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Report #37: The Wines of Sicily

Introduction

Sicily is one of the most exciting wine regions in Italy. In recent decades, Sicilian wines have greatly improved in quality. While Sicily is renown for its outstanding dessert wines such as the world-famous Marsala, today there are a growing number of wineries throughout Sicily, large and small, producing world class premium wines from unique indigenous varieties like Nero d'Avola, Nerello Mascalese, Frapatto, Grillo, Caricante, and others.

In our previous 2007 report *The Wines of Southern Italy: from Quantity to Quality,* we noted that most of southern Italy including Sicily had a long history of wine production focused on quantity. Instead of producing wines of quality for the international market, the south of Italy became a producer of cheap bulk wine, and Sicily was the leading producer. Indeed, the structure of the wine industry in Sicily was built on the production of cheap wine by cooperatives, which in turn stifled private investment and innovation in the wine industry. While Sicily's cooperatives and private companies continue producing a vast quantity of innocuous wine, there are today many outstanding family and commercial wineries producing world class wines that deserve the attention of the trade and serious wine consumers. These wines are the focus of this report.

In this report we provide a brief history of Sicily's wine industry and identify its major wine growing regions and their different soils and climate. We then identify the improvements which have taken place in the vineyards and the wineries throughout the island that help explain the emergence of Sicily as a producer of premium wine. A unique characteristic of Sicilian wine is its indigenous grapes, so we focus the next section on the different varieties and styles of wines being produced and identify the best producers. We also take a close look at the special cuisine of Sicily and make recommendations on the pairing of Sicilian wines and food. Lastly, we examine the global market for Sicilian wines and recommend measures for promotion of Sicilian wines in the United States. In the final section we provide tasting notes and ratings on more than 200 wines tasted for this report. Some of the artisanal wines we review are produced in small quantities and are difficult to find outside Sicily, but the persistent consumer who seeks out these wines will be amply rewarded.

The current market for Sicilian wines in the US should grow in the coming years. The quality of the wines is excellent and the prices are competitive for most wines. The big challenge for the Sicilian wine industry and its importers is to educate the public about the quality and uniqueness of Sicilian wines. This is one of the missions of Assovini Sicilia, the trade organization which represents most of the quality wine producers of Sicily in international markets.

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Mike Potashnik and Don Winkler with Joel Butler, Contributing Editor

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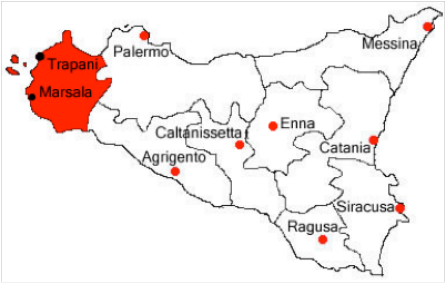
A Brief Wine History

Sicily has a long and colorful wine history beginning with-ancient times. It acquired worldwide renown in the 19th century with the discovery of *vino perpetuo* by an English merchant, who fortified the wine and marketed it to the world as Marsala. The popularity of Marsala eventually faded, to be replaced the middle of the last century by the production of bulk wine by community cooperatives. But towards the end of the century, quality growers began bottling their own wine, following the viticultural and enological advice of the Sicilian Wine Research Institute (IRVV) and gaining success in export markets[1]. Today, there's a renewed emphasis on the indigenous varieties of Sicily accompanied by continued improvements in growing grapes and making wine.

Ancient Times

The Greeks and Phoenicians were the first to grow vines and produce wine in Sicily in the 8th century B.C. According to Homer Sicily was a wild yet fertile place and that with a little industry it could become a land of plenty. In the centuries that followed, other outsiders (Romans, Muslims, Normans et al) exploited Sicily's natural wealth but failed to create an indigenous wine culture. Under the Romans, the island became the breadbasket of the Roman Empire, and Sicily's grapes and wines were prized on the Roman table. The Muslims introduced a variety of new crops on the island beginning in the 9th century and continued the cultivation of wine grapes although not to the same degree as in Greek and Roman times. The Norman kings brought wealth to Sicily and protected its natural resources but contributed little to the development of the island's wine culture. Indeed, up to the end of the 18th century foreign rulers and the landed nobility which arose with them continued to exploit Sicily's natural wealth without developing an indigenous culture for wine production.

The Age of Marsala



Sicily's wine industry began to emerge in the late 18th century with the invention of Marsala by the Englishman, John Woodhouse. Woodhouse landed on Sicily's west coast near the city of Marsala (see map) in 1770, tasted the local wine called *Vino Perpetuo* (a wine aged in cask more than 40 years and drawn directly from cask) and realized he could fortify the wine to better withstand shipment and make a less costly version of Madeira since both labor and grapes were plentiful and cheap. The fact that in 1805 Thomas Jefferson purchased a barrel of Marsala is evidence of Woodhouse's success in marketing Marsala. In the ensuing years other British entrepreneurs followed Woodhouse and invested in vineyard development, winemaking, and transport of still wines in and around the town of Marsala.

During the second half of the 19th century, following the unification of Italy under Giuseppe Garibaldi, British influence in the wine industry waned, and more Sicilians entered the Marsala trade, producing wine for local consumption and exporting it to France, England, and other countries. Indeed, the wine industry flourished during this period with vineyard plantings reaching their highest point in history—over 321 thousand hectares. The boom, however, did not last; phylloxera hit Italy in 1880 and took a major toll on vineyards and wine production until the middle of the 20th century when wine cooperatives came on the scene and transformed Sicily into a major bulk wine producer.

The Rise of the Cooperatives

During the second half of the 20th century, cooperative wineries became the major producers of wine in Sicily. These cooperatives produced grape juice (must) and wine in bulk from grapes purchased from their members—small farmers. Responding to the growth in demand for cheap wine in Europe and aided by favorable EU trade policies, Sicily rapidly became a major producer of bulk wine and its cooperative wineries expanded rapidly. The wine boom of this period also enabled cooperatives to provide essential income to small Sicilian farmers, especially those in the West who had been hard hit with the down turn of the Marsala industry in the 1960s. From 1970 the number of cooperative wineries in Sicily increased from 73 to 197 by 1980. As of 1987, 78 percent of Sicilian wine was produced by cooperatives, and 97 percent of that was sold in bulk. One cooperative—Settesoli—located in Menfi on Sicily's southwestern coast was exceptional. Formed in 1958, it started bottling wine in the mid-1970s under the leadership of Diego Planeta and today is highly successful exporting good quality value wines.

[1]In 2011 the IRVV was replaced by the IRVOS (Istituto Regionale Vini e Oli di Sicilia) to promote Sicilian olive oil in addition to wine.

The Palmento: Traditional Winemaking

Prior to the introduction of modern enology, winemaking in Sicily took place in palmentos. A precursor to today's wineries, the palmento was a building constructed of stone where freshly harvested grapes were crushed and where the juice underwent alcoholic fermentation. The walls of the palmento were very thick, to buffer rapid temperature changes. Palmentos were frequently built to make use of gravity—the reception area was elevated, and subsequent processes occurred at lower elevations. Typically, harvesters dumped grape bunches into shallow stone basins where a team of crushers trod the grapes, the juice of which then flowed through stone gutters to stone tanks where it fermented and then to another level where it was transferred to large chestnut or oak barrels, like the chestnut barrels that we saw in the old palmento preserved at the Barone de Villagrande winery on Mt. Etna (see picture). The introduction of modern winemaking equipment and more hygienic conditions in the cellar have made the traditional palmentos obsolete for winemaking today. Many sit abandoned, surrounded by the vineyards they used to serve. However, they are interesting tourist attractions.

The Quality Revolution

Beginning in the 1980s a small number of Sicilian wine producers began producing high quality wine that ultimately led to today's quality winemaking revolution. These producers were by no means the first, as a couple of decades earlier, Giuseppe Tasca and his wife took over management of Tasca d'Almerita and began producing wines of quality as did the team at Duca di Salaparuta under the leadership of the brilliant Piedmontese consulting winemaker, Franco Giacosa. Also in 1971, the Frenchman Hugues Bernard began producing quality wine at the Rapitalà winery at Alessandro di Compareale near Palermo. These early pioneers were followed in the 1980s by Giambattista Cilia, Giusto Occhipinti and Cirino Strano, the founders of COS winery, by the Rallo family of Donnafugata, by Salvatore and Vinzia di Gaetano of Firriato, by Marco De Bartoli, who revitalized the making of quality Marsala, by Diego Planeta and others. These were just a few of the producers who, with the help of other industry leaders and consultants, would transform Sicily into a quality wine producer in the decades ahead.

