

ONE BOTTLE: The 2007 Riofavara Nero D'Avola "Sciavè"

by JOSHUA BAER

Dionysus stood at the end of the stone pier in Chios. He was watching the sky, the horizon, and the light on the water. He saw the pirate ship make its way into the bay. It was an old, solid ship with a black hull and a frayed white sail. There were twelve pirates on board. With the exception of the helmsman, each pirate was either a murderer or a thief. Dionysus knew what the pirates wanted. Their greed had an odor. They saw Dionysus's flowing hair and purple robes and assumed that he was an indolent fool who could be abducted and held for ransom. With any luck, his father would turn out to be a merchant, maybe even a king. The pirates had no idea that they were about to kidnap a god.

After the pirates rowed to the pier and shipped their oars, they called out to Dionysus and asked him where he was going. Dionysus said nothing.

The pirates dropped anchor, then they dove into the water, swam to the pier, and stood in a half-circle around Dionysus. There were eleven of them on the pier. Only the helmsman remained on board. The helmsman was older than the other pirates. He stood at the stern of the ship with his hands on the tiller.

"Where are you going?" said one of the pirates. His name was Lycabas.

"I was thinking about going to Naxos," said Dionysus.

"Ten thousand islands in the Aegean," said Lycabas, "and we're all going to the same one. What a coincidence. Is that where you live, on Naxos?"

Dionysus nodded. "I live in a temple on the slopes of Mount Zas."

"Mount Zas," said Lycabas. "I've heard stories about the forest there. It's supposed to be full of wild game. You don't live in a palace?"

"The forest is my palace. It surrounds my temple."

"Are you a priest?"

"No, I'm the god of wine."

All of the pirates laughed. "The god of wine!" said Lycabas. "Well, good for you, my young friend. Come with us. We'll take you to Naxos."

"I'd like that," said Dionysus, "but I get seasick on the open water. If you let me lie down on the deck of your ship and sleep until we get to Naxos, I'll be all right. But if you need me to row, I'd better stay here."

"We'll do all the rowing," said Lycabas. "You can sleep the whole way. We'll even tie a rope around you, to make sure you don't slip over the side."

After they left Chios, Dionysus lay down on the deck of the ship and pretended to fall asleep. He heard the pirates whispering, then he felt a rope being tied around his ankles.

"All of you are crazy," said a man's voice. It was Acoetes, the helmsman. He was speaking to the rest of the pirates. "That boy is no boy. I saw lightning in his eyes. He has a god inside of him—Apollo, Poseidon, or almighty Zeus. We should just take him to Naxos."

"Acoetes," said Lycabas, "you're the one who's crazy. If he's a god, why did he let us tie him up? This is an opportunity. Forget about a ransom. I say we head south to Alexandria and sell him to the Egyptians."

"I won't do it," said Acoetes.



Two of the pirates, Medon and Opheltes, walked behind Acoetes. Opheltes grabbed Acoetes' arms. Medon pulled a dagger from his belt and held the blade against Acoetes' throat. "Go ahead and kill me," said Acoetes. "The boy is a god. When he wakes up and sees what we're doing, he will sink this ship and kill us all. Better to die here on deck in a pool of my own blood than drown at sea."

Dionysus pretended to wake up. He looked at the sky, the horizon, and the light on the water. "I thought we were going to Naxos," he said. As he spoke, white whiskers grew from his eyebrows.

"We took a little side trip," said Lycabas. "We'll be in Naxos before you know it."

Dionysus looked at his ankles. As the rope untied itself, it turned into ivy. Layers of leopard fur covered the god's skin. Claws emerged from his fingers and toes.

As the pirates backed away from the leopard, vines grew up the mast of the ship and wound their tendrils around the upper and lower beams of the sail. Black grapes hung from the vines. The oars turned into stalks of fennel. Music—it sounded like a thousand flutes, each one playing its own sad song—filled the air.

The leopard considered each pirate. As the flute music grew louder, the pirates covered their ears with their hands. The leopard grabbed Medon and tore his right arm from his torso. As Medon's arm disappeared into the leopard's mouth, the other pirates jumped overboard. The leopard spoke to the water. As the pirates tried to swim away from the ship, they turned into dolphins. Each dolphin leaped into the air but fell back into the water. The dolphins knew the god had spared their lives but the dark sea made no sense to them. It felt like a cold, endless prison.

The only man left on deck was Acoetes. He and Dionysus arrived in Naxos the next morning. After they docked in the harbor, the god and the man left the ship and walked through the forest to the ancient temple on Mount Zas. Acoetes became a priest. The prayers, rites, and secrets of the god of wine became his whole life.

Which brings us to the 2007 Riofavara Nero D'Avola "Sciavè."

Azienda Agricola Riofavara is located in Ispica, a village near the southeast corner of Sicily. The estate is run by Massimo Padova, his sister Marianta, their cousin Antonella, and Massimo's wife, Margherita. The Nero D'Avola grapes used in Riofavara's "Sciavè" are grown in the Noto Valley, northeast of Ispica. Massimo's grandfather, Don Saverio Padova, used to own farms and vineyards in the Noto Valley. In Ispica, "Sciavè" (pronounced sha-VEH) was Don Saverio's nickname.

In the glass, the 2007 Riofavara "Sciavè" is an opaque scarlet touched with royal purple. The bouquet is a moment of truth. On the palate, the surprise is the way the wine unlocks your heart. The promise of ripe flavors yields to the gift of raw emotions. The finish is like being at sea. Danger and safety move in and out of balance.

Be careful of this wine. It has a sneaky side. Its charm will make you laugh but its beauty can be terrifying. This is what happens when gods and men appear on the same stage. ♡

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