravecchio. When the Castel del Monte DOC was established in 1971, Sebastiano's father and grandfather decided to rename their Stravecchio Il Falcone in honor of Frederick II Barbarossa, who, in addition to building the nearby Castel Del Monte pleasure palace the Appellation is named after, was an ardent falconer who even wrote a treatise on the subject.

The vineyards used to make the Stravecchio were initially planted with a traditional mix of Nero di Troia and Montepulciano D'Abruzzo, the ratio being three rows of Nero di Troia, which provides power and force, per row of Montepulciano, which provides softness and elegance. The first vineyards were trained in the Alberello style, as shrubs, and the first three wines poured in the course of this vertical were made from vines trained this way. Subsequently, Rivera replanted their vineyards to a density of 4000 vines per hectare using the cordon spur pruning system, and divided the varietals by vineyard. In terms of yields, though the Castel del Monte DOC allows up to 140 quintals per hectare (and some producers interested in quantity obtain considerably more), Rivera limits yields to 110 quintals per hectare; though this might strike someone used to more northern Appellations as high, it is actually quite acceptable considering the intensity of the Puglian summer.

Their winery notes have allowed them to trace the evolution of the wine from a technical standpoint, seeing exactly which vineyards went into the wine, and seeing how the cellar technique, which was initially primitive, has evolved.

The Wines



Rivera Rosso Stravecchio 1950

This is the first vintage produced. Garnet ruby with pale onion skin rim. The bouquet is unusual, and very much alive, with brandied cherries mingling with oatmeal hints of maple candy, underlying leafy underbrush and toasted hazelnuts. Swishing brings up alcohol and dried flowers; mingled with greenish leather and balsam. Quite interesting. On palate it shows its age, with rather tannic berry fruit supported by quite a bit of acidity and an abundance of alcohol, and it flows into a long greenish tannic finish. The tannins keep it alive, though they are in large part drawn from stems, which -- according to the winemaker's notes that they still have for all their vintages -- also ended up in the vats, and are therefore greenish. Indeed, very much alive. **1 star**

Rivera Rosso Stravecchio 1960

Pale brownish garnet ruby with brownish onion skin rim. The bouquet is musty, with a pungent mix of wet underbrush and toasted hazelnuts, supported by a fair amount of acidity, and some wet bark. Obviously old. With swishing the alcohol emerges to a greater degree, and there is also some tingly spice. On the palate it's aged, with a fair amount of acidity supporting some tannins that again have a stemmy greenness to them. Though not dead it's less alive than the 1950, and this is likely due to vintage variation. **1 star**

Rivera Rosso Stravecchio 1967

Garnet ruby with brownish almandine rim. The bouquet is tart, with sour cherry supported by acidity and leaf tobacco mingled with wet oak leaves. On the palate it's lively, though clearly aged, with quite a bit of acidity supported by tannins that have a tongue-scraping burr to them, and lead into a long tart tannic finish that has dusky overtones. It's clearly elderly, but alive, and has a certain grace, though in a rather up-front way. Direct, and this is the tannic structure making itself well known. **1 star**



These vintages were fermented in cement, and since they were very tannic, in part because Uva di Troia simply is tannic, and in part because the stems went into the vats as well, they were aged for a number of years -- 5 or more -- before going into bottle. They didn't macerate much because of Uva di Troia's tannicity, and because with the equipment available at the time the only way they could avoid excessive tannin accumulation was to macerate for short times. In addition, Sebastiano says, they had no temperature control; temperatures increased, while the sugars fermented out, and at that point they had to rack.

