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## Amalfi Coast Jewels

AFTER OUR FOUR-DAY TUSCAN WINE and food extravaganza in June 2014, we headed to Rome to board the Crystal “Serenity” for a seven-day cruise from Rome to Venice. While one could make the case that the 23 people who were on the pre-cruise had been over exposed to wine and food, I wanted to offer an extraordinary wine and food discovery to the first 20 of the 43 people on the cruise who signed-up for the limited space event. Our first stop was in Sorrento, at the northern end of the Amalfi Coast.

I had reached out to Silvia Imperato, owner of Montevetrano and one of Campania’s and Italy’s highest-rated wineries. Although not normally open to visitors, after a long letter of introduction and some amount of imploring, Silvia graciously



Jim Bryant and Silvia Imperato

PHOTO: PAT BRYANT

agreed to host 20 of us. The day was fabulous in all accounts except that the ground operator and I both misunderstood the location. This necessitated an hour and a half drive each way in order to visit both Montevetrano and to arrive at a late lunch which had been prearranged in Positano.

We arrived at about 11:30 a.m. and were welcomed by the indefatigable and undauntable Silvia. She is an electric personality who immediately captivated all of us. She gave a brief tour of her winemaking operations and regaled us with the story of how, at age 50, she turned from one of Italy’s most famous photographers into one its most revered winery owners. What a story by a great storyteller. She wanted to take us on a vineyard tour, but we knew we had to leave by 1 p.m. at the latest in order to make our luncheon plans.

Silvia had personally prepared a light lunch for us to accompany our wine tasting. We sat under a portico with outstanding views of her property. Prominent was the remains of an ancient Roman castle perched above her facilities (see photo).

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An old Roman castle

We enjoyed the appetizers with the 2008 vintage of her flagship Montevetrano, a blend of roughly 70 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, 20 percent of Merlot, and 10 percent Aglianico. These wines are easy to drink young with the beautiful forward black fruit, but they age gracefully. The winemaker is Ricardo Cotarella who manages to tease out of the terroir enough of the chalk minerality and herbs to give these wines a sense of place, versus just another great international styled wine. Robert Parker was so impressed with the initial vintages ('91, '92, and '93) that he termed Montevetrano the "Sassacaia of the South."

Having long been a fan of the most famous indigenous grape of Campania, Aglianico, we were treated to Silvia's newest wine, CORE, which is 100 percent Aglianico. Although she, like I, loves the grape, she said the real reason she developed the wine was so that more people could access it, as the cost is less than half of her flagship wine. It was a very beautiful expression of the grape. Our 2012 CORE was redolent of spice and red fruits with overtones of anise with a tinge of iodine. I love this wine and hope to be able to buy it soon in the United States. (Now available in California.)



CORE wine from Montevetrano

Our visit unfortunately had to end all too soon. I sincerely doubt if any group of 20 people ever hated to leave any place more than we did that day. We were all totally in love with the property, wines, and hospitality, but most of all with Silvia and her small team.

Onto the bus we went, back to Sorrento via Naples and then onto the Amalfi Coast drive, consistently ranked in the top two most scenic drives in the world. The views over the Mediterranean

are breathtaking, one more beautiful than the other. We arrived into Positano and then the "fun" began. Our small bus needed several of the locals to direct us around corners of the very narrow streets even after adjusting outside mirrors. Finally, we arrived at our

destination, Le Sirenuse, which is always ranked at or near the top of all hotels worldwide. In fact, I read an article once by the travel editor for the "San Francisco Chronicle" in which she said that in her worldwide travels for 20 years, this was the only property she never left during a three-day stay and it is a small property. I found it in the



The drive to Positano

d'Abruzzo from 2011. While the grape is often considered pedestrian, Valentini's is the greatest example of this wine. Most of the fruit, up to 90 percent, is sold to a local co-op. The remainder is vinified into a complex, full wine with a mineral character, but with aromas and flavors of yellow flowers, honey, chamomile, and nuts. Not only is

it the greatest wine made from Trebbiano, but many wine experts consider it to be Italy's greatest white wine with which I agree. The wine ages beautifully for decades. After sipping limoncello and basking in this surreal environment, we reluctantly made our way back to Sorrento along the Amalfi Coast. The stunning views aided in our transition. The day will remain forever with those who made the trip.

mid-1990s, and was fortunate enough to spend a weekend there and wanted to share it with our group.

We had arranged for a late 3 p.m. lunch showcasing some of Italy's great white wines. We sat just inside an open room, shielded from the heat, but with panoramic views of Positano and the sea. We had superb large fresh salads accompanied by 2009 Verdicchio Riserva "Campo delle Oche" from San Lorenzo, served from magnums which was both light enough for appetizers and the salad, but great in minerality and perfectly balanced by scents of almonds, chamomile, saffron, and ripe fruit – truly one of the great white wines of Italy.

The salad was followed by a small plate of local white fish, for which I chose one of Italy's most famous white wines – Valentini's Trebbiano



The view from Le Sirenuse Hotel

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À votré Santé! U



PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

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