In the late 1980s and 1990s, most of the leaders of Sicily's wine industry looked beyond Sicily for help in developing their industry. In 1985, Diego Planeta, head of the Settesoli cooperative and the new President of Sicily's Regional Institute of Vine and Wine (IRRV), funded research to identify promising international varieties and supported the travel and study of young enologists to become acquainted with developments in other countries. Also during this period, Giacomo Tachis, one of Italy's finest enologists from Tuscany, and a follower of the famed Emile Peynaud of Bordeaux, became a consultant to the IRRV. For more than a decade Tachis helped give direction to Sicily's quality revolution, promoting the adoption of Nero d'Avola as Sicily's red grape, prescribing the growing of international varieties, introducing techniques to improve the quality of Zibibbo (Muscat Alexandria) and Moscato Bianco dessert wines and helping develop barrel fermentation techniques for Chardonnay and indigenous whites.

In recent decades, producers in Sicily have focused their attention on producing high quality wines from their own indigenous varieties. Some of the most notable examples are the group of producers on Mt. Etna in eastern Sicily: Marco de Grazia of Tenuta delle Terre Nere, Andrea Franchetti of Passopiscaro, Federico Curtaz of Tenuta di Fessina, Alberto Graci, Barone de Villagrande, and others who are crafting stunning wines from the indigenous grapes of Nerello Mascalese and Carricante. In Vittoria in southeastern Sicily, the winemakers at COS, Arianna Occhipinti, and at Gaetana Jacono's Valle delle Acate are producing exciting Cerasuolo di Vittoria, and Frappato. Indeed, in virtually every growing area of Sicily there has been exciting progress in the quality of Sicilian wine.

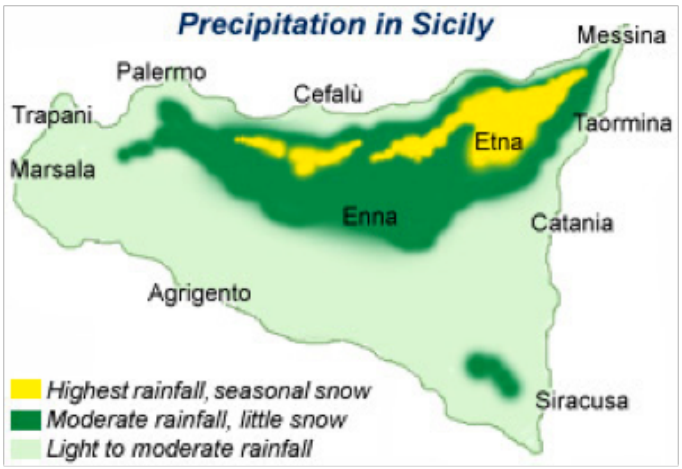
Geography

Sicily is a geographically diverse wine growing region with unique soils born from underwater volcanoes, strong winds that attack from the south and the north, and sites suitable for growing grapes on the coastal plains, the hilly interior, and the mountains and volcanoes of the island. In this section we examine this terroir and how it varies across the major growing regions of the island.

The Island

The largest island in the Mediterranean, Sicily also has the tallest (3320 m), active volcano (Mt. Etna) in Europe. Shaped like a triangle, the island's apex is Marsala on the west, and its base lies to the east, running from Messina in the north to Siracusa and Noto in the south with Sicily's second largest city, Catania, located in between. The northern side of this triangle is mountainous (the Peloritanis) as is its southeast corner (the Hyblaeans), while the southern and western coasts are home to seaside plains that rise to the hills that dominate the island. Less than 15 percent of the land is classified as littoral plains.

Excluding the northern mountains, Sicily was born under water, the product of underwater volcanoes (like the active volcano Ferdinandea located 6m under water just west of Agrigento) and the violent clash of continents as the African plate slid under the Eurasian plate pushing Sicily out of the sea. As a result, much of the island's soil is calcareous in nature, with limestone especially prominent in the southeast. The absorptive capacity of the soils helps vines survive the long, arid summer. Both active volcanoes like Mt Etna and dormant ones like Monti Iblei in the southeast have contributed rich basalt to the soils[2].



The Climate

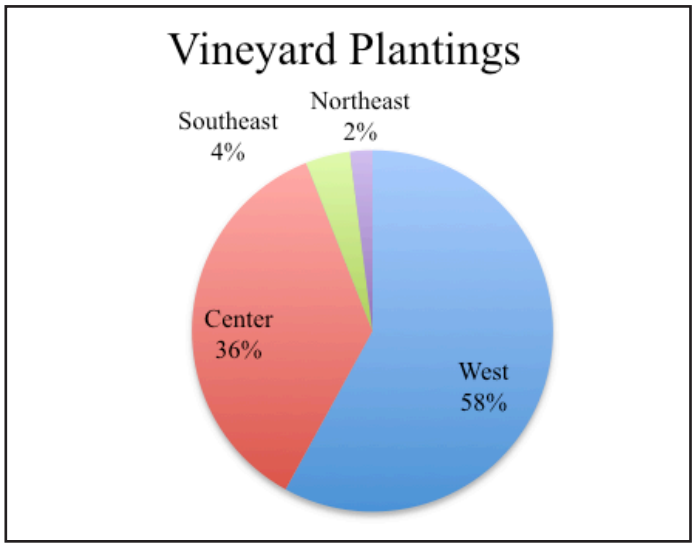
Sicily lies in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, and its climate is warm with rainfall concentrated in the winter months. Average rainfall is about 600 mm but varies considerably, as shown in the map. Milo on Mt. Etna receives about double the average for the island; rainfall is also higher than average in the mountains south of Palermo. As with many parts of the Mediterranean, rainfall in Sicily has declined in recent decades[3]. Average temperatures and diurnal variations also vary by altitude and proximity to the sea, which serves as a moderating influence, warming in the winter and cooling in the summer. Diurnal temperature variations are greatest in the interior at high elevations like the Regaleali estate near Sambuca located northeast of Agrigento.

Strong winds from every direction buffet the island the year round. The hot, dust-laden *scirocco* that comes out of the Sahara can reach speeds as high as 100 km/h and snap green shoots in the spring and dry out grapes in the autumn. It's especially persistent and severe on the island of Pantelleria.

[2]For a detailed analysis of Sicilian soils, consult Venturella, Giuseppe. "Climatic and Pedological Features of Sicily." *BOCCONEA* (2004).

[3]Arnone, E. et.al. (2013) Rainfall statistics changes in Sicily, Hydrol. Earth Syst. Sci. Discuss., pp 2323-2352.

The plains, hills, and mountains and their different exposures create numerous, distinct areas for growing vines. For purposes of exposition, we simplify and divide Sicily into five principal regions—the West, the Center, the Northeast, the Southeast, and the Islands.



The West

The West is mostly comprised of the province of Trapani (one of nine in Sicily) and includes two major urban areas, Marsala and Trapani. As with other coastal areas, soils near the sea include the mineral salts of ancient lagoons. Many of the soils, both along the coast and on the hills further inland, are calcareous red clay.The Grillo grape does especially well in the hot, dry coastal climate, while Catarratto, the most widely planted variety, is mainly grown on the inland hills, which rise as high as 600 m. The Trapani area grows 58 percent of all wine grapes in Sicily and an astounding 70 percent of all white wine grapes. Some of Sicily's most prestigious producers have vineyards in the West, including Caruso & Minini, Firriato and De Bartoli.

The Center

This includes a large area covering the land between the Tyrrhenian Sea on the north to the Mediterranean on the south and extending from the Belice River on the west as far east as the Salso River. It corresponds approximately to the provinces of Palermo, Agrigento, Caltanissetta, and Enna and has 36 percent of Sicily's grape vines. The major wine producing areas are the highlands south of the seaside city of Palermo, the plains and hills near the southern coast called the Terre Sicane, and the highlands in the very center of the island.

Palermo. Much of the Palermo area is hilly with medium-high altitude (400+ m) vineyards of calcareous clay soils and a benign climate, including moderate average rainfall (600 mm). Both indigenous (Catarratto, Inzolia) and international varieties are grown. Wineries with vineyards

in the Palermo highlands include Duca di Salaparuta and Rapitalá.

Terre Sicane. The Terre Sicane is arid and hot and frequently buffeted by the African scirocco. The soils are typically sedimentary and calcareous, and the vineyards are typically planted at 250-500 meters altitude. White grape varieties (Inzolia, Catarratto, Chardonnay, Viognier) dominate, but French red varieties (Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah) have also gained in popularity. Important, large wineries in the Terre Sicane include Donnafugata, Planeta, and Settesoli.

