

# Hail Nero! Italy's hottest value red

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One of the hottest affordable red wines from Italy these days is from the country's hottest region: Sicily and its nero d'Avola.

Its big flavor, drinkability, and low price (most nero d'Avola costs less than \$13) has made it wine insiders' weekday wine.

Twenty years ago, no one thought of buying wines from Sicily. Nero d'Avola, its primary red grape, wasn't thought much of at all. Lots of it was exported to the Italian mainland or to France's bulk wine-producing region of Languedoc where it was blended with other wines, not for flavor but for color.

The wine industry on the island off Italy's toe has since made a dramatic turnaround. A new generation of winery operators decided they no longer wanted to make bad or boring wines. New technology allowed them to ditch the old ways of making wine and better manage the grapes from this hot region.

The Sicilians themselves talk of their wine industry's "rebirth," a recognition of how bad their wines used to be. Whites from Sicily used to taste like lemon water. Today they can be delightful. Among reds we have the nero d'Avola. With fruity, generous, soft, juicy flavors and moderate tannins, nero d'Avola seems tailor-made for what people drink today.

The flavor of nero d'Avola resembles more purple fruit rather than the black and red fruit of Bordeaux varieties such as cabernets and merlot. Nero d'Avola often is compared, in somewhat of a stretch, to syrah. Notes of plum and chocolate are often mentioned.

An entry-level, basic nero, Mandrarossa Nero D'Avola Sicilia smells of red apple and anise with flavors of sweet red cherry, raisin and spice, with a round, tart finish. \$8. HHH 1/2

Step things up a bit with Donnafugata 2011 Sedàra, a mostly nero d'Avola blended with merlot, cab sauv and syrah. Delivering a big fruit and floral smells, it follows with flavors of black raspberry, raisins, a brush of spice and solid acids. \$9. HHHH

The favorite in my informal panel of nero neophytes was Fuedo Arancio Stemmari 2012 Nero d'Avola, which excelled in complexity and structure. The wine showed hints of dark chocolate, raspberries and gentle spice and tannins helped along by six months in French oak barrels. \$11. HHHH

Among reds in its price range, the complexity and quality of a nero d'Avola are tough to surpass. If you like good red wines that won't set you back much, you owe it to yourself to get into nero d'Avola.

GRADE: Exceptional HHHHH , Above average HHHH , Good HHH , Below Average HH , Poor H