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## An Italian Red Wine's Star Turn

Intensely aromatic as well as affordable, Nero d'Avola just might be the next Malbec

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*Illustration by Gwendal Le Bec for The Wall Street Journal*

**WHAT MAKES A** wine popular? It's a question that winemakers (and marketers) have long asked themselves. For me, the explanation is simple: A popular wine is one that is easy to pronounce. There's Chardonnay, Merlot, Pinot Noir and of course Malbec—all beloved wines with non-challenging names. Of course, an in-demand wine needs other attributes, too.

For example, it must be reasonably priced, widely available and easy to drink. It doesn't need to be grown in wine regions everywhere, although that helps. And if it's produced in one particular place (e.g. Malbec in Argentina), the winemakers of that area should make it very, very well.

**Oenofile: Three Nero D'Avolas to Try**

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*F. Martin Ramin/The Wall Street Journal*

Many other wines have proved popular over time. How many oenophiles remember when Syrah was a star, or when Viognier was touted as "the next Chardonnay" until it was deemed to have too much fruit, too much alcohol and too many vowels?

There is a wine that I think could become the next Malbec: Nero d'Avola, or "Nero" as it's sometimes called. Nero d'Avola ("black grape of Avola") is the most widely-planted and most famous red grape in Sicily. It's the island's vinous ambassador, showing up more and more frequently on American wine lists and retail-store shelves.

Nero d'Avola produces dark red wines that are fairly high in alcohol (around 14%, and sometimes more) but also relatively high in acidity, which means they're not quite as overpowering as other high-octane reds like Zinfandel or Syrah. They're also intensely aromatic, with powerful, seductive aromas of cherry, raspberry and spice that practically billow out of the glass. They're usually quite soft and approachable—sometimes so soft that more tannic grapes such as Syrah are blended in to give the wines structure.

First planted in Sicily hundreds of years ago, Nero d'Avola was almost always blended with other grapes to fortify weaker red wines. It's only been showcased on its own for the past 30 years. It wasn't until the Duca di Salaparuta estate just outside Palermo debuted the first vintage of Duca Enrico, in 1984, that Nero d'Avola was given a serious, starring role. Aged for almost two years in cask and 18 months in bottle, Duca Enrico is an elegant, restrained example and, at \$56, one of only a few pricey Neros (most cost less than \$15 a bottle).

*"Nero d'Avola could be for Europe what Malbec has become for South America."*

Cost is among the biggest factors determining Nero's future success. A popular wine must be affordably priced. And save for three pricey but excellent Nero d'Avolas (the 2006 Duca Enrico; the 2009 Morgante Don Antonio at \$35 and the 2010 Occhipinti Siccagno for \$37), most all of the wines that I bought for my tasting cost well under \$20 a bottle. Three of the best were the lively and lithe 2011 Valle dell'Acate Case Ibidini at \$12 and the plush 2011 Pupillo Re Federico at \$14. The soft, plummy 2011 Tenuta Rapitalà Campo Reale costs a mere \$10 a bottle.

According to Giuseppe LoCascio, Italian brand director of Winebow, an importer specializing in Italian wines, the company's Nero sales were up 10% in 2012 over 2011, and are projected to grow at the same rate this year. Yet Mr. LoCascio isn't quite ready to call Nero d'Avola "the next Malbec"—in fact, he doubts it could even come close. "And I'm Sicilian," he noted.

## The Off Duty Fall 50

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*F. Martin Ramin/The Wall Street Journal, Styling by Anne Cardenas, Grooming by Cheyenne Timperio/ArtMix Beauty*

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The main problem, said Mr. LoCascio, is an inconsistent flavor profile. "Nero d'Avola is more varied than Malbec. You'll have many different expressions of the grape," he said. After all, the grape is grown all over Sicily, in different climates and terroirs, and large producers are often more interested in volume than quality. "I don't think we will ever match the popularity of Malbec," Mr. Locascio concluded dolefully.

And yet for Yannick Benjamin, a sommelier turned wine educator and sales specialist at Le Dû's Wines store in New York, Nero's diversity is a selling point. He likened its variable nature to that of white Burgundy. "You have wines that range from crisp Mâcon-Villages to village Meursault to grand cru Montrachet," he said.

It's also important to note that Nero is a red wine that is drinkable by itself, said Mr. Benjamin—it doesn't need food: "It's full bodied but soft." The fact that it's inexpensive means that restaurants can afford to pour it by the glass (This is how many people experience a new wine, after all.)

In fact, Nero has so many advantages that Mr. Benjamin thinks it could go further than becoming merely the next Malbec. "What Malbec has become for wines of South America, Nero d'Avola could be for Europe," he wrote in an email.

That's an ambitious vision, more ambitious than my own, I said during our subsequent chat. Did Mr. Benjamin really believe this was possible? Mr. Benjamin did and, besides, he added, "The name Nero is so easy to pronounce."

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