Central Highlands. In the very center of Sicily, one finds vineyards planted on mountainous hillsides at high altitudes (up to 900m). While days during the growing season can be hot, especially when the scirocco blows, temperatures plummet at night, resulting in large diurnal temperature variations. Like most the rest of Sicily, even these highlands were at one time under the sea, reflected in the calcium carbonate content of the sandy and clay soils. Arguably the most important producer here is Tasca d'Almerita with over 400 ha of vineyards near Vallelunga. Catarratto, Nero d'Avola, Perricone, and Cabernet Sauvignon are among the varieties grown in the central highlands.

The Southeast

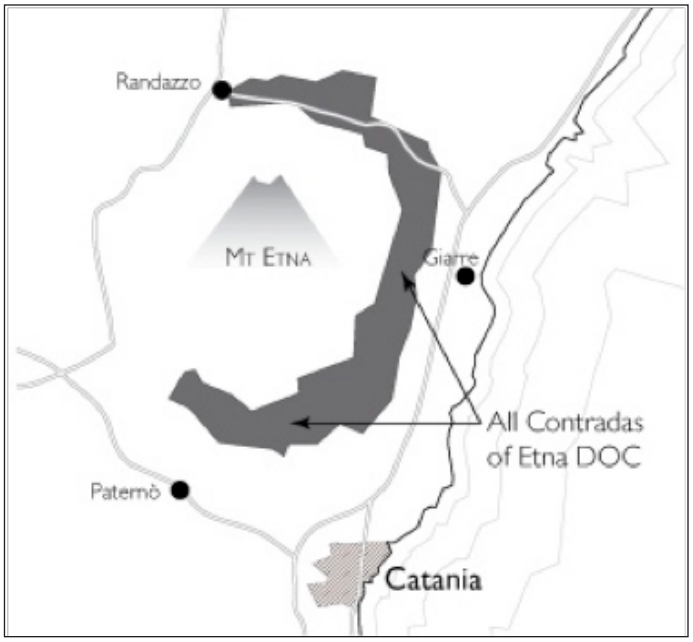
This historic area lies between the Salso River on the west and the Ionian Sea on the east and includes important urban centers like Vittoria, Ragusa, Noto, and Siracusa. It is where Franco Giacosa discovered Nero d'Avola, and where several growers, including the Zonin-owned Principi di Butera, have planted that variety near Butera. Aside from Butera, the most important wine growing regions are around the city of Vittoria and south of Noto. The Southeast has only about 4 percent of all Sicilian vineyards.

Vittoria. Vittoria is coastal plain of sandy, sedimentary soils, often with a calcareous hardpan, and a hot, dry climate. It is the home of the delicate Frappato grape and the Cerasuolo di Vittoria blend of Frappato and Nero d'Avola. Important wineries include COS, Occhipinti, and Valle dell'Acate.

Noto. While Vittoria is near the southern shore and the Mediterranean, Noto is nearer the eastern shore and the Ionian Sea. Here the highly calcareous, clay soils can be almost white, which reflects the heat and helps keep soils cool. As the hottest part of Sicily, fruit can get very ripe, as we found in our tastings there. Moscato Bianco and Nero d'Avola are two important varieties grown here. Well known wineries include Feudo Maccari and Zisola.

The Northeast

Quantitatively, the Northeast is Sicily's least important wine region. However, it compensates for its lack of size by producing some of Sicily's most exciting wines. While grapes are grown on the coastal plain bordering the Tyrrhenian Sea to the north, the main growing area in the northeast is Mt. Etna, especially its northern and eastern sides. Mt. Etna is one of the most active volcanoes in the world with



Mt. Etna DOC

continuing eruptions of ash and pumice and periodic lava flows, the most recent large one occurring in 1991-1993. The soils are, of course, basaltic but of widely varying textures, from fine sand to basalt rocks the size of potatoes. Since Mt. Etna is active, falling ash and *lapilli* (small, light volcanic pebbles) are not uncommon, especially towards the east and southeast, due to prevailing winds, and contribute to soil fertility. The soils are loose and well-aerated, allowing the roots of vines to easily penetrate the basaltic substrata in search of water in the dry-farmed vineyards.

The terroir of Etna varies greatly depending on altitude and vineyard location, with higher rainfall, cooler temperatures, greater diurnal variation, and more basaltic soils the higher the altitude. Below 400m the soils tend to be sandy clay of alluvial and basaltic origins, and the slopes are gentle enough to permit modern, wire-trained vines. Widely differing mixes of basaltic rocks and sand predominate at altitudes between 400 and 900m (essentially, between two parallel roads, the Quota 600 and the Quota Mille, where Nerello Mascalese, Nerello Cappuccio, and other indigenous red grapes grown *alberello* (individually staked bush vines) style, often on terraced vineyards. White grapes, mostly Carricante, grown best above 900 m, the altitude helping preserve the grape's natural acidity. Red varieties dominate Mt. Etna, representing over 90 percent of all vines planted, but the white variety Carricante is predominant on the southeastern slope, especially in Milo.

Rainfall varies not only by altitude but, also, by location on Mt. Etna. Precipitation is greatest (1200 mm, annually) on the eastern and southeastern slopes, which receive a direct hit from winter storms coming in off the sea. The northern slopes receive less direct rainfall but benefit from runoff from the summit that is absorbed by the volcanic substrata.

Numerous wineries are producing high quality wines from Etna. Some of the better known are Barone di Villagrande,

Cornelissen, Graci, Passopisciaro (Andrea Franchetti's estate), and Terre Nere (Marc de Grazia's estate).

The Islands

A Zibibbo Vine on Pantelleria

Sicily has numerous offshore islands. In terms of wine production, the most important is the largest island, Pantelleria, which lies directly east of Tunis and just 60 km from the Tunisian coast. With volcanic soils, high summer temperatures, almost no ground water, scant precipitation and in the direct path of the fierce scirocco winds, the island is famous for its Passito di Pantelleria, made from the Zibibbo grape. Most vineyards are located near the sea, which helps moderate the summer heat and provides essential humidity. Vines are head trained (alberello pantesca—see photo) and planted close to the ground in depressions for protection from the wind.

Closer to Sicily and just 15 km from the Trapani coast near Marsala lie the Egadi Islands, including the largest and most important, Favignana, where Firriato has an experimental vineyard located just meters from the sea.

The Eolian (Lipari) Islands are a volcanic archipelago that lies at the opposite end of Sicily just off its northeastern shore. Commercial vineyards can be found on the largest island, Lipari, as well as on Salina. The islands receive moderate rainfall and have sandy, volcanic soils. The principal grape variety is Malvasia di Lipari which has traditionally been used to make sweet, passito wines. Tasca d'Almerita has a 5 ha vineyard on Salina for making a passito style Malvasia. Carlo Hauner and Colosi also are important producers of this wine.

Improvements in Viticulture and Winemaking

"Sicily has a heavy responsibility to European viticultural history, that of maintaining the sensitivity to history which is inherent in the island's traditions, of keeping alive the relationship between the universality of myth and local traditions, where the tangible signs of symbols are found in those ancient grapes and in those places where they come alive again." These words by noted Viticultural Professor Attilio Scienza, from the Istituto Agrario di San Michele all'Adige, echoed in our minds as we travelled around the island and inspected the diversity of vineyards. From ancient times until quite recently, Sicily was noted for the quality of its wines, unique varieties and a variety of *terroirs*, reflecting its strikingly diverse climate and topography.

There is evidence that Sicily's producers are paying heed to Professor Scienza's comments. The quality of Sicilian wine has improved immensely over the past two decades, resulting from numerous changes in the vineyard and the winery. These changes have had diverse sources—research and experiments carried out by the IRVV, the Università di Milano, Università di Palermo, and forward thinking growers and wineries; advice from world-famous Italian enologists; EU regulations and subsidies; and the incentives provided by higher prices and the critical acclaim and recognition of Sicily's best wines by the wine trade and consumers.

The Vineyard

The Sicilian vineyard has undergone numerous changes in recent years—better plant material, different planting practices, new vineyard sites, and improved vineyard management, including increased use of sustainable and organic practices.

Improved Indigenous Clones

Increasing research into grape improvement via clonal selection and identification of old, indigenous vines of quality has grown strongly in the last 10 years. Since 2003, the Regional Agricultural Assessor for Sicily has carried out a large-scale project aimed at genetic improvement of the island's ampelographic foundations, in collaboration with the Universities of Palermo and Milan, along with Rome's CRA-PAV (Centro di Ricerca per la Patologia Vegetale). From this research has come the first organized clonal selections of key varieties like Frappato, Inzolia and Nero d'Avola, along with the identification of over 50 indigenous varieties, many previously unknown. These discoveries have led producers to replant better vine material according to site. Simultaneously, producers like Marco Nicolosi of Barone di Villagrande continue to replant their vineyards from a careful selection of cuttings from their own vines, thus preserving genetic diversity.

