

# Wine Connoisseur

## MAGAZINE

### Villa dei Misteri: The Ancient Wine of Pompeii



Everybody knows Italy has a long winemaking history dating back to Roman times, but few are aware of the fact that the same wine the citizens of ancient Rome used to drink is still being produced today. Pompeii (in the Campania region in the south of Italy) is 2000 years old. The city was covered with lava after the volcano, Vesuvio, erupted in 79 B.C. These 18th-century ruins are now visited by more than 2 million tourists each year.

What's new today is the active wine production taking place at that archaeological site!

In the 1980s, the Superintendency for the Archaeological Heritage started a search beneath the archaeological site to discover the original plants, trees and flowers and recover them after 2000 years had passed.

During their research, they discovered grapevines. They turned to Mastroberardino, an historical local winery, known for their efforts to protect and enhance the native varieties. Researchers asked the winery to handle this piece of the research.

The study progressed through several phases and the analysis of the berries and vines remains in laboratory along with the casts of plants, similar to the amazing casts of the bodies trapped under the lava. Based upon where the vines were located, the winery was able to reproduce the grapevines with the same density as the original ones.

Thanks to the numerous books written by Romans, such as *Naturalis Historia* by Plinio, it was possible to learn more about ancient farming techniques of the vines.

In 2001, from this fascinating recovery, "Villa dei Misteri" wine (named after one of the most impressive villas in Pompeii) was born. Villa dei Misteri is a red wine made with 90% Piediroso and 10% Sciascinoso grapes, the same grapes the ancient Romans used to drink. Incredibly, both grapes are still popular today, especially the Piediroso. For the last few decades, Sciascinoso has not been used as much.

Before producing the wine, the agronomists at the winery suggested planting a small experimental vineyard to test the ancient varieties preferred by the Romans (Piedirosso and Scacinoso, both reds) as well as other typical grapes of the area. They wondered whether, after 2000 years, growth conditions might have been changed. They planted 8 different local varieties (both whites and reds) to test them before starting the official production. What they found was that Piedirosso and Scacinoso are still the best grapes that are cultivated today.

Thanks to Italy's ancient wine history, Mastroberardino continues to produce less than 2,000 bottles per year. The first edition was auctioned off to support the recovery of the Villa dei Misteri itself. An image of the Villa's frescos is reproduced on the label.

Fortunately, modern winemaking and wine storing techniques are used by the winery today. Otherwise, this wine would not be drinkable. To create a chilling effect, Romans stored wine in amphorae which were inserted into the ground, which is not as effective as our modern techniques. This helps us to understand why the ancient Romans added honey to wine. It was not just a whim, but a preservative--a way to dampen any defects that might be a result of poorly preserved wine underground.. It seems they also used to add sea water to the wine as a preservative, especially while transporting it by boat from one country to another... I do not want to imagine the result!

Today, *Villa dei Misteri* is a very fine wine. It ages for about 12 months in new French oak barrels, or bottles. The wine has spicy notes along with red, fruity ones. It has fine tannins and a long shelf life. Just imagine the soil where the grapes are grown--mainly volcanic, loose, rich in minerals and lapilli which add mineral notes and a special taste to the wine. *Villa dei Misteri* is great paired with traditional and rich pasta dishes; it is also nice with cheese and grilled meats.

So, if you ever have a chance to visit the archaeological city of Pompeii, you'll find those small vineyards. In some of them, the ancient amphorae remain, as well as the famous lounges where ancient Romans would lie and relax while eating and tasting the wine and grapes wearing crowns on their heads made from the grapevines harvested for the wine.

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