

Accornero Grignolino del Monferrato Casalese Bricco del Bosco Vigne Vecchie 2006-2015

BY IAN D'AGATA | NOVEMBER 12, 2019

Grignolino is one of Italy's most underrated varieties, and so are its wines. The grape and its wines were historically famous and exceptionally popular as they were much sought-after in Italy as recently as the late 1970s. Soon thereafter Grignolino fell on hard times, when practically black, high-pH, overripe and obviously sweet red wines became, the desired norm. Happily, most fads are short-lived, and when people began to realize that sweet, high-alcohol and generally overripe reds made for very poor company at the dining table, it was time for light and medium-bodied wines to have their turn in the sun once again.



The entrance to the Accornero estate

Grignolino is characterized by dark pink to pale red hues (often with orangey tinges), high tannins, bright acids and mostly floral aromas and flavors with little in the way of obvious fleshy fruit. In fact, such lighter-styled wines (or the best examples, at least) offer brilliantly balanced drinking experiences that are remarkably complex, food-friendly and ageworthy. Grignolino is the poster child of a specific group of "less is more" grapes, a point underscored by what is arguably Italy's best Grignolino, Accornero's Grignolino del Monferrato Casalese Bricco del Bosco Vigne Vecchie.



Accornero's Grignolino vineyards

Understanding the Grignolino Grape Variety and Its Wines

There are three main wines made from Grignolino. The best examples are 100% Grignolinos but the minimum required by law is 85%: Grignolino d'Asti (usually the lightest and most perfumed of all), Grignolino del Monferrato Casalese (usually bigger and richer) and Piemonte Grignolino (a less famous category, but the wines are often surprisingly good). The Grignolino variety is also (rarely) called by other names, such as Arlandino and Barbesino. "Grignolino" most likely derives either from the Piedmontese dialect word *grignole*, "grating of teeth," in a reference to the variety's high acidity and tannic clout, or perhaps from another meaning of the word, "seeds," because the grapes contain, on average, more seeds (three) than other varieties (which they usually only have two).

Grignolino is the 11th most planted variety in Piedmont, but at 877 hectares, it's not far behind the very popular Arneis (947 hectares) in this specific classification (2010 data). Though Grignolino's hectarage has steadily fallen over the last two decades, signs of an end to this hemorrhage have only recently begun to surface. Grignolino is, in fact, still much more prevalent today in Piedmont's countryside (especially in the provinces of Asti and Alessandria) than many of the region's other currently fashionable varieties, such as Erbaluce, Favorita, Nascetta and Ruchè. The downturn in Grignolino's fortunes is really only a recent event. It is well demonstrated by documentation how Grignolino was a favorite in centuries past of nobles and wealthy families, who much preferred its light-bodied, perfumed, refined wines to the more rustic, coarser reds. In fact, Grignolinos were some of Piedmont's most expensive and sought-after wines right up to the beginning of the 20th century.



The soils at Accornero are rich in fossils

Grignolino's fall from grace was not solely the result of a bad fashion trend; the variety has a number of less-than-desirable characteristics that also contributed to its current out of favor status. Depending on the clone or the biotype, Grignolino can have very long, large, rather compact pyramid-shaped bunches. The compactness makes Grignolino prone to rot. For this reason, the grape requires good ventilation; add the fact that it also loves sunlight, clearly Grignolino needs to be planted in top-quality sites. Such locations are precisely the spots where producers choose to plant Nebbiolo (for obvious reasons), this explains why plantings of Grignolino in the Langhe have essentially gone the way of the dodo, the brontosaurus and the archaeopteryx. Grignolino is also prone to just about all the grapevine diseases, which makes producing wine that much more of a challenge. (It is especially susceptible to esca – a real tragedy, for many of Piedmont's oldest and most beautiful Grignolino vineyards have been wiped out by this veritable plague over the last decade or so.) Last but not least, Grignolino is characterized by asynchronous maturation, especially when yields are allowed to creep upward. Come harvest time, those many different-colored grapes of varied ripeness levels within bunches require very time-consuming, tiring and expensive hand sorting, something not all wineries are especially keen to get involved in. The winemaking doesn't get any easier. Though Grignolino has pretty blue grapes that are not especially pale (it is always a surprise to those familiar with the light pink wines that typify the variety), it gives up its pigments with difficulty. Extended skin contact risks leaching out the variety's not exactly shy tannins, making for a head-scratching winemaking conundrum.

