

Ancient Wine Production - The Roman World,
Part III
by Chris Mundigler

An ancient Roman proverb tells us that, "the drier the grapes the stronger and sweeter the wine." Some of the most highly praised and coveted sweet wine in the Roman world was *passum*, or raisin wine, which came into Italy from far afield in the Roman Empire. The extensive network of Roman trade brought this wine into Italy from such far-flung regions as Crete (southeast of the Greek mainland); Cilicia (in Asia Minor north of Cyprus); Numidia, Libya and Egypt (in north Africa), with only a very small amount coming from Italy itself. Why was *passum* and other more premium wine brought into Italy? Mainly to satisfy the Roman thirst for good drinking wine as well as highly-prized cooking wines.

While the Romans were able to grow great quantities of their own wine (as indicated in previous issues of *Labyrinth*), they still relied heavily on imported wines to supplement their growing appetites for wine and culinary delights. The earlier example of *passum*, for instance, was highly prized as an imported wine by the Romans, and its virtues were especially extolled by Apicius, who, living around the 1st century AD, wrote the definitive Roman cookbook called *De Re Coquinaria* or *On Cookery*. In this book, Apicius used this raisin wine as a sweetener for meats, fish and vegetables, utilizing its unique characteristics to colour and flavour his creations as well. *Passum* was made from wine grapes which were left on the vines longer than usual so that they dried to about half their normal weight, increasing their sweetness considerably. In some regions, the grapes were picked on time when ripe, but were then spread out and sun-dried to enhance their sweetness. A third way to sweeten grapes was to immerse them in boiling olive oil once ripe and picked. Whichever sweetening method was used, the grapes were next soaked in a premium quality wine, and once swollen, were crushed by treading or pressing (as described in earlier issues of *Labyrinth*). A secondary *passum* was then made from the remnants of the first pressing. Another very sweet wine, *defrutum* (made sweet by reduction to half its volume by boiling), was also traded extensively throughout the Mediterranean.

Premium wines were brought into Rome from all over the known world, usually in transport *amphorae*, the regions and methods having been

previously described throughout the last seven issues of *Labyrinth*. Wines moved to and from the modern regions of Britain, Brittany and Spain, following the coastal trade routes along the northern Mediterranean to and from such major Roman ports as Pisae, Ostia and Tarentum. Wines flowed into Rome from the east as well, from Asia Minor, the Black Sea regions, Egypt and North Africa. Major trade routes crisscrossed the Mediterranean (see accompanying map) and funnelled superior wines into Rome and from there into its gluttonous citizens. Evidence for this extensive trade can be seen in one mountainous example just outside the city of Rome itself: the so-called Monte Testaccio is a large mound of ceramic fragments from an estimated 40 million *amphorae* once filled with a cheap but desirable wine from Spain.

Well before the major Spanish thrust of wine into Italy at the turn of the millennium, this commodity was a major trading entity between the Etruscans, Greeks and Carthaginians of the 6th century BC, with Gaul entering as a major importer around the 3rd century BC. Etruria, Latium and Campania joined in the extensive wine export trade from Italy to all its new territories from the 2nd century BC on. Southern Gaul was one of the major areas which imported wine at this time since viticulture (grape and wine production) had not yet begun there, the planting of grape vines being prohibited outside of Italy until around the time of Augustus. Southern France, the Rhône Valley, Britain and Brittany all benefited from an extensive wine trade with Rome in the 2nd century BC. The wine trade out of Italy reached a fever pitch by the mid-1st century BC with Italian wine in such demand that the Gauls were trading one slave to Rome for one *amphora* of wine!

From this time on, though, trade in Italian wine started a downward slide as vineyards began to appear in the former import regions of Spain, Gaul and southern France. Areas such as Rhodes and Cnidos to the east, which had traditionally held an important place in wine production, also began to take an upper-hand in the wine trade around the Mediterranean. By the time Augustus was in power, Spain had become a major player in exporting wine to Italy in vast quantities, and during Domitian's reign vines were ordered removed and wine trade restricted in an attempt to curb excess production. Although Italy was to continue to produce wine until at least the 4th century AD, politics began to bog down internal production with stumbling blocks such as Diocletian's price and taxation reforms on trade and commerce.

And what of the wine itself once it reached the client level after its long (or short) journey to the Roman markets? Sold in a street side shop, or *thermopolium* (such as the ones found at Herculaneum), where it was kept cool in marble-faced counters that housed the *amphorae*, the wine was taken to the homes of eager Romans along with the cheeses, nuts, figs and cakes also bought from the *thermopolium*.

While undiluted wine was often used as a libation, sacrificed to the gods by pouring it on the ground, the grape elixir was usually diluted with water and drunk at dinner parties and private gatherings by rich and poor alike. The only real difference in wine drinking between the classes was the quality of wine served, but in any case the consumption of undiluted wine was considered barbaric. The poorer classes often drank *posca* which was made by watering down a very low-quality vinegar wine or *acetum*. These poor-quality wines were often sweetened with lead acetate, which in quantity or over time could easily have caused lead poisoning in the heavier drinkers of the lower classes. The upper class, however, enjoyed wine flowing in rivers through dining rooms and vintages ranging from lowly Marseilles and Vatican wines to the highly-prized Falernian, as described by Petronius in his *Satyricon*. This work is a masterpiece which elaborates in great detail the particulars and consequences of an amazing dinner party hosted by Petronius' wealthy freedman, Trimalchio. Through wonderful descriptions and minute details, we are given an insightful look into the uses and abuses of this product which we have followed through the last few issues of *Labyrinth*, and which was of such importance to the people and economics of the ancient world.

In the next issue, we will switch our attention to a different, yet in some ways related, commodity of the Mediterranean world. As Pliny tells us, "there are two liquids that are specially agreeable to the human body, wine inside and oil outside..." (*Natural History* 14.29.149-150). It is the cultivation, production and processing of olives and olive oil which we will look at in the next series of articles in *Labyrinth*.