At Donnafugata this desire to increase diversity and quality led to their planting 33 biotypes of Muscat from all over at their large vineyard on Pantelleria, famous for its ancient sun-dried Zibibbo (Muscat Blanc). In a joint effort with Giuseppe Tasca at Regaleali, both properties have planted some of the 50 nearly extinct varieties noted above in order to further Sicily's stature for quality wine and protect a precious cultural heritage.

Better Vineyards

Growers are searching out better locations for vineyards, partly in response to global warming, partly the result of changes in consumer preferences, and partly to simply get better fruit. Increased temperatures as well as the modern preference for delicate and crisp white wines has encouraged producers to plant at higher elevations, above 600

Villagrande's High Density, High Altitude, Massale Planted Vineyard at Milo

meters. The demand for fresh white wines as opposed to the old, oxidized style typical of the Marsala and Alcamo area propelled Cusamano to plant their Piano degli Albanesi vineyard near Ficuzzi at 700 meters. Likewise, most people consider the best Etna white wines to come from around Milo on the volcano's eastern slopes above 700 meters where there is more rainfall and cooler temperatures (Barone di Villagrande), or the drier north slopes above 850 meters (Terre Nere, Passopisciaro).

The search for better vineyard sites includes the rediscovery of old sites. Etna is perhaps the best example of the resuscitation of historic growing areas, but the practice extends beyond Etna. Planeta has been especially active in developing new vineyards in historic areas like Vittoria, Noto, Mamertino, and, of course, Etna. Old vineyards in Etna and elsewhere are located on what were at one time large wine estates called *contradas*, and some producers (Terre Nere, Passopisciaro) started several years ago putting the names of the *contradas* on their wine labels. Marco de Grazia advocated identifying and defining the *contradas* of Etna, and as a result in 2011 a ministerial decree established 133 of them and legalized putting the *contrada's* name on wine labels when the grapes come from a specific one.

Vineyards are also being planted more densely than a decade ago in order to limit production per vine while maintaining overall production levels[4]. The Planeta vineyard in Ulmo has increased density from 3800 to 5000 vines per hectare, while Villagrande's vineyards are planted 7000 vines/ha. Andrea Franchetti at Passopisciaro on the high slopes of Mt Etna (above 800 m) has recently planted Cesanese and Petit Verdot vines to 12,000/ha, an inordinately high density designed to focus these vines to better concentration considering the marginal, cool climate at this elevation.

Improved Vineyard Management

For newly planted vineyards, Sicily made the conversion from the traditional alberello (see box) or pergola style training to Guyot and and cordon-spur (cordone speronato) training several decades ago. Cottanera on Etna, for example, used to be pergola trained but converted to Guyot when it replanted to international varieties in the 1990s. Both trellising systems allow for mechanized harvesting and drip irrigation, and cordon-spur also permits mechanized pruning. The high cost of manual labor in Sicily requires mechanized viticulture in order to produce wine at internationally competitive prices. However, growing numbers of growers are resuscitating old alberello trained vineyards, especially on Mt Etna, and some (e.g., Feudi Maccari, Tasca d'Almerita) are even planting new alberello vineyards. In some cases (e.g., Pantelleria) alberello is the only feasible system. The high costs of rebuilding terraces (on Etna) and maintaining low-yielding, old alberello vines on tiny plots makes this financially feasible only for high-end wines. Today the distribution of vines by type of training is: alberello (8%), trellised/spalliera (82%), and pergola/tendone (9%).

Century Old Pre-Phylloxera Nerello Mascalese Alberello Vine in Terre Nere's Don Peppino Vineyard in Contrada Calderara Sottana

Alberello. Translated as "little tree", alberello is the age-old traditional method of vine-growing still widely used in many parts of Sicily. Low-growing, often pruned in a goblet-style, circular form, alberello vines are typically low in vigor, ideally suited to warm areas and rocky, well-drained soils where the leaf canopy shades the clusters from sunburn, and the porous ground allows deep root penetration. This allows older vines especially to avoid undue stress as they can take advantage of a deep water level. Older alberello vineyards are especially common where phylloxera cannot survive, like on Mt. Etna due to its sandy, low clay content soils. Yet at properties like Feudi di Maccari near Noto, producers have planted newer vineyards in the traditional manner, citing the benefits above, the less expensive planting costs (no fancy trellising), and the self-limiting vigor achieved as the vine's roots go deeper.

Cover cropping is increasingly used by some (Planeta, Donnafugata, Regaleali and others) to divert some energy from vines so that they do not grow as vigorously, thus achieving lower sugars and hopefully better alignment of flavour development. By tilling under these grasses and legumes, they also maintain a healthier soil and lower the need for fertilizers.

More recently, producers are returning to more traditional pre-industrial era vineyard management practices of a century ago, when everything was farmed "organically". Sicily's overall dry and benign climate, often windy, permits a more hands-off approach to farming that producers find less capital intensive, more consumer-friendly and quality enhancing. At Regaleali, Giuseppe Tasca said his

[4]Increased planting density is another way that Sicilian growers are returning to the past. As Salvo Foti in *La Sicilia del Vino (Maimone*, 2005) states (JB translation): "Fifty years ago, the normal vine density in Sicily was about 10,000 vines/ha; today, while there are isolated examples like this, they have become the exception…..new types of trellising have so modified the traditional systems that they have cut to 1/10 the number of vines per hectare."

father started to reduce chemical treatments beginning in the 1980's, including sulphur treatments. From four years ago, Tasca no longer uses any copper or sulphur, and is effectively organic. Other growers (Valle dell'Acate, Feudo Maccari) are following organic practices, and a small number of producers (e.g., COS) have converted to biodynamic farming.

The Winery

In the winery, Sicilian producers are crafting wines using modern equipment and new techniques introduced since the 1990s. Most of the old palmentos have been replaced with new facilities, and well-trained enologists and consulting winemakers are at the helm in many of the top wineries. Some noteworthy improvements in winemaking from the harvest to barrel aging are noted below.

The Harvest

Harvest at Donnafugata

Meticulous vineyard management and steady ripening of grapes enable Sicily's wineries to harvest healthy grapes by machine and by hand. The top wineries like Donnafugata are picking their grapes for acidity and freshness and harvesting by hand and sorting to remove debris before fermentation. Because of high daytime temperatures, top producers also harvest at night to better preserve the aromas of the fruit.

Fermentation

The use of controlled cold fermentation and cyromaceration in neutral tanks has contributed to white wines with fresher fruit, improved aromatics, stability of taste properties and better overall balance. Carricante, Inzolia, and Grillo have been the main beneficiaries. The use of cold maceration before alcoholic fermentation is also helping produce more concentrated color and softer tannins in Sicilian red wines.

Most Sicilian producers are also now doing relatively shorter and cooler fermentations to avoid overextracting tannins and to retain more fruit. Some, like Marco de Grazia at Terre Nere, have adopted roto-tanks to do fairly quick macerations to gain color and fruit with little seed tannin extraction. Winemakers are also using gentler fermentation techniques to capture the floral, gamey and red fruit character of delicate varieties such as Nerello Mascalese and Frappato. These more controlled methods have contributed to the development of the unique style of wines like Cerasuolo di Vittoria, which exhibits freshness and delicacy in wines from producers like COS, Occhipinti and Valle dell' Acate. They have also softened the tannins in the "rossos" of Mt. Etna.

Franco Giacosa: Pioneer of Sicily's Nero d'Avola. Franco Giacosa played a key role in Sicily's quality wine revolution by helping to revive Sicily's indigenous wine varieties like Nero d'Avola. In 1974, several years after obtaining a diploma at the School of Enology in Alba, Giacosa joined the winemaking team of Duca di Salaparuta where he worked with Italy's famed enologist Ezio Rivella. At Duca di Salaparuta he experimented using 120 small vats (100 liters) for microvinification. This became essential for comparing and understanding the different varieties, soils and microclimates of Sicily, which up to that time was known exclusively for its wine sold in bulk. In the early 1980s he started production of a red wine using 100% Nero d'Avola, which received world wide accolades. He later incorporated Nero d'Avola into the blend of Duca Enrico, which was Sicily's first varietal Nero d'Avola. In 1997 Giacosa left Duca di Salaparuta and became Technical Director for Zonin. He encouraged Gianni Zonin to purchase the 310 ha property that later became Feudo Principi di Butera. As technical director at Zonin, Giacosa continued work on the development of Italy's indigenous grape varieties until he retired in 2011.

Maturation

Sicilian producers of quality red wine are using oak barrels for maturation, especially small barriques (225L) and slightly larger tonneaux (350-500L). However, many producers are using less new oak than they did even five years ago and are also using only older barrels. Producers like Villagrande and Passopisciaro in Etna are using larger oak (even chestnut, the traditional wood for Etna red wines) vessels from 3 hl to 15 hl for aging their wines.

