

KNOW THIS GRAPE

Why Falanghina Is Winning Over Winemakers

Climate change and appealing economics are propelling this little-known, white Italian grape into the spotlight

written by

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This Italian grape is known for its versatility. Photos courtesy of Libero Rillo and Duncan Meyers.

Italy is home to hundreds of indigenous vine varieties—more than any other country in the world—which can make it difficult for lesser-known Italian grapes to stand out in the international market. But thanks to America's keen interest in Italian wines—in 2021, Italy had the highest volume share of U.S. wine imports—coupled with the growing interest in indigenous varieties, more native Italian grapes are getting their time in the spotlight.

One such grape rising from obscurity is Falanghina, a white variety indigenous to Italy's southern Campania region. Once thought of as a workhorse variety, developments in viticulture and winemaking have led to an increase in the quality of its wines, and more interest in the grape in both domestic and international markets.

This rise of Falanghina has also coincided with a growing movement to plant indigenous Italian grapes in other countries, particularly the U.S. What started with plantings of highly popular grapes like Nebbiolo and Sangiovese, has now trickled down to include lesser-known grapes, particularly heat-adapted white varieties like Falanghina.



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With both quality and international plantings on the rise, Italian and American wine professionals alike share what makes this grape uniquely suited to the wine market of today—both climatically and economically—and why it's time to give Falanghina its moment in the spotlight.

Getting to Know Falanghina

The name Falanghina actually refers to two distinct grape varieties: Falanghina Beneventana and Falanghina Campi Flegrea. “When we talk about Falanghina, we are talking about the most widespread white grape variety in Campania, where two very different varieties are grown under this name,” says Pasquale Carlo, the director of [Sannio Academy](#).

“The name derives from the Latin term *falanga*, the wooden pole that supported the vine,” explains Carlo. “It is a name used to indicate the [training] system, not the variety. The two varieties present evident differences, starting from the shape of the bunch, while DNA studies have highlighted that the two varieties differ in 34 ampelographic characters out of 40.”

Falanghina Beneventana is grown in the Benevento region, a hilly area northeast of Naples, and accounts for approximately 80 percent of all Falanghina production. Falanghina Campi Flegrea, which has far fewer plantings, is found in the coastal, volcanic Campi Flegrei region. The different varieties, along with dramatic soil differences in each region, result in very distinct wine profiles. Beneventana, grown primarily on calcareous and clay-based soils, tends to produce richer, fuller-bodied wines, while Campi Flegrea, grown on volcanic soils, makes lighter, more aromatic wines. The two grape varieties, however, are never blended. Each region maintains distinct winemaking rules established by the DOCs, and more importantly, unique cultural traditions, explains Giovanni Morone, the winemaker for [Cantina Morone](#), located in Benevento’s Sannio region.

Nevertheless, all Falanghina is notable for its high acidity, making it well suited to a variety of wine styles—and an ideal grape to rely on in a warming climate. “It’s a versatile grape that can be used to produce white wines, sparkling—both charmat and *metodo classico*—passito, young wines, or [long-aging] wines,” says Libero Rillo, the owner of [Fontana Vecchia](#) and the president of the [Consorzio del Sannio](#).

The Evolution of Italian Falanghina

The last few decades have brought significant changes to Falanghina. “Falanghina has changed a lot in terms of quality and organoleptic features,” says Luigi Foschini, the export manager for [La Guardiense](#), a cooperative based in Sannio

and the largest producer in all of Campania. “Falanghina in the ’70s made wines that were hard to drink because of the acidity, because of the pH, because of many characters.”

A key issue was getting Falanghina to fully ripen. “The grape 45 or 50 years ago was so acidic, so bitter, that if you bit into one it was like biting into a lemon,” says Foschini. “What has changed in the meantime? Viticulture. In order to produce a ripe product, you have to focus on viticulture. Focusing on reducing yields per hectare, different training systems, climate change, and hilly vineyards, has made Falanghina as a raw material very interesting.”