For all the difficulties and headaches it presents, or perhaps because of them, Grignolino and its wines are loved by large numbers of enthusiasts. When producers get it right, the wines offer a panoply of perfumed aromas and flavors, a complex spectrum ranging from rose hips to cinnamon to red berries to nutmeg to red cherries to soy sauce to flint to violet to white pepper to orange zest, and a whole lot more. And with people looking for lighter-bodied, svelte wines to pair with their locally sourced, less heavy-handed food preparations, Grignolino's popularity is undoubtedly on the rise. I have routinely found over the last five years that at wine tastings everywhere, Grignolinos almost always emerge as the second or third favorite wine of the night. Though it is still relatively unknown, and a hand-sell for most somms in fine

dining establishments, I am glad to report that the numbers of the Grignolino "squadrons of the faithful" are blooming year after year.



Bricco del Bosco Vigne Vecchie is a Grignolino made in the historic, traditional style, aged up to two years in oak, and quite ageworthy

The Accornero Estate and Its Grignolino

The Accornero estate was founded in 1897 but entered the modern winemaking age with current owner Ermanno Accornero's father Giulio, who started making wine in the mid-1950s. In the beginning, besides raising farm animals and tending to other crops, Accornero sold mostly bulk wine, limiting himself to bottling only small amounts for his best, most faithful customers. At that time the family owned only five hectares of vines, mostly Barbera, with 0.5 hectares planted to Grignolino. Giulio's two sons, Massimo and Ermanno, started taking part in running the winery by the end of the 1970s and early 1980s, and focused on estate bottling. Massimo is no longer with us, but Ermanno is still at the helm today, assisted in winemaking by star-consultant Mario Ronco, who also helps make the small-lot Grignolinos of many local estates, and is also very well regarded for his high-quality, large-volume bottlings from Sicily's famous Cusumano winery.

Accornero is located in Vignale Monferrato, a commune that is essentially one big *Grand Cru* area for Grignolino. Today the estate boasts 30 hectares, of which 25 are planted to vines. Of these, 4.1 hectares are of Grignolino, divided among the 2.3-hectare Bricco del Bosco vineyard (five plots planted in 1980) and the 1.8-hectare Vecchia Vigna (four contiguous plots, planted in 1961 and 1971). The soils are mostly friable and marly-tufaceous in nature (with some loam and sand) and have a sub-alkaline pH. Grignolino likes poorly fertile soils such as these. Combining the variety with Paulsen and Du Lot rootstocks helps curb the variety's natural tendency for high vigor. At Accornero, green harvests are performed when necessary (the aforementioned asynchronous maturation normally leads to a green harvest at *veraison*). The estate makes two Grignolinos, the entry-level and truly outstanding Grignolino del Monferrato Casalese Bricco del Bosco, from the younger vines and made with no oak aging, and the oak-aged Grignolino del Monferrato Casalese Bricco del Bosco Vigne Vecchie, made from the oldest vines, the ones planted back in 1961 and 1971. The 1961 Grignolino vines are located right next to the 1971 vines, but were bought by Accornero only recently, in 2015;

hence, the fruit from those almost 60-year-old vines was used to make the Vigne Vecchie bottling starting after that date.



Getting ready to taste through the vertical

Accornero produces roughly 110,000 bottles of wine per year; of these, 12,000 are of Grignolino Bricco del Bosco and 2,500–3,700, depending on the vintage, of Vecchie Vigne. Today, it is not unreasonable to consider each of these two wines to be either the best Grignolinos made in Italy, or at the very least, among the top three wines in each category.

Although I absolutely adore the entry-level Bricco del Bosco (one of my half-dozen favorite light-bodied Italian wines of all time), it is the Vigne Vecchie that is a unique wine, of which I have never had a bad vintage. It boasts all the characteristics that make Grignolinos so endearing, but kicks them up a notch or two. The Vigne Vecchie is a bigger, deeper wine than the Bricco del Bosco *tout court*, medium-bodied and very refined but mouthcoating in its rich fruit and tannic presence, a wine brimming with ripe red cherry, sweet spice and floral nuances that linger long on the aftertaste. Accornero has tinkered with his winemaking over the years, in order to achieve the most ageworthy Grignolino possible. For example, he now uses increasingly longer macerations and fermentations. From 2006 - 2008, macero-fermentations lasted roughly three weeks, but since 2009 these increased gradually, reaching up to two months with the 2013 and 2014 vintages (there is now two months' worth of skin contact, using the old *cappello sommerso* technique with wooden staves keeping the cap down in contact with the must). The wine ages 30 months in *tonneaux* (of which roughly 60% are new, the percentage of new oak changes depending on the vintage characteristics). I wonder how many readers ever imagined a Grignolino that could spend two years or more in oak and still taste of anything else; and yet, therein lies the magic of the Bricco del Bosco Vigne Vecchie, a wine in which the fruit always sings loud while oakiness is never much of an issue.