Producers like Alessio Planeta and Marco de Grazia cite two reasons for dialing down the oak. As vines have matured the wines have greater fruit and structure and don't need the "crutch" of new oak. Also, the increasing importance attached to the expression of terroir dictates that oak influence be reduced. Perhaps another reason is the delicate nature of some of Sicily's best varieties, like Frappato and Nerello Mascalese, which are easily overwhelmed by too much oak.

Cement vats are also being used for fermentation and for aging lighter red varieties like Frappato. Cement vats were used for aging well before the introduction of French oak, and they offer several advantages. They breathe like oak and diffuse oxygen without adding oak character, and they retain and exchange heat well, so that refrigeration is usually not needed, although glycol tubing can be embedded for precision temperature control.

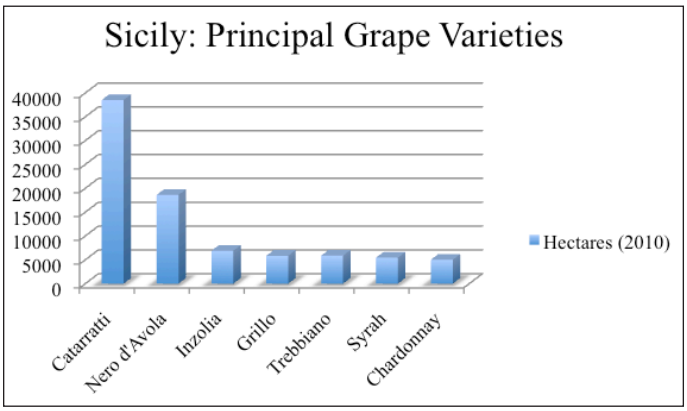
Experimentation

Amphora Sunk in Gravel at COS

Creative wine-making and experimentation in the cellar are taking place across Sicily today. Two Sicilian producers are looking backwards to their Roman past. COS is crafting wines fermented and aged in clay amphora jars with indigenous yeasts, kept underground to moderate heat build-up during maturation and bottled with little or no added sulphur dioxide. However, only modern scientific knowledge and understanding allows this low-tech approach. Franc Cornelissen is using clay amphorae for producing natural wines. He is an extreme naturalist, avoids any treatments of the soil, either organic or biodynamic, and uses amphorae lined with epoxy resin to reduce volatile acidity in his wines.

The Grapes and Wines

A large number of both indigenous and international grape varieties are grown in Sicily. However, a relatively small number are important for premium wine production. White grape varieties represent 64 percent of the total, with 36 percent of plantings being red varieties. As shown in the graph, indigenous varieties like Catarratta, Nero d'Avola, and Inzolia are a high percentage of all plantings, with Syrah, Chardonnay, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon together representing less than 17 percent of the total. Some of Sicily's most interesting indigenous varieties—Nerello Mascalese, Carricante, Frappato, Zibibbo, and others barely register on a graph of hectares planted.



White Grapes

The Grillo Grape

Grillo. Grillo was historically the most important variety in quality Marsala. Grown alborello style and harvested late, the grape gives both good acidity and the high levels of alcohol desired in Marsala. However, in recent times it was largely forgotten as growers replaced it with the consistently high yielding Catarratto. Marco De Bartoli rediscovered the variety in the 1980s, producing a cold-fermented, dry wine that today is widely imitated.

Grillo is grown mostly in the western province of Trapani. It is a spontaneous crossing of two other Sicilian varieties discussed here—Zibibbo and Catarratto. It is frequently blended with the more aromatic Inzolia grape. Today Grillo represents about 6 percent of Sicily's planted vines.

Grillo table wines are made in several styles. The most frequent is fermented in stainless steel and reveals aromas and flavors not unlike those of Sauvignon Blanc with good acidity and freshness. Good examples of this style are offered by Caruso & Minini, Valle dell'Acate, and Tasca d'Almerita. Grillo is also sometimes aged in oak for up to 12 months. The Duca di Salaparuta makes a good example of this style. And Grillo is also often frequently blended with other grapes, especially the more aromatic Inzolia; Firriato makes an excellent example.

Inzolia. An old native variety, Inzolia (also spelled Insolia) is the third most planted grape in Sicily with 6,800 hectares mainly in western Sicily. Inzolia is blended into many other wines and is used with Grillo and Catarratto to produce Marsala. Light straw in color and low in acidity it was historically blended with Catarratto to make white wines. Prior to the onset of powdery mildew (to which it is especially susceptible) in the 19th century, this was the most widely planted grape in Sicily and, also, made up the largest share of the Marsala blend.

Like Grillo, Inzolia is very productive and needs to be planted in low-fertility soils to lower yields and give quality fruit. Inzolia is mildly aromatic and does best in high altitudes, which bring out its spicy floral character and increases its acidity level. Good examples of fresh Inzolia made in stainless steel are offered by Firriato and Caruso & Minini. Cusumano makes an excellent, wood fermented, lees stirred wine. And several producers blend Cattarato with Inzolia, Grecanico, Cattarato, and even Viognier; recommended producers include Cottanera, COS and Caruso & Minini.

Cataratto. This is the most widely planted of all varieties in Sicily (and the second most widely planted in all of Italy),

representing more than a third of all planted vines. It is a high yielding variety that has been written about since the 17th century, but it came to the fore in the 20th century when it replaced Grillo for the production of Marsala. It accounts for 34% of total plantings in Sicily with 38,000 hectares. It makes subtly flavored wines of moderate alcohol and high acidity, especially when grown in the hilly interior. As a dry wine, it is frequently blended with Inzolia, which contributes both alcohol and fragrance. There are three phenotypes of Catarratto—Comune, Lucido, and Extralucido. Comune is the most widely planted and yields the highest sugar and lowest acidity of the three.

Carricante. Almost all of the Carricante in Sicily (just 146 ha) is found on Mt. Etna. At high altitudes (1000 m) Carricante seems to be a sponge for the minerals of Etna, and its wines are invariably described as subtle, chalky and mineral-like with high acidity that gives them long life in bottle. It's the principal grape in Etna Bianco (at least 60% of the blend) and Etna Bianco Superiore (at least 80% of the blend). Etna Bianco Superiore is only produced in the commune of Milo near Catania. Barone de Villagrane makes an excellent example of this wine.

Carricante is fermented in stainless steel to preserve its aromatic qualities and is usually blended with other varieties, although Tenuta di Fessina makes an outstanding, oak-aged, 100 percent Carricante. Firriato and Graci make excellent blends of Carricante and Catarratto, while Planeta blends Carricante with Riesling, and Terre Nere blends it with Inzolia.

Zibibbo. This exotic sounding grape is none other than the familiar Muscat of Alexandria. Its name is derived from the Arabic "zabib" for dried grape, and became the name for this grape variety when the island of Pantelleria was under Arabic control. Originally from Northern Africa, the Muscat of Alexandria is one of the oldest genetically unmodified grapes in existence and is the base of many of the world's special sweet wines: Beaume de Venise in the Rhône, Vinho Moscatel in Portugal's Setúbal region, Hanepoot in South Africa, etc. Indeed, the Vitas International Variety Catalogue lists 199 different names for this grape.

Only 2 percent of Sicily's vineyards are planted to Zibibbo, but it is far and away the most important variety planted on the island of Pantelleria. While Zibibbo is best known as the variety used to make the late harvest Moscato di Pantelleria and the sweet Passito di Pantelleria, today many producers also make dry and sparkling Zibibbo from grapes grown both on Pantelleria and on Sicily itself.

Chardonnay. Several international white varieties are planted in Sicily. The most important is Chardonnay, which was widely planted on the island beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Today it is the most planted international variety and occupies five thousand hectares or more than 4 percent of all plantings. Tasca d'Almerita produced the first varietal Chardonnay and Planeta released its outstanding ripe, barrel-fermented Chardonnay in the mid-1990s. Today, 98% of all Chardonnay in Sicily is planted in the provinces of Trapani, Agrigento and Palermo. Other producers of excellent Chardonnay-based wines include Cusumano, Donnafugata, Firriato, and Rapitalà.

Red Grapes

The Nero d'Avola Grape

Nero d'Avola. This is Sicily's most important red grape with 16 percent of total plantings. While grown all over the island., it is the dominant grape in the southeast vineyards of Butera and Noto and in much of the province of Caltanissetta in the central highlands where it represents 63 percent of total plantings. Because of the wide variety of growing conditions and differences in wine making Nero d' Avola takes on a variety of guises.

The most common characteristics of Nero d'Avola are dark fruit aromas, hints of herbs and rich earthy flavors. These characteristics are found among grapes grown along the coast and anywhere else that grapes are allowed to ripen longer. Good examples of this ripe style are Princip di Butera, Cusumano, Tasca d'Almerita, Duca Salaparuta, Duca Enrica and Feudo Maccari.

