

A Wine-List from Horace's Poetry

By R. Faber

Studies of wine in antiquity cannot avoid the poetry of Horace, for it is one of his favorite subjects. However, a cursory reading of his works and the modern commentaries on them reveals that it is not easy to determine how Horace ranked the wines he knew. This difficulty is due in part to the fact that as a poet Horace employed wine for a wide range of literary and thematic purposes. Even so, a brief consideration of the poet's descriptions of wines is revealing. Horace mentions many wines by name, both native and foreign ones. While much can be said about the wines from Greece, including Chian, Coan, and Lesbian, we shall restrict our list to a few Italian wines.

Wines from four regions seem to vie for top spot in Horace's ranking. The most commonly mentioned wine is Falernian, which refers to a region of Campania in southern Italy. Capua, Naples, Pompeii were the main towns of Campania during Horace's day. It appears that Falernian wine was available in three varieties. In his *Natural Histories* (14.62.f) Pliny classifies the three varieties as "dry" (*austerum*), "sweet" (*dulce*), and "light" (*genue*). Horace depicts Falernian wines with various adjectives. In *Odes* 2.11.19 he calls it "fiery" (literary 'burning', *ardens*), while in another the epithet "strong, powerful" is used (*forte*, *Sat.* 2.4.24). In another context Horace calls Falernian wine "dry" (*severum*, *Odes* 1.27.9). In yet another poem he suggests that a very good Falernian is well-aged, as it is removed "from the back of the cellar" for those rare moments of bliss (*Odes* 2.3.7-8). It is not clear to me whether Falernian wine caused "fevered thoughts" during the night (*Epistle* 1.18.91-3) or whether that claim is merely an excuse used by someone trying to avoid having a glass of it.

Another wine from Campania was Calenian, so-called from the town Cales (or Calvi). The second-century AD writer on banquets, Athenaeus, describes this as a 'healthy' wine. Horace, in *Odes* 1.31.9, mentions Calenian wine in the context of other highly-prized vintages. The Greek term "kouphos", which means "nimble" or "light", has been applied to this wine. Horace refers to this wine indirectly in *Odes* 3.16.4, by mentioning the Laestrygonians, who according to tradition had re-located to this region of Italy.

Caecuban is, in Horace's view, a top-quality wine. It hailed from Latium. The fact that he mentions it in connection with celebrating Octavian's defeat of Antony and Cleopatra suggests that he prized it highly (*Odes* 1.37.5). In *Epode* 9, addressed to Maecenas, Horace mentions Caecuban again in a celebratory context, comparing it to wines from the Greek islands of Lesbos and Chios. Formian wine, as the name implies, came from the region around Formiae, on the coast of southern Latium. This wine had a reputation for maturing quickly.

Less reputed than the four wines mentioned above is Sabine wine. It was known for having a harsh, even acidic taste –although in later times its medicinal qualities were

appreciated. In *Odes* 1.20.1 Horace calls this wine “cheap”, *vile*, but it appears from other passages that he deemed it a solid, medium-quality wine. In fact, often the descriptive epithets applied to wines in Horace’s poetry are hard to interpret, as they may have connotations that cannot be recovered easily by us, or function in the thematic concerns of the poem. Horace depicts a Massic wine (that is, from the region around Puteoli and Baiae) as “old, aged” (*vetus*, *Odes* 1.1.19). In another poem he describes the effect of this wine as ‘causing forgetfulness’ (*obliviosus*, *Odes* 2.7.21). Other terms are “mellow” (*lene merum*, 3.2.9.2) and “sweet” (*dulcis*, 3.13.2). In *Odes* 1.17.21 a wine from Lesbos is described as “harmless” (*innocens*); perhaps this term is a translation of a Greek word used especially in medicinal contexts for the reviving the faint. Although it may be difficult for us to reconstruct the precise meaning of these terms, it is clear that Horace knew his wines.