

"In the vineyards you must get on with the vintage when the grapes are ripe...", or at least so says Varro in his work *On Farming* (1.54), written around 36 BC. Nature may have amply endowed Italy and many of its provinces with an excellent environment in which to grow premium wine grapes, but it was up to man to cultivate, harvest and transform that raw material into a consumable commodity worthy of both Romans and gods alike.

In the last issue of [Labyrinth](#), we saw how climate, terrain and region affected the growth and variety of Greek and Italian wine grapes. The processing of those grapes into exquisite wines, however, required just as much careful thought and experimentation as land investment and choice of region.

Besides the grapes themselves, two of the most important components of any vineyard were the pressing-room and the large storage containers for the processed juice. At Pompeii, for instance, next to a vintner's house wine-presses and ten huge in-ground *dolia* or earthenware jars, have been found which have been calculated to have produced and stored at least 12,500 litres, or 2,750 gallons, of wine per estate. These *dolia*, such as those found at archaeological sites throughout southern Italy, were used to store and ferment the pressed grape juice into a palatable wine and were often very thick-walled ceramic vessels up to almost two meters in diameter. Some of these vessels were so large, in fact, that they had to be fired in the ground for they could never be transported and buried in place without damage.

In close proximity to these storage vessels were the treading rooms and the wine-presses which fed the *dolia*. Once picked from the vines, the grapes were sorted and the best of the best were trodden to remove the first, and most prized, juice of the harvest. This juice was piped off into *dolia* for fermentation and the pulp from the treading was taken to a mechanical wine-press "so that any must remaining in [the pulp] may be squeezed out into the same vat" (Varro, *On Farming*, 1.54). Sometimes even this pressed pulp was pressed yet again to remove the last remnants of any

juice, although this second pressing was "kept separate because it tastes of iron", Varro tells us. Not letting anything go to waste, the Roman farmers then took these well pressed grape-skins, added water to them in *amphorae*, or ceramic jugs, and produced a drink called *lora acina*, or watered grape-skins, which was "given to the labourers in winter instead of wine", according to Varro in the same passage.

The initial treading of the premium grapes selected for the wine was no easy task in itself. The treaders had to be careful to pick out any leaves missed by the gatherers, for as we are told in the *Geoponics* (6.11), leaves, if pressed with the grapes, tend to make the wine spoil. These treaders also had to be careful to pick out any grape-stones, kernels and stalks left in the vats since these tended to clog the run-off channels. The men themselves were required to have "scrupulously cleaned their feet" and they had to be "fully clad and have their girdles on, on account of the violent sweating". A reasonable request for quality control!

As mentioned, after the treading came the wine-press, and Pliny, in 77 AD, tells us that one wine-press of the type described below, should have been enough to serve a twenty acre vineyard (*Natural History*, 18.74.317). The wine-press was usually a single large wooden beam, anchored at one end over a bag containing the grapes, and pulled down as a lever by one of three devices at the other end (see accompanying illustration). According to Pliny, it was the leverage, not the weight, which was critical to the process. He goes on to tell us that, "in the old days people used to drag down the press-beams with ropes and leather straps, and by means of levers" as in diagrams "a" and "b", "but within the last hundred years the Greek pattern of press has been invented, with the grooves of the upright beam running spirally." For the latter type, Pliny was no doubt talking about a simple screw-press as shown in diagram "c".

Once the pressing was completed and the grape juice channelled into the *dolia* nearby or drained into storage cellars below the presses, the fermentation and aging process could begin. Cato, writing around 160 BC, tells us that "if you would keep must for a year, pour it into an amphora and seal the cork with pitch. Immerse the amphora in cold water for thirty days. Then remove it and the must will be preserved for one year." (*De Agricultura*, 120). Horace, however, liked his wine a little more aged, preferring to wait thirty-six years instead (*Odes*, 3.8).

Trimalchio was the most patient of all, serving his guests 100 year old Falernian wine in Petronius' *Satyricon* (34). Athenaeus tells us that not only is well-aged wine better for the palate, but also for our health. Old wine, he writes, helps in digestion, is composed of finer particles and so is better assimilated, increases bodily strength, makes the blood red and flow more easily, and ensures an undisturbed sleep (*Deipnosophistae*, 1.26).

The many varieties of Roman wine, from Falernum to Caccubum to Mamertinum and beyond, must have kept both the wine-drinkers and the wine-makers very busy, but that was not the only source of wine which flowed into Rome. Premium wines from Spain, Gaul, North Africa, Greece, and even Britain and Brittany, were coming into Italy in great quantities from the sixth century BC to at least the fourth century AD. How this wine was traded with Italy and how it was sold and used for dinner parties, cooking and libations will be explored in the next issue of Labyrinth.