Since Nero d'Avola ripens relatively early growers need to take care to avoid over-ripe, high sugar grapes. Where grown at higher elevations with cooler growing conditions in the middle of the island, Nero d'Avola yields redder, fresh fruit. However, at 500 meters, it has difficulty ripening and produces light, astringent wines. The top producers of well-balanced, spicy dark red fruited Nero d'Avola include Tasca d'Almerita, Planeta, Caruso & Minini, Duca di Salaparuta, Valle dell'Acate, Occhipinti, COS, Morgante and Principi di Butera.

Nero d'Avola is frequently blended with international varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. Cusumano, Donnafugata, and Mazzei blend with Bordeaux varieties, while Valle dell'Acate blends with Syrah.

Frappato. Grown almost exclusively in the southeast, Frappato has only 1 percent of total plantings in Sicily. However, its popularity is increasing due to its unique rose petal and red berry fragrance and delicacy. In Vittoria it plays a key role with Nero d'Avola in the blend Cerasuolo di Vittoria, one of Sicily's finest wines, which is now produced by about 20 wineries. Frappato is mainly grown in sandy soils, and its bunches are tight and compact. Fermentation is usually done in stainless steel quickly and gently at low temperatures to preserve aromatics and fruit flavors. Frappato easily oxidizes and is usually overwhelmed by barrel fermentation and aging, so concrete vats and Slavonian botti are more commonly used. While Frappato lacks anthocyanins and is light in color, it is flavorful with red berry and pomegranate fruit flavors. Frappato is clearly not for cellaring and should be consumed within two to three years, akin to fine Cru Beaujolais.

The percentage of Frappato in Cerasuolo di Vittoria varies between 30 and 40 percent. Top producers include COS, Planeta, and Valle dell'Acate. Excellent, single varietal

Frappatos are made by COS, Occhipinti, and Valle dell'Acate.

Nerello Mascalese. Nerello Mascalese is the prized grape of Mt. Etna, producing some of Sicily's most authentic and unique wines. It is primarily grown on Etna's north slopes, but is also planted on the east and south slopes. Nerello Mascalese is a late ripening grape, usually harvested in mid-October, with large clusters and berries and thick skins. Like Pinot Noir, the grape is highly sensitive to its terroir and in the case of Etna reveals the unique characteristics of the different contradas (crus) where it is grown. It is often blended with another important variety indigenous to Mt. Etna, Nerello Cappuccio. Neither variety is widely planted outside of Mt. Etna, although the tiny Faro DOC that overlooks the strait of Messina also uses these varieties. Plantings of Nerello Mascalese are just over 3 percent of all Sicilian plantings, while Nerello Cappuccio is under 1 percent. There are many fine producers of Etna Rosso including Girolamo Russo, Le Vigne, Passopiscaro, Pietradolce, Tenuta delle Terre Nere, Tenuta di Fessina, and Graci.

Perricone. One of Sicily's oldest grapes, Perricone used to be important in western Sicily, but today only occupies less than 400 hectares in all of Sicily. It almost became extinct after phylloxera devastated Sicily in the early 1900s. Perricone is a vigorous vine and needs green harvesting to achieve a balance between the foliage and the fruit. Depending upon where it is grown, Perricone can be deep in color and bitter or light in color and less astringent. A majority of producers use oak to ferment and age Perricone, but some like Caruso & Minini use stainless steel and produce lighter style wines.

Perricone is used both as a blending grape and a single varietal. It is frequently blended in small amounts with Nero d'Avola to increase palate texture and reduce high acidity. Both Firriato and Tasca d'Almerita blend Perricone with Nero d'Avola. Excellent single varietal Perricone is made by Caruso & Minini and Firriato.

Syrah. Like other international varieties, Syrah was only introduced into Sicily in the mid-1980s. Since its introduction it has become the second most planted red variety in Sicily after Nero d'Avola and currently accounts for 5 percent of all plantings. Because of its adaptability to warm climates and sandy soils, most of it is grown in western Sicily. Stylistically, Sicilan Syrah has been considered similar to Australian Shiraz with ripe, dense, and alcoholic traits. Top producers of Syrah include Caruso & Minini, Cottanera, Principi di Butera, Rapitalà, Valle dell'Acate, Planeta and Passopisciaro.

Bordeaux Varieties. Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and other Bordeaux varieties are also planted in Sicily. Like the other international varieties in Sicily they were actively promoted for use by the IRVV in the mid-1980s and early 1990s. Both Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot are mainly blended with Nero d'Avola to add color or structure. They are also combined with each other to produce Bordeaux blends. Excellent examples of Nero d'Avola and Bordeaux variety blends are made by Ceuso, Cusumano, and Donnafugata. Planeta makes an interesting blend of Bordeaux varieties only.

Sicilian Food and Wine Pairing

Sicilian cuisine is just as exciting as its wines. It is exotic and bears the imprint of the different peoples that have occupied the island over the centuries: Greeks, Romans, Normans, Spanish, Arabs, French and northern Italians. Homer's *Odyssey* describes the island's bounty of fresh apples, pomegranates and grapes. The Normans introduced fish curing with salt, while the Spaniards brought tomatoes, peppers and other vegetables. But it was the introduction by the Arabs of almonds, eggplant, couscous, saffron and sugar cane that defined much of Sicilian cooking as it is today. During our visit to Sicily we had the good fortune to taste a wide variety of dishes at lunches and dinners around the island.

In this section, we identify many of the key dishes of Sicily from antipasti to desserts and offer suggestions on pairing them with wine. Sicilian dishes are usually simple and savory, and Sicilians value fresh ingredients. They also like to roll and stuff different foods. Rolled meats like *Farssumagru*, rolled fish like *Involtini* and, of course, *Cannoli*. Sicilians also like fried foods, stuffed fried dough, fritters, and Arancine, of course.

Antipasti

Antipasti

Sicilian appetizers are a wonderful prelude to the main meal, but can also be a meal all by themselves. Marinated mushrooms, *prosciutto di parma,* Sicilian olives, carciofi (marinated artichoke hearts), *peperoni ripieni* (baked yellow and red peppers) *frittata*, omelets of all kinds, carmelised onions, cheesy *arancinette* (miniature rice ball croquettes) and *polpette di melanzane* (fried and braised eggplant fritters)

are among the appetizers we enjoyed for antipasti during our travels in Sicily.

Wines: Red and white wines pair well with most antipasti. For most of our meals in Sicily we drank both reds and whites for starters. Fuller bodied whites work well with spicy olives and marinated vegetables. Light-bodied reds are ideal for just about all antipasti, especially fried foods like *arancinette* or dried cured meats like *proscuitto.*

Fish and Seafood

Involitini de Pesce Spada

Fish and seafood are widely available in Sicily. One of the most popular fish dishes is *Involtini di Pesce Spada*, swordfish roll-ups stuffed with pine nuts, raisins, bread crumbs, and anchovies. Sicilians also love the taste of anchovies. Fresh and canned anchovies are featured in local dishes such as *Spaghetti con Acciughe e Mollica Rossa* (spaghetti with anchovy, fresh tomato sauce, and toasted breadcrumbs). Fresh sardines are also very popular and are usually fried or grilled but can also be stuffed and baked or featured in the popular pasta dish *Pasta con le Sarde*. Fresh tuna is plentiful in late spring and is cut into thin steaks, grilled and served with fresh tomatoes or other vegetables. Tuna is also preserved as in *Tonno Sott'Olio* and eaten sparingly as an antipasti or in salads.

Wines: Sicily produces a variety of white wines that are ideal for pairing with fish and seafood. Young, unoaked Inzolia, Grillo, Catarratto, and Carricante are all good choices for simple fish dishes and seafood. For richer fish and seafood dishes, anchovies and tuna, we recommend blends of these traditional grapes with Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, and perhaps Viognier. Other good choices would be barrel fermented single varietals like Chardonnay and Inzolia and barrel fermented blends of these wines or red fruit forward wines such as Frappato or darker more complex wines such as Cerusolo di Vittoria.

Pasta

There are many distinctive pasta dishes served throughout Sicily. *Pasta con le Sarde* (pasta with sardines) is one of Sicily's most famous pasta dishes. It is made all over Sicily, but the traditional recipe of Palermo is reputedly the best. *Spaghetti alla Siracusana* is another heavenly sauce of crunchy breadcrumbs, sardines, and parmesan cheese served with plain olive oil. An equally popular and delicious pasta dish is *Pasta alla norma*, which we ate at small restaurant in Etna. It consists of slowly cooked eggplant chunks with spices tossed into a basic tomato sauce and then tossed with ricotta and pasta. Pasta is often blended with vegetables such as *Pasta con Broccoli e Zacca* (green cauliflower and squash) or *Spaghetti con Verdure di Campo e Ricotta* (Spaghetti with Wild Greens and Ricotta) This simple and delicious dish in the creation of Anna Tasca of the famed family of Tasca d'Almerita Winery.