Rivera Il Falcone Castel Del Monte Riserva DOC 1971

This is the first wine labeled Il Falcone, and their first use of oak -- 30 to 50 hectoliter Slavonian casks. It's brownish garnet with brown reflections and tawny onion-skin rim. The bouquet is frankly acetic, with leaf tobacco and some spice mingled with wet bark and toasted hazelnut. On the palate it's surprisingly smooth and round, to the point that one might not connect the two if tasting blind from two glasses; it has some delicate red berry fruit supported by smooth sweet tannins that gain direction from some lacy acidity, and flow into a long clean soft tannic finish with sour berry fruit overtones. The use of wood, and the adoption of new fermenting tanks, which allowed pushdowns and breaking up of the cap, makes a huge difference. Though it's clearly elderly, it does show considerable grace and must have been more inviting in the past. **2 stars**

Rivera Il Falcone Castel Del Monte Riserva DOC 1974

Deeper garnet ruby with black reflections and almandine rim. The bouquet is delicate at first swish, with some dried flowers, which gain direction from some sour acidity and toasted hazelnuts with peppery overtones and some wet leaf bitterness. Not much fruit; the odors are more tertiary, and this is to be expected. On the palate it's medium bodied tending towards full and quite soft, with fairly

ample sour cherry fruit that has some hazelnut tannic overtones and is supported by warm acidity, while the tannins are fairly smooth, and lead into a long savory tannic finish with alcoholic overtones that continue. It's quite alive, though clearly middle aged, and is one of those wines that invites repeated sips. In short, it grew on me. **2 stars**

Rivera Il Falcone Castel Del Monte Riserva DOC 1980

This is first vintage with grapes from trellised vineyards. It's deep black garnet ruby with brownish overtones and almandine rim fading into onion skins. The bouquet is elegant, with menthol and raw beef at first sniff, which open with swishing, revealing a fair amount of alcohol, and leaf tobacco, toasted hazelnuts, and underbrush as well; tertiary aromas continue to dominate, and with time menthol grows. On the palate it's full, and smooth, with moderate red fruit supported by clean smooth tannins that flow into a fairly long tannic finish with underlying tart acidity. Still greenish in a way, and has a lot in common with the earlier vintages. **1 star**

Rivera Il Falcone Castel Del Monte Riserva DOC 1988

They decided to make the wine easier to drink, and began to use steel tanks for fermentation. The long-term results were less than satisfactory, so they have backtracked, but this wine remains as a testament to the experiment. It's garnet with almandine in the rim, and has a tired bouquet, with dried leaves and some acidity; it seems older than the 80. On the palate it's light, with bright acidity and moderate fruit supported by moderately intense slightly brambly tannins. It's weaker than its older siblings, and has less to say, though Sebastiano says it was more drinkable when it came out. **1 star**

Rivera Il Falcone Castel Del Monte Riserva DOC 1995

This was the last vintage made with cement tanks, and the first with small wood -- to avoid overshadowing with oak they bought some used barriques from Champagne houses. The bouquet is interesting, with mint and alcohol mingling with spice and wet leaves. On the palate it's full and fairly smooth, with cherry and red berry fruit supported by some sour cherry acidity and by tannins that have a fair burr to them, and flow into a fairly long acidic finish; the overall effect is pleasant in a fairly rustic key (which is shared by its older siblings) and it has a fair amount to say. If you like this style you will like it. **2 stars**

Rivera Il Falcone Castel Del Monte Riserva DOC 1997

Deep ruby with black reflections and cherry rim. A very different appearance with respect to the older wines. In 1997 they began to lay the bottles on their sides, something they hadn't thought to do before then. The bouquet is different too, with hints of plums at the first sniff, and it opens into rich plum fruit with swishing, supported by berry fruit jam, spice, and hardwood ash. Quite pleasant, and has a lot to say. On the palate it's full, and quite soft, with ample plum fruit supported by moderate acidity and by tannins that have a slight graphite burr to them, and flow

into a long clean sour berry fruit finish with graphite overtones. Quite nice, with quite a bit going on; by comparison with the earlier vintages it's much more approachable, and as such represents a distinct change in direction. It's also softer than the earlier vintages, with much less acidity, and this may affect its longevity.

