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# From Sicily, Reds Worth the Hunt

By **ERIC ASIMOV**

The transformation of the world of wine in the last 20 years has been simply astounding. Consumers have been blessed with a profusion of wonderful wines from sources that few would have predicted as recently as the turn of the century. Case in point: Sicily.

Sicily has always been a prodigious fount of wine. That was part of the problem. What poured forth in such quantity was cheap, bad and easy to dismiss: heavy reds, dull whites and sweet wines that traded on famous names (Marsala, Moscato di Pantelleria and Malvasia Delle Lipari) but rarely delivered.

Now Sicily is one of the most exciting wine regions in the world. That goes particularly for the reds, which are not heavy at all but fresh and lively. Whites, too, are emerging, especially those made from the savory carricante grape on Mount Etna.

What accounts for this explosion? Partly, it's a result of a new, energetic generation of wine producers who embraced the island's indigenous grapes at a time when many regions were looking past their heritages to capitalize on the world's taste for international grapes like chardonnay, merlot and cabernet sauvignon. As a result, Sicily's new-wave wines immediately stood out as distinctive cultural emblems.

Perhaps equally important has been a slight shift in taste in the United States, the proverbial pendulum swing, from heavy wines of power to lighter wines of greater finesse. In many ways this played to the strength of these Sicilian producers, who specialized in agile reds with invigorating acidity, particularly those producers around Mount Etna on the eastern part of the island and those around the town of Vittoria to the southeast.

Etna Rossos, the red [wines of Mount Etna](#), have gotten the most attention. They are based on the nerello mascalese grape, with an occasional assist from its sibling, nerello cappuccio. Similar in spirit, however, are the wines from the Vittoria region, generally made of a blend of the frappato and nero d'Avola grapes, though sometimes of frappato or, less often, nero d'Avola alone.

To get a better sense of what was happening in this part of Sicily, the wine panel recently tasted a selection of blends and wines that showcase the frappato grape. Ordinarily, our tasting coordinator, Bernie Kirsch, puts together a group of 20 bottles that we hope provides a good

cross-section of a region or genre. But so few producers from the Vittoria region are imported into the United States that for this tasting we had only 16 bottles, and that number included multiple entries from several estates. Florence Fabricant and I were joined at the tasting by Francesco Grosso, wine director at [Marea](#) on Central Park South, and Patrick Cappiello, wine director and a partner at [Pearl & Ash](#) on the Lower East Side.

Despite the small number of producers, we found it a terrific selection, showing off the verve, grace and energy of these wines. The best seemed almost to vibrate with a tension between bitter and sweet fruit flavors, a typical Italian construct. Many also had savory components, whether spicy, smoky or mineral, combined with graceful, lively textures. Occasionally, the balance would fail, which would emphasize a sweet, almost candied element, or in one case, the flavors of oak. But these failures were rare.

Our top three wines were all blends, combining the earthy strength of the nero d'Avola with the bracing floral freshness of the frappato. Our No. 1 wine, the 2009 Sicilia Rosso from Lamoresca, was spicy, earthy and structured, pleasantly funky yet alive in the glass. No. 2 was the 2012 SP68 from Arianna Occhipinti, fresh, bright and surprisingly complex for a wine intended to be drunk young. No. 3, the 2011 Pithos Rosso from COS, was fermented and aged in terra-cotta amphorae rather than in stainless steel or oak barrels. The wine was beautifully fragrant with a distinct sense of umami.

The next three wines were all frappatos, with no more than a small percentage of other local grapes added, if any at all. Each was delicious though simpler than the blended wines. No. 4 was the 2012 Vittoria Frappato from Valle Dell'Acate, floral, harmonious and, at \$19, our best value. Next was the 2011 Nerocapitano from Lamoresca, lively, graceful and balanced, followed by the deliciously energetic 2011 frappato from Arianna Occhipinti.

I would call these four producers the stars of the region, and would go out of my way to drink any wines they make. But the remaining wines, all Cerasuolos di Vittoria from Feudo di Santa Tresa, Manenti, Gulfi and Planeta, are worth seeking out as well.

You may have noticed that the wines at the top of the list all bear the initials I.G.T., or Indicazione Geografica Tipica, a designation that theoretically, at least, is of lower status than Cerasuolo di Vittoria, as the wines at the end of the list are called. Ordinarily, I would hate to plunge into this alphabet soup of wine nomenclature, but it's an indication that official designations may not be so meaningful in Sicily, or elsewhere in Italy, for that matter.

Cerasuolo di Vittoria is an appellation of the highest order in the Italian wine hierarchy, Denominazione di Origine e Garantita. It's the only appellation on Sicily considered worthy of D.O.C.G. status, and wines must meet certain requirements, including being made from grapes

grown within a particular zone, blended in a particular proportion and receiving a certain amount of aging before release.

Some producers might choose not to meet these requirements because they are after a different expression of wine. Others might be outside the zone, or simply refuse to submit their wines for approval because of past bureaucratic slights, real or imagined. And so, they settle for the I.G.T. designation. The point is that on Sicily, the style, philosophy and methods of the producer matter more than the official designation.

Though only a limited number of wines are available from this region of Sicily, I imagine that number will grow. Meanwhile, seek out these wines if you can find them in stores or restaurant wine lists. They generally take well to a light chill, which makes them especially appealing in the warm weather.

### **Tasting Panel**

Lamoresca, \$39, \*\*\* 1/2

I.G.T. Sicilia Rosso 2009

Spicy, funky, earthy and structured, with fruit flavors that are alive and deep. (SelectioNaturel, Chelsea, Mass.)

Arianna Occhipinti, \$28, \*\*\* 1/2

I.G.T. Sicilia SP68 2012

Fresh, bright, earthy and complex, with long-lasting floral, fruit and mineral flavors. (Louis/Dressner Selections, New York)

COS, \$33, \*\*\*

I.G.T. Sicilia Pithos Rosso 2011

Lively and flamboyantly fragrant, with savory, smoky, energetic fruit flavors. (Domaine Select Wine Estates, New York)

### **BEST VALUE**

Valle Dell'Acate, \$19, \*\*\*

Vittoria Frappato 2012

Bright, floral and harmonious, with an attractive tension between bitter and sweet flavors. (Polaner Selections, Mount Kisco, N.Y.)

Lamoresca, \$26, \*\*\*

I.G.T. Sicilia Nerocapitano 2011

Lively, graceful and balanced, with bright cherry and herbal flavors. (SelectioNaturel, Chelsea,

Mass.)

Arianna Occhipinti, \$40, \*\* 1/2

I.G.T. Sicilia Il Frappato 2011

Energetic and bright, with simple yet pleasing fruit flavors. (Louis/Dressner Selections, New York)

Feudo di Santa Tresa, \$13, \*\*

Cerasuolo di Vittoria Classico 2010

Lively and structured, with attractive cherry flavors. (Vias Imports, New York)

Manenti, \$20, \*\*

Cerasuolo di Vittoria 2011

Dark, dense and slightly tannic, with smoky fruit flavors. (Jan D'Amore Wines, Brooklyn)

Gulfi, \$20, \*\*

Cerasuolo di Vittoria 2011

Lively and earthy, though the fruitiness leaves an impression of slight sweetness. (Selected Estates of Europe, Mamaroneck, N.Y.)

Planeta, \$21, \*\*

Cerasuolo di Vittoria 2011

Rich and earthy, with pretty fruit aromas. (Palm Bay International, Boca Raton, Fla.)