Wines: Because of the wide variety of pasta sauces in Sicily, pairing them with wine requires attention to the main ingredients. Red wines are usually paired quite successfully with pasta with tomato sauces. While visiting Etna we found the high acidity and fresh flavors of Etna Rosso pair magnificently with fresh tomato sauces. Big reds work well with more complex and earthy pasta sauces.

Meats

Farsumagru

In our travels in Italy we seldom ate meat. However, there are some wonderful meat dishes in the Sicilian culinary repertoire. *Farsumagru* (rolled steak, stuffed sicilian style) is perhaps the most celebrated meat dish in Sicily. It is a steak stuffed with meats, cheese, eggs and vegetables and then rolled to look like a roast. Other tasty meat dishes are rolled up *Braciole alla Sicilian,* veal cutlets or scaloppini filled with olives and capers and grilled over coals, and *Involtini di Carne*, emat roll-ups stuffed with ham, cheese and pistachios. *Spezzatino di Agnello con Patate* (lamb stew with potatoes) is one of many savory stews served in Sicily. Another is *Spezzatino di Vitello*, or veal stew made with onions, tomato paste and vegetables.

Wines: Big, flavorful reds are ideal for pairing with meat dishes such as steak and lamb. Nero d'Avola is an excellent choice for most meat dishes, especially the darker riper styles that offer blackberry and earth flavors. However, blends of Nero d'Avola with Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah also work well. Syrah by itself also usually pairs well with beef and lamb dishes. We couldn't resist ordering veal Marsala at a fine restaurant in the city of Marsala and enjoyed it with a red-fruited Nero d'Avola.

Doci (Desserts)

Sicilian meals always feature a sweet ending. Desserts made with fresh ricotta cheese are regularly served at lunches and dinners and are often the high point of a meal. *Cannoli con Crema di Ricotta* is very popular in Sicily, and during our visit, we tried many different recipes. The best ones have crisp shells and are filled with freshly made ricotta

Cannoli con Crema de Ricotta

cream. *Cassata* is Sicily's magnificent Arabian -inspired sponge cake with sweetened ricotta cream, marzipan and candied fruits. It is a specialty of western Sicily, especially Trapani, but is a big production to make at home. Casatelle are ricotta-filled, fried turnovers stuffed with sweetened ricotta. These decadent sweet pastries are also common in Trapani and served with coffee in the morning or as a dessert. Tarts of almonds, figs and other fruits are also popular desserts and are usually made with *Pasta Frolla,* a flaky pastry dough sweetened with sugar and grated zest of lemon. Sicilians also often have plain fruit for dessert, and there are wonderful choices like yellow melons, figs, persimmons, blood oranges, kiwi fruit and dates. There are also mild local cheeses like *caciocavallo,* a semisoft cow's milk cheese.

Wines: Sicily's sweet wines, known as *Passitos*, pair beautifully with desserts. So long as they are sweeter than the desserts themselves and have adequate acidity, passitos are excellent accompaniments to many of the desserts listed here. Marsala also pairs well with some desserts like cannoli and cheeses like Pecorino. A bold tasting Parmesano will go best with a bold Nero d'Avola.

The Market for Sicilian Wine

Sicily has made significant improvements in the quality of the wines it produces and exports. As a result, foreign demand has increased, and exports of bottled wine more than doubled between 1999 and 2009. As shown in the graph, the most important market is the UK, followed by Germany, and the US. Other major importers of Sicilian wine are Switzerland, Sweden, Canada, and the Netherlands.

While exports have increased, they are still a small percentage (about 10 percent) of total (bottled plus bulk) wine production, which was 4.8 million hectoliters in 2011. However, exports are mostly bottled wine, and exports of bottled wine are about 28 percent of the total 1.5 million hectoliters of bottled wine produced in 2011. Furthermore, the producers of especially high quality wine export a much higher percentage of their production: Firriato (45%), Carlos & Menini (85%), Feudo Principi di Butera (60%), Valle dell'Acate (70%), Cottanera (40%), and Barone di Villagrande (55%).

In 2011 Sicily produced 4.8 million hectoliters of juice from grapes, of which 1.5 million hectoliters, or 31% of the total, was bottled in one form or another on the island itself. While the percentages vary year by year, about 65 percent of Sicilian wine is sold in bulk or as table wine, 30 percent is sold with an IGT appellation, and 5 percent is sold with a DOC or DOCG appellation. Total exports (in 2009) are 460 thousand hectoliters, 74 percent of which is bottled. In the decade 1999-2009, bulk wine exports plummeted while exports of bottled wine more than doubled.

Sicily's Appellations. Today, there are 24 Sicilian wine appellations (23 DOCs, 1 DOCG (Cerasuolo di Vittoria), and IGT), of which the most widely used is Sicilia IGT *(indicazione geografica tipica),* which was created in 1995. The flexibility the Sicilia IGT allows producers, including higher yields than DOC appellations, permitting the variety name on the label, sourcing fruit from anywhere on the island, and bottling outside Sicily, quickly made it the most popular of all appellations. However, as of the 2012 vintage, the Sicilia IGT appellation ceased to exist and is instead replaced by two other appellations—Terre Sicilia IGT and Sicilia DOC, both of which allow fruit to be sourced from anywhere on the island and the wine to be bottled outside Sicily. It will be challenging to clearly explain to consumers what these appellations mean, aside from "grapes grown in Sicily". Meanwhile, only a few of the other 23 appellations are commonly used, mostly for wines that already have a clear identity, like Pantelleria, Etna and Cerasuolo di Vittoria. Given that the generic classifications Terre Sicilia IGT and Sicilia DOC are likely to be the appellations most consumers will find on bottle labels, it's important that quality producers begin putting more detailed technical information on back labels as to the grape sources, production methods, and locations of processing facilities so that interested wine consumers can begin learning more about the diverse terroir of Sicily and its impact on wine quality.

Export Promotion

The current market for Sicilian wines in the US should grow in the coming years. The quality of the wines is excellent, and prices are competitive for most wines. One challenge for the Sicilian wine industry is to educate consumers and the trade about the improvements made in the quality of Sicilian wine in recent years. Another is to use the appellation system and improved wine labeling to market Sicilian wine more effectively (see box).

Marketing organizations like Assovini Sicilia are playing an important role in promoting Sicilian wine exports. Since Assovini's 67 members produce 80 percent of the wines actually bottled on the island (as opposed to Sicilian wines bottled on mainland Italy, mostly by larger, more commercially oriented producers), it is in a unique position to promote the Sicilian wine industry in international markets. Assovini organizes an en Primeur, which since 2004 has

presented the new vintages to the Italian and international press, but it needs to compliment this with other educational activities and industry tastings in key international markets.

Export promotion activities in the U.S. should include media and education campaigns in major US wine markets and tastings for the trade and consumers. The media and educational campaigns should be done in both print and online with target groups identified with the assistance of the Institute for Foreign Trade, the Italian Embassy, and key importers. Sicily has exciting wines to promote in the U.S. market and a good story to tell. Wine enthusiasts would be keen to learn about the authentic, indigenous wines that are being produced in Sicily. Furthermore, the US wine media, including bloggers, need to be encouraged to write more about Sicilian wines, and the Sicilian wine industry itself needs to use social media such as Facebook and Twitter more effectively in generating excitement about Sicilian wines.

Lastly, wine industry leaders need to take action to clarify Sicily's appellation system so that its fine wines are better understood and appreciated by consumers and the trade. Presently only a few of Sicily's appellations are commonly used on labels and in the marketing of wines. These include Cerasuolo di Vittoria, Etna, Malvasia delle Lipari, Marsala, and Pantelleria. Each of these refers to specific grape varieties and unique terroir, which conveys valuable information to consumers, but in total they account for just a tiny percentage of Sicily's total production. The recent ministerial decree allowing Etna producers to put the name of the contrada from which grapes were sourced on the bottle label is a useful step forward in helping consumers identify high quality wines. Hopefully, other DOCs in Sicily will soon follow suit in specifying the grape sources and production methods that account for their quality.

Tasting Notes and Ratings

The wine reviews and ratings for this report include more than 200 Sicilian wines. They consist of both indigenous and international varieties and blends grown throughout Sicily. Although Sicilian wines are increasingly popular in the US market, many of the wines we tasted in Sicily are still not available in the US. This is especially true of some of the lesser known indigenous varieties and of Marsala. Notwithstanding the fame of Marsala, very few of the better wines such as the Marsala Vergine are being imported, which is most unfortunate. Hopefully, in time, when Sicilian wines are better known and appreciated, restaurants and consumers will have greater access to the full range of premium wines being produced in the country.