Today, Falanghina represents “the most important economic voice of the Campania wine sector, which ranks among the top 20 Italian wine [regions],” says Carlo. Despite lowering yields and restricting plantings to higher-quality, hilly sites, production of Falanghina is roughly six times higher than 10 or 15 years ago, according to Rillo. Previously, Falanghina often went to bulk wine production; now, given the increase in quality, the majority of the wine is bottled within one of the regional denominations.

“In the last decade, [Falanghina] has enjoyed great commercial success, but it still struggles to find an identical match in the judgment of critics and enthusiasts, especially in Italy,” says Carlo. “Abroad, the perception is different, in my opinion. Falanghina wins significant opinions from experts and the most important magazines, especially in the United States.”

Falanghina Arrives Stateside

Indeed, many Americans, particularly within the wine trade, are starting to know—and love—Falanghina. Today, the grape can be found planted up and down the California coast, with bottlings coming from many highly respected wineries, such as [Ridge Vineyards](#).

When Duncan Meyers, the cofounder and winemaker for Sonoma-based [Arnot-Roberts](#), first started working with Falanghina, the grapes had come to him by chance, but the quality and value were clear. “Falanghina is brilliant,” says Meyers. “It crops well, meaning you get three or four tons to the acre of really high-quality fruit. It ripens slowly, it’s a slow sugar accumulator, and it retains acidity like crazy.”



From left to right: Libero Rillo, the owner of Fontana Vecchia and the president of the Consorzio del Sannio (photo courtesy of Libero Rillo); Elenora and Giovanni Morone, the winemakers for Cantina Morone (photo courtesy of Giovanni Morone); Duncan Meyers, the cofounder and winemaker for Arnot-Roberts (photo courtesy of Duncan Meyers).

Further south, plantings of Falanghina in Paso Robles, which have been around for over a decade, are increasing. “I just put in an order this year for some Falanghina to be planted for us,” says Stephy Terrizzi, the cofounder and viticulturist for [Giornata Wines](#), which focuses specifically on Italian grape varieties. “We use it in three different wines and it does really well with skin contact for us, and the acid is just off the charts.”

The late-ripening, high-acid grape does well in California's warmer climates, and in Paso Robles particularly, it works well in the pockets of clay and calcareous soils that are reminiscent of Benevento. "We're really lucky in Paso to have the soil and the climate that is kind of perfect for treating these grapes with respect," says Brian Terrizzi, who founded Giornata with Stephy and serves as the winemaker.

On the consumer side, however, Falanghina still faces an uphill battle. "It's kind of a hidden gem," says Mike Fifer, the wine, beer, and spirits team leader for [Plum Market](#) in Ann Arbor, Michigan. "It suffers because no one knows how to pronounce it and unless someone tells you what it is, you're probably not going to pick it up. It's a hand-sell for us."

With direct-to-consumer winery sales, the story is similar. "The response from our mailing has been good and people look forward to it, but I don't know whether that is based on the fact that it's just cheap and easy to drink or whether they're really fired up about Falanghina," says Meyers. "I kind of think it's the prior, not the latter."

The Future of Falanghina

A major reason for the growing presence of Falanghina in California is climate change. "I think [Falanghina] shows a lot of potential," says Meyers. "Especially with the changing climate, these heat-adapted white varieties that crop well are fantastic. I love the idea that instead of pushing to the few remaining places that are cold enough to farm grapes, people look to the grapes that can handle the places that we already have vineyards and infrastructure in place. And Falanghina is a good candidate for that."

The economics of Falanghina are another key reason why California winemakers are investing in the grape. "Having four, even five, tons to the acre is not unheard

of and it still makes high-quality wine,” says Meyers. “We charge \$25 for our [Falanghina]. I want it to be a utilitarian white that people can drink at lunchtime and not put it on a pedestal. It’s hard to do that in California with high-quality farming. It’s hard to do that with other varieties that crop lower.”

As the grape gains favor at home and abroad, Falanghina’s biggest champions are hopeful, but they acknowledge that challenges remain. “The future [of Falanghina] is bright,” says Carlo. “The widespread diffusion of the vine ... is the result of its great adaptability to different soils and climates, a characteristic that gives this Campanian native grape an international charm. The challenge will be to differentiate, to be able to communicate the distinctive trait of [Falanghina] wines, making them truly unique in the complex production panorama of southern Italy.”

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