The first-ever tasting of every vintage ever made of the Bricco del Bosco Vigne Vecchie. The wines were tasted non-blind directly at the Accornero estate in May 2019 in the company of Ermanno Accornero

Accornero first made the Grignolino Vecchie Vigne in 2006, but had wanted to make an oak-aged, ageworthy Grignolino as far back as the 1970s. He was always very aware that local old-timers believed most Grignolinos were being drunk much too young, and that the wines come into their own at three to four years. But at that point in time nobody aged Grignolino wines at all, preferring to bank on the easygoing, addictively perfumed charms of the steel-aged versions. Accornero knew this meant missing out on showcasing the Grignolino variety's full winemaking potential; after all, it couldn't be an accident that all the wines that had reaped important awards and medals in centuries past were oak-aged. And so, in 2006 he took the plunge and made his first oak-aged Grignolino (releasing it only in 2011); the rest, as they say, is history.

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Vintage	(Hover for Commentary) Producer	Name	Tasting Notes	Score	Drinking window
2015	Accornero	Grignolino del Monferrato Casalese Bricco del Bosco Vigne Vecchie	Good full vivid red. Sweet red fruit, candied raspberry, crystallized strawberry, Asian spices and violet. Cinnamon, marzipan, blood orange and cherry pie in the mouth are nicely supported by polished but assertive tannins and lifted by vibrant	92	2022-2030

			<p>acidity. Finishes very long, dense and creamy, but with outstanding precision and lift. A hot year that saw dangerously ripe grapes bordering on overripe, with very high potential alcohol levels, but the Vigne Vecchie suffered no water stress and gave no cooked characteristics. Grapes from the 1961 vineyard were used for the first time, allowing Accornero to almost double production, from 2,000 to 3,700 bottles.</p> <p>-- Ian D'Agata</p>		
2014	Accornero	Grignolino del Monferrato Casalese Bricco del Bosco Vigne Vecchie	<p>Luminous deep red. Very pretty, aromatic nose of dark red cherry and minerals, complicated by quinine and perfumed flowers. Dense, juicy and extremely long, offering youthfully chewy but polished tannins and hints of blood orange, peach, red cherry jelly and sweet pipe tobacco. A touch of soy sauce emerges at the back, and very lively acidity extends the flavors, adding hints of leather. A cool and very rainy year, different from 2008, which many in the area believe gave similar wines. Ronco thinks it was actually a better vintage than 2008, as those who worked well in the vineyards were able to wait out the bad weather and leave the grapes on the vine to benefit from an extremely long hang time. Some growers pulled the trigger too early because they were worried it was getting too cold.</p> <p>-- Ian D'Agata</p>	89+	2022-2030
2013	Accornero	Grignolino del Monferrato Casalese Bricco del Bosco Vigne Vecchie	<p>Slightly deep red. Cool-climate nose of mint, coriander, minerals and red cherry; very pretty and pure. Then spicy and lively, hints of ginger lifting the <i>umami</i>, herbal and spicy red fruit notes. Closes long with hints of porcini and herbs and this wine's typical seamless, weightless mouthfeel. This is one of the more complex Grignolino wines I have memory of. The 2013 growing season offered a normal warm summer, but the fall season was cooler than usual, and some rain fell in September, leading to a slightly later harvest than usual. Good diurnal temperature variations made for very perfumed wines. The tannins here are slightly tougher than usual for an Accornero wine; believe it or not, this still needs a lot more time in the cellar.</p> <p>-- Ian D'Agata</p>	92+	2023-2030
2012	Accornero	Grignolino del Monferrato Casalese Bricco del Bosco Vigne Vecchie	<p>Marvelous bright red. Slightly aromatically compressed but very clean nose of red cherry, minerals, sweet spices and potpourri, lifted by hints of faded rose and lavender. Enters round, juicy and almost sweet, then reveals rising,</p>	88	2020-2029