Our program of tastings was organized by Assovini Sicilia and other partners in Sicily. Most of the wines reviewed here were tasted during our visit to Sicily in May 2013. Wines we couldn't taste during our visit because of time constraints, we tasted at our offices in McLean VA and Washington, DC. We provide tasting notes, ratings and prices for virtually all the wines tasted. Those not imported in the US, with some exceptions, are listed under **Other Wines Tasted**; tasting notes for these wines are provided in our Tasting Notes Archive watww.i-winereview.com

The International Wine Review rates wines using the 100 point system. We do not write up wines that receive a rating below 85 points. The ratings are:

95 and above	A wine of distinction
91-94	A wine of outstanding or superior quality
89-90	A wine of very good to excellent quality
87-88	A wine of good quality
85-86	A wine of fair or acceptable quality
84 and below	Not recommended

We commonly add a + to a point score to indicate our judgment that a wine is deemed to be of higher quality than its point score but is not at the next quality level. That said, we urge our readers to look at our comments that help explain our ratings and provide more useful information about a wine than a simple number. We do not rate wines tasted in barrel and often do not give final ratings of wines that are newly bottled. We mark these wines with a "?"

All tasting notes and ratings for this report also appear in the i-WineReview's Tasting Notes Archive at www.i-winereview.com. Subscribers may use the i-WineReview Search function to locate all reviews of individual producers and their wines. Our tasting notes also include profiles of the producers who may be unfamiliar to our readers.

Abraxas is a small company located on the island of Pantelleria. The company was founded in 1999 by former Agricultural Minister, Calogero Mamini and Attilio Tripodi. Abraxas has 26 hectares of vines farmed organically in vineyards at 120mt and 400mt. It produces 80,000 bottles of outstanding passito and unique red wines of very good quality annually. Two reds are reviewed here. ***Importer:*** Wine Emporium, Brooklyn, NY

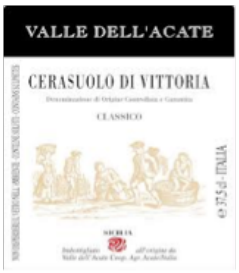
Abraxas 2009 Rosso Sidereus Sicily ($15) 89 A blend of Cabernet Franc and Nero d'Avola, the Sidereus is a rustic wine revealing aromas of dark and spicy red berry fruit with high acidity. It has good structure, youthful firm tannins and a pleasant finish. Sourced from a 360m vineyard. **Abraxas 2008 Kuddia del Moro Sicily ($30) 91** A more substantial wine than the Sidereus, this Nero d'Avola exhibits an attractive dark ruby color and aromas of plum and black cherry. It is a big rustic somewhat earthy wine although soft on the palate with dark spicy fruit flavors and tannic grip on the finish. Planted at 836m on volcanic soil at the foot of the 'Montagna Grande' on Pantelleria.

Barone de Villagrande This estate, one of the very few located on the eastern slopes of Mt. Etna at Milo, is situated at an altitude of 700m above sea level. It is family owned and operated; co-owner Marco Nicolosi Asmundo serves as winemaker. The wines produced by Barone de Villagrande are virtually all of indigenous grapes sourced from their Mt. Etna vineyards, which range from 15 to 75 years in age. Over the past 10 years the company has also been managing a project on the island of Salina to produce passito from sun-dried grapes of Malvasia delle Lipari. The quality of Barone de Villagrande wines is very high. Unfortunately only two wines of this producer are currently imported. ***Importer:*** Ominiwines, Flushing, NY

Barone de Villagrande 2011 Etna Bianco Superiore Sicily 91 Yellow-green gold color. Herbal-olive and slightly nutty bouquet reflects some lees contact and a cool site. Very

Tenuta di Fessina Property of Federico Curtaz, one time agronomist for Angelo Gaja, and an old friend of Marco de Grazia, who suggested he buy this property in Rovitello, which is cooler than Randazzo to the west, and thus produces a quite different, more floral and less weighty style of Etna Rosso that is refined and elegant. ***Importer:*** A Leonardo Lo Cascio Selection, Winebow, Montvale, NJ

Tenuta di Fessina 2010 A Puddara Bianco ($37) 90 This 100% Carricante displays a pale straw color and aromas of minerals and honey with a hint of acacia, Aged for nine months in French oak, it is rich on the palate and fills the mouth with exotic flavors and has a chalky finish. Well done. **Tenuta di Fessina 2011 Etna Rosso Erse Sicily ($35) 91** Medium ruby-garnet color. Pretty, subtle black fruit, mineral-tar and floral spicy aromas showcase pure Nerello Mascalese character. Elegant, and firm at once, the wine shows a solid moderately intense core of fruit. A very good base level Etna Rosso, it has good acidity and finishes clean with firm tannins. Overall, very pleasant. **Tenuta di Fessina 2010 Il Musmeci Etna Rosso Sicily ($65) 92** Medium light ruby-garnet color. Deeper brighter perfume of both sour and dark cherries (amarena and marasche in Italian),accented by delicate violet florality. Lovely fruit on the palate, medium bodied, chewy yet sweet cherry-mineral flavors. While the acidity is somewhat high, the tannins are rounder and more complete. This is a fine delicate wine with real length and deeper textured than the Erse, but also requiring 3-4 years aging to soften and integrate. **Tenuta di Fessina 2010 Ero Rosso Nero d'Avola Sicily ($25) 91** Medium dark ruby. This Nero d'Avola displays a lovely nose of dark red plum with a hint of spicy balsamic. It reveals typical red fruit characteristics for this variety, but is a very juicy wine, packed with fresh flavor and sweet tannins. **Tenuta di Fessina 2011 Laeneo Nerello Cappuccio Sicily ($25) 89+** Dark ruby. Black raspberry and red plum with note of dark cassis. Pure, juicy and savory on the attack and palate, showing dark fruit with blue notes. Hint of bitterness with firm tannins on the finish. A terrific blending grape.



Valle dell'Acate Located in southeastern Sicily, Valle dell Acate is owned and operated by Gaetana Jacono whose family has been producers in the area for six generations. Their vineyards total 100 hectares and have been replanted since 2001 They grow indigenous and international varieties on sandy-clay soils.. The winery bottles 33,000 cases annually and has a large and diverse portfolio. The quality of the wines is outstanding. ***Importer:*** Polaner Selections, Mt. Kisco, NY

Valle dell'Acate 2012 Zagra Sicily ($19) 90 The Zagra is 100% Grillo and exhibits yellow green-gold color and floral aromas with a hint of herbs. On the palate it has very fresh fruit flavors, good balance, and a layered spicy finish with notes of bitter almond. A complex wine for this grape. **Valle dell'Acate 2012 Il Frappato Sicily ($20) 89** The Il Frappato has a perfumy nose of red berries and rose petals. It is very fresh and fruit forward with nice firm tannins, no cloying sweetness and. good acidity. Simple flavors but very clean without that candied Beaujolais character. Fermented in stainless steel and left on the skins for 15+ days. **Valle dell'Acate 2009 Cerasuolo di Vittoria DOCG Sicily ($23) 92+** This extraordinary Cerasuolo is a blend of 70% Nero d'Avola aged in 350 liter tonneaux for 10 months; and 30% Frappato aged in stainless steel tanks. After blending, the wine is aged in bottle for an additional 12 months before sale. Medium ruby garnet color, it offers a lovely black cherry and floral bouquet, showing freshness and real individuality. It has well structured, elegant red berry flavors with discrete tannins and baked cherry/raspberry compote nuances. The finish adds some savory earthy tones. **Valle dell'Acate 2010 Il Moro Sicily ($23) 92** Il Moro is 100% Nero d'Avola fermented and aged one year in Stainless steel and one year in the bottle. It is elegant and red fruited with notes of earth and dark red cherry, quite sweet and ripe in character. Soft and lush on the palate, it has gentle ripe tannins and a long velvet finish. **Valle dell'Acate 2010 Tane Sicily ($50) 91** Tane is a blend of 85% Nero d'Avola and 15% Syrah. It spends 12 months in barriques, 50% new. Dark ruby. rich toasted oak, violets, dark red cherries, with a hint of framboise on the nose. Big, soft, lush on the palate showing lots of dark cherry fruit and garden herbs. Finishes with a sweet balsamic note.

Other Wines Tasted: Valle dell'Acate 2012 Insolia Sicily 89 Valle dell'Acate 2010 Rusciano Sicily Valle dell'Acate 2011 Bidis Sicily 91

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