2 stars

Rivera Il Falcone Castel Del Monte Riserva DOC 2001

This is the current release; it's deep black cherry ruby with black reflections and cherry rim. The bouquet is powerful, and quite fresh, with red berry fruit laced with plums and berry fruit jam with hints of cut flowers and slight savory overtones. Quite interesting, and it has a lot to say in a fresh, fruit driven youthful key. On the palate it's full and smooth, with rich cherry and forest berry fruit supported by smooth sweet tannins that have an oaky undertone to them that will fold into the wine with time; it's still a little young but promises quite well, and will be very pleasant to drink in the next 2-3 years. Expect t to age well for at least 5-10 years. Again, much softer and considerably less acidity than in the older wines. **90**

Rivera Il Falcone Castel Del Monte Riserva DOC 2002

This is in bottle, but hadn't been released. It's impenetrable pigeon blood ruby with ruby rim. The bouquet is rich, and floral, with red flowers and red berry fruit; extraordinary and rather brash freshness of the sort that leads one to think of a starlet in the glass. Youth, in short. On the palate it's full, and quite smooth, with rich cherry plum fruit supported by clean soft tannins that flow into a long plum finish. Elegant, and will drink well with drier red meats; if you like big smooth fruit driven wines it will be worth seeking out when it is released.

Bottom line: Il Falcone is a very interesting wine, with excellent aging potential, and should you find a recent bottle in your wine shop, you may want to put it aside for a special occasion, even far into the future. Should you instead come across an older bottle, do consider it, because you may have in your hands a very pleasant surprise.



Rivera's Other Wines

The above vertical took place in the fall of 2005. At Vinitaly (April 06) I had occasion to taste through Rivera's wines, and was much impressed; quality was uniformly high. They're imported to the US by **Bedford International**.

Rivera Marese Bombino Bianco Castel del Monte DOC 2005

Bombino is an autochthonous varietal; the wine is pale brassy yellow with brassy reflections, and has a rich bouquet with pleasant floral accents mingling with heather, deft lemon blossom acidity, and a mixture of rosemary and sage. Quite fresh. On the palate it's graceful, with bright very tart renette apple fruit (renettes are Italian baking apples) mixed with lemon and supported by deft citric acidity that flows into a long lemony finish. Quite deft, in a warm slightly aggressive key, and will work very well as an aperitif with fish-based pasta dishes and risotti, or fish tout court, including richer things such as fried fish. Expect it to hold well 2-3 years, and drink quite quickly. **2 stars**.

Rivera Pungirosa Bombino Nero Castel Del Monte DOC 2005

Pale orange rose with brilliant salmon reflections. The bouquet is closed -- it was freshly bottled -- though swishing did bring up some red berry fruit with heather from a cut field. Very young, and still developing. On the palate it's light and deft, with pleasant raspberry fruit that gains body from glycerin and some soft tannins, while direction comes from lively raspberry acidity that flows into a clean sour raspberry finish. Pleasant, and will be quite nice with hearty fish-based pasta dishes or richer risotti that require a little more body; it will also be nice with pasta salads and similar at a cookout, or grilled fish, and because of the deftness of fruit and relative lack of tannins it will also be a nice bet with spiced Oriental dishes. It's a touch too acidic to be drunk far from the table, but with foods it will go very fast. **2 stars**

Rivera Rosé Castel del Monte DOC 2005

This is slightly deeper salmon pink than the Pungirosa, with brilliant ruby reflections and white rim. The bouquet is also richer than the Pungirosa's, with riper raspberry fruit that has more pulp, and is supported by some heather and deft underbrush as well. On the palate it's full for a rosé and quite round, with ample elegant raspberry fruit supported by deft raspberry acidity that flows into a long raspberry finish with warmth and some brambles. It's more powerful and a little more settled than the Pungirosa, at a cookout or picnic featuring fish, or with pizza or lighter pasta dishes. Expect it to drink quickly. **2 stars**

Rivera Rupìcolo Castel del Monte DOC 2004

This is a 70-30 blend of Montepulciano d'Abruzzo and Nero di Troia, and is deep ruby with black reflections and cherry rim. The bouquet is powerful and elegant, with rich red berry fruit supported by fairly intense stewed bell peppers and some greenish overlying spice. If you're used to the international varietals it's decidedly

exotic, but also pleasant, and as it opens it gains in intensity. On the palate it's full, warm, and rich, with fairly intense red berry fruit that has harmonious grilled pepper overtones and is supported by ample slightly dusty tannins that flow into a long warm finish with cedary spice and fruit that carry at length. It's quite pleasant, in a slightly aggressive key that is both varietal and youth at work, and will drink very well with succulent red meats, for example lamb (leg too) or a hearty roast. Worth seeking out if you like this more aggressive style, and you can expect it to go quickly. **2 stars**