			<p>slightly tough tannins that coat the palate, locking it in a vise-like grip. Tobacco, earth tones and potpourri accumulate and linger on the long, refined, dense finish. Though there is noteworthy tannic clout here, there is also plenty of fruit and a certain airiness that makes this wine seem very light and harmonious. The 2012 vintage in the area was less droughty and characterized by a cooler fall season than 2011.</p> <p>-- Ian D'Agata</p>		
2011	Accornero	Grignolino del Monferrato Casalese Bricco del Bosco Vigne Vecchie	<p>Vivid red. Pungently intense coffee-like notes of torrefaction, plus superripe dark plum, licorice and herbal notes; with aeration, aromas of anise and crushed rose petals emerge. Then dense, juicy and very suave, displaying red fruit cocktail qualities and finishing thrust of <i>umami</i> flavors, complicated by smoke, <i>garrigue</i> and white pepper. Juicy and lovely, this is yet another Grignolino wine that smells superripe but tastes delightfully light on its feet, though there is a building mouthcoating tannic streak rising at the back. I don't think this wine has aged as well as others in the lineup; I certainly liked it a lot more in the first few years after its release. According to Accornero, 2011 was a very hot year (as elsewhere in Piedmont), and the ripe, soft fruit provided less contrast to the oak, making this specific vintage of the Vecchie Vigne seem oakier than usual. Unlike other grapes and vineyards at Accornero, the Vecchie Vigne did not go into water stress in 2011, thanks to the combination of old vines and clay-rich soils (the harvest took place one week earlier than in the already very early 2007).</p> <p>-- Ian D'Agata</p>	90	2022-2027
2010	Accornero	Grignolino del Monferrato Casalese Bricco del Bosco Vigne Vecchie	<p>Vivid red. Captivating aromas of spicy red cherry, raspberry nectar and herbs. Then rich, dense and juicy, showing lovely ripe fruity presence to the red cherry and sweet spice flavors. A wine that is less fresh but fruitier and denser than the 2009, while finishing similarly long and with still youthfully chewy tannins.</p> <p>-- Ian D'Agata</p>	92+	2021-2028
2009	Accornero	Grignolino del Monferrato Casalese Bricco del Bosco Vigne Vecchie	<p>Beautiful luminous red. Very pure, precise aromas of red cherry, raspberry, dried herbs, crushed flowers, mint, marzipan and green melon. Clean, fresh and savory, revealing nuances of blood orange on the austere, steely mouthfeel. Finishes long and clean, with hints of black licorice and more dried spices. Outstanding fruit/acid/tannin balance and a hint of alcoholic warmth but very</p>	90+	2021-2029

			<p>light on its feet and showing no undue weight. Still fresh after all these years, this remains a rather monolithic wine that showcases a straight-as-an-arrow personality. Unlike the 2011 Vigne Vecchie, which appears to have aged less gracefully than I had originally expected, this wine actually seems to have improved in the years following its release. The weather during the growing season was, at least in this neck of the Piedmontese woods, rather similar to that of 2010, experiencing very regular rainfall and a warm summer, but a harvest period that was not as hot as 2010. This is the first Vigne Vecchie that was bottled with Diam corks.</p> <p>-- Ian D'Agata</p>		
2008	Accornero	Grignolino del Monferrato Casalese Bricco del Bosco Vigne Vecchie	<p>Pale garnet-red. Meaty aromas and flavors of dried herbs, beef broth and earth, plus delicate undertones of anise; coffee and crushed rose petals emerge with prolonged aeration. Very round and lifted in the mouth, offering lovely juiciness and clean, absolutely weightless red fruit flavors that persist nicely on the savory but pure finish. Not my favorite Vigne Vecchie, but this is extremely light on its feet and boasts sneaky concentration. The 2008 vintage was a generally fresh one, with numerous rain showers in the Vignale Monferrato area between August and September, the latter month being especially cool, leading up to a late harvest (it took place roughly 12–14 days later than in 2007 and about 7–8 days later than in 2006).</p> <p>-- Ian D'Agata</p>	90	2019-2024
2007	Accornero	Grignolino del Monferrato Casalese Bricco del Bosco Vigne Vecchie	<p>Good full bright red; slightly deeper than the 2006. Initially aromatically compressed, then more expressive with aeration, offering cherry cola, potpourri and red cherry aromas lifted by strong floral notes. Boasts plenty of nutmeg and dried sage in the mouth, where pure, juicy red fruit flavors are nicely supported by extremely smooth if big tannins. Finishes long and clean with red cherry and strawberry jelly reminders. From a hot year characterized by copious yields at many estates, but the Vecchie Vigne's vigor is so low that high yields are never much of a factor.</p> <p>-- Ian D'Agata</p>	94	2021-2029
2006	Accornero	Grignolino del Monferrato Casalese Bricco del Bosco Vigne Vecchie	<p>Very pretty pale red. Intense nose of sweet spices (cinnamon, nutmeg), ripe red cherry, red plum, marzipan, bay leaf and dried sage. Then rich, dense and juicy, the smooth tannins nicely framing the ripe raspberry and red cherry flavors. Lingers</p>	95	2020-2030

		<p>impressively with peppery nuances on the long, taut, suave back end. An excellent vintage, from a classic, very regular growing season, this is a simply outstanding red wine. At 13 years out, and still amazingly young and not really ready to drink, this beauty showcases just how well Grignolino wines can age.</p> <p>-- Ian D'Agata</p>		
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