

The Noble Wines of Montepulciano—Vino Nobile



Vino Nobile di Montepulciano is one Italy's classic red wines, and has unquestionably helped Tuscany retain its privileged place on the wine map. It comes from the vineyards which surround Montepulciano, a picturesque hill town 25 miles southeast of Siena, and about an hour south of Florence. It is the southernmost end of the Tuscany region.

Viticulture here dates back many centuries. During the 15th century, the local wine was a favorite among the local aristocracy, and in the 16th century it was revered by Pope Paul III, who spoke of the wine's excellent qualities. Vino Nobile di Montepulciano has even been mentioned in literature as "the king of all wines."

According to DOCG — Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita (controlled designation of origin guaranteed) rules, to be labeled as Vino Nobile di Montepulciano, a wine must come from vineyards on the hills which surround Montepulciano. This area is made up of slopes located between the Ocria and the Chiana rivers.

The key grape variety grown here Sangiovese - think Chianti. It is also the same grape variety used to make another of Tuscany's other great red wines, Brunello di Montalcino. Sangiovese grapes must make up at least 60–80 percent of the final wine, but it can also contain other local grapes as permitted in the province of Siena, including Canaiolo and Mammolo.

The aging period for any Vino Nobile di Montepulciano is strictly regulated. It is a minimum of 24 months for traditional Vino Nobile and at least 12 months must be spent in oak barrels. Riserva wines must age for 36 months, of which at least 24 months must be spent in oak barrels. Local winemakers long used large Italian botti instead of smaller French barriques since smaller barrels might impart too much oak accents, leading to dominate notes of toasty oak and vanilla flavors in the wine. Since the larger botti have a lower surface area relative to the volume of wine they contain, less oak flavor is imparted in the finished wine. Oak barrels are really employed more for the benefit of slow, controlled aging. And now, this tradition has become treasured in the Vino Nobile di Montepulciano DOC laws.

Vino Nobile di Montepulciano is usually maroon-red in color and takes on a subtle brick-orange tint over time. It is characterized by its dark cherry and rich plum aromas, ripe strawberry and cherry fruit flavors, and a gently tannic 'tea-leaf' finish. It is also known for its medium body, firm tannins, and for the acidity which makes it a particularly age-worthy wine, some lasting decades.

The **2009 Leone D'Oro Vino Nobile di Montepulciano** is a tremendous wine for the money, with delicious fruit flavors of rustic blackberry and cassis, enhanced by nuances of briar and tobacco. Full and lush on the palate, this noble wine offers an amazingly long, velvety finish. **\$20**

A very reasonably priced example of Vino Nobile is the **2011 Fattoria del Cerro Vino Nobile di Montepulciano**. It is an intense, full-bodied Vino Nobile de Montepulciano with aromas of wild black cherry, violet and vanilla and ripe flavors of black cherry, dark cassis and blackberry that coat the tongue. Hints of vanilla and tobacco linger on the finish to provide extra depth. **\$21**

Produced by one of the most prominent wine families in Italy, the **2010 Marchesi Antinori La Braccessa Vino Nobile di Montepulciano** is both seductive and savory. Earthy aromas dominate the bouquet. The palate delivers a lush dark cherry, black plum are the first impression made on the palate, but they are soon accented by baking spice, cinnamon and tobacco notes. The is fresh acidity balanced by firm-yet-elegant tannins that provide a long, silky finish. **\$27**

Lush without being overpowering, the **2011 Avignonesi Vino Nobile di Montepulciano** is made from 100% Sangiovese. It exhibits bright cherry notes that mingle with a touch of raspberry and vanilla on the bouquet. Flavors of dark red cherry, plum, and roasted coffee bean linger on the tip of the tongue while hints of black tea and toasty cedar roll in on the medium-bodied finish. **\$30**