Rivera Nero di Troia Violante Castel del Monte DOC 2004

Deep cherry ruby with black reflections. The bouquet is quite elegant, with rich red berry fruit mingled with berry fruit jam -- currants and blackberries -- and supported by deft grilled bell pepper and some peppery acidity, while there are also floral -- violet -- accents that add grace. On the palate it's full, and quite round, with voluptuous forest berry fruit supported by clean grilled bell pepper notes and tannins that have a warm bitter greenish burr, and flow into a long clean slightly tart fruit laced finish. Great depth that's all the more impressive considering how young the wine is; it will drink beautifully with a platter of mixed grilled meats and veggies, or with a succulent stew. Well worth seeking out. **88-90**

Note: I tasted a prerelease bottle of Violante in the fall of 2005 (you'll find the note below, in the Uva di Troia note), and found the wine significantly better this time around.

Rivera Triusco Primitivo Puglia IGT 2003

Deep black almandine ruby with black reflections and almandine rim. The bouquet is powerful, with rich red berry fruit that has some jammy notes and is supported by warmth and slight cedar mingled with cocoa and hints of underbrush. Quite a bit going on.. On the palate it's full, with powerful slightly balsamic red berry fruit supported by considerable warmth and by tannins that flow into a long clean slightly tannic brambly finish. It's pleasant in a fairly rich, slightly rustic key now, but also needs a year for the tannins to fold into the wine, by which time it will have gained considerably in elegance. Now it will drink nicely with succulent red meats and has the structure necessary to age well for many years. **2 stars**

Rivera Cappellaccio Aglianico Riserva Castel del Monte DOC 2002

Impenetrable black almandine ruby with black reflections and almandine rim. The bouquet is powerful and frankly oaky, with some blackberry fruit that emerges, coupled with warmth, but what is most evident is the cedar. On the palate it's full and soft, with moderately intense berry fruit that rapidly folds into itself, revealing tannic warmth from wood. It's a child of a hotter than normal vintage, and it isn't a letdown, but it's not exciting either. **1 star**

Rivera Il Falcone Castel del Monte Riserva DOC 2002

Deep pigeon blood ruby with almandine rim. The bouquet is powerful, with fairly intense slightly balsamic red berry fruit supported by alcohol and cedar, with underbrush as well to provide definition. On the palate it's rich and smooth with powerful plum-laced red berry fruit supported by clean sweet tannins that do reveal some oaky heritage, and flow into a fairly long clean finish. It's obviously the child of a lesser vintage, but has a pleasing grace to it, and though it won't age long it will hold for another 3-5 years, and I would give it one to get its bearings. Drink it with succulent, not too fatty meats, along the lines of rare roast beef cut thick. In the proper setting it will be quite nice. **2 stars**

Rivera Puer Apuliae Castel Del Monte DOC 2003

Poured pyrope ink; the bouquet is quite intense, with jammy berry fruit supported by equally intense warm cedar -- a marvel of concentration -- that is still very young and gives an impression of being between here and there, in transit as it were. On the palate it's equally full and powerful, though there is more fruit, which does balance the oak, though it also gives an impression of vineyard immaturity -- one expects more depth than there is. It will in any case be interesting to follow the wine to its destination, which will be frankly international, and if you like the "gobs of fruit and concentration in spades" style that some of the wine press seems to favor, you will like it. I found myself feeling, on the one hand, that I was looking in on a toddler, and, on the other, that this isn't my style of wine. But I did find it interesting. **2 stars**

(Note: I also tasted this wine in November 2005 and gave it the same point score, 83, as I did here.)

posted by Kyle Phillips

<http://italianwinereview.blogspot.com/2006/07/rivera-il-falcone-vertical-spanning.html>