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Discovering Sicily... and its Wine

By Marcia Frost

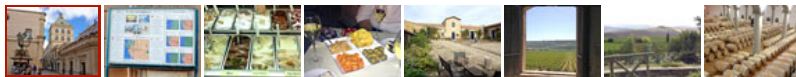
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Downtown Marsala Sicily



I love to cook and my grandfather was the one who honed my skills when it came to Italian food. Whether my ravioli didn't have enough cheese or my sauce wasn't sweet enough, Grandpa Joe would always voice an opinion. He was also adamant about having a good, Italian, red wine with those dinners.

A few years ago I visited Rome and Trieste, but that wasn't the area half of my mother's family was from. I longed to get to Sicily and taste the pasta, sauce and wine my grandfather remembered from his homeland. I was excited when I was recently offered the opportunity to go there. Then came the second bonus – I was getting to explore this Italian wine region with three of the country's top producers.

Ragusa Ibla with Valle dell'Acate

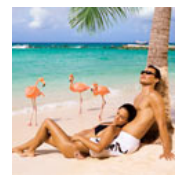
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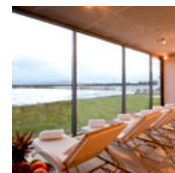
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Discovering Sicily... and its Wine

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It was a long first day as it took three planes and a ride of more than three hours for my friend Tracy and I to make our way to Ragusa. We were both tired and excited when we arrived at Locanda Don Serafino Hotel, a 19th century mansion that had been renovated only where necessary. It was filled

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We were staying in Ragusa Ibla (the Ibla meaning the "old" part of Ragusa), a European city at its best, with cobblestone streets and a piazza that brought me back to my time in Rome a few years back. Francesco Ferreri, owner of Valle dell'Acate, picked us up at the hotel and took us on a brief tour of the city, which has 51 churches, each one is Catholic, but no two alike.

Our itinerary stated that we would be stopping for an aperitif. I never thought it would be in two parts – the first at a gelato shop! This was not just any gelato place, this place used wine to make their frozen treats. It was as good as it sounds and I couldn't decide which I liked better – the moscato or the rose.

We had our real aperitif in the piazza in front of the shop, sipping spumante and nibbling olives and chips, before heading to dinner.

The only thing more unusual than Locanda Don Serafino Hotel was the restaurant. It seemed odd that the Locanda Don Serafino Restaurant wasn't anywhere near the hotel until I stepped inside it. The location was just as unique as the lodging, an intriguing mixture of ancient and modern. The pairing dinner was also quite a mixture: ricotta with eggplant and basil pesto; Stimpirata rabbit; ravioli filled with apple and aubergine cream with mozzarella and raw tomato sauce (a favorite dish of the trip); roasted stuffed quail; and crème brulee with a pistachio semi freddo.

I had my first taste of frappato, a grape originally from Greece and steel aged in Valle dell'Acate's Il Frappato to hold the raspberry and blackberry notes. I also tasted the Cerasuolo di Vittoria Classico, a blend of Frappato (30%) and Nero d'Avola (70%), another Sicilian grape. After the long trip and big dinner, we were asleep soon after returning to the hotel.

Francesco Ferreri picked us up in the morning and took us to his winery. His vineyards went from the valley to the river to the sea. We saw the chardonnay vines that had just been harvested, and the solar panel he used to gather 50% of the energy he needed to run the production plant.

He set up a tasting for us in the warehouse, where we also learned about all the different terroirs his grapes are grown in and how the soil and climate specifically affects the grape and, ultimately, the wine. We had the 2011 Insolio, a white filled with peach and citrus, with just a hint of floral. I liked the Zagra even more. This blend of grillo and insolia tasted like a ripe apricot that stayed on your palate.

Before we left we did a vertical tasting of the Bidis, a mixture of chardonnay and insolia from 2005 to 2010. I favored the '07, though I'd be happy to drink any of them.

There was then a "light" lunch of fruit, cheese, bread and calzone before our driver came to take us to our next stop.

Regaleali with Tasca d'Almerita

Nunzio had driven us from the airport in Palermo to Ragusa so we had gotten to know him a bit during that drive, but we were still a bit concerned when he stopped just off the highway and told us someone was meeting us there. It turned out that Tasca d'Almerita had sent a driver to take us up the mountain, a road that many did not wish to travel.

It was quite the trip up to Regaleali as we circled up the mountain with no guard rails or pavement. At one point we even had to wait for the sheep to get out of the road! It was quite a bumpy trek, but the end result was beautiful – both the view from above and the small town.

The villa home of Fabrizia Lanza, which also housed the Anna Tasca Cooking School* and its guests, was like something out of a movie. It centered around a picture-perfect courtyard where we sat, drank wine and nibbled on appetizers. It turned out her father was in for a visit so he picked his favorite wine for dinner, a 2007 Rosso Del Conte, an estate wine of Nero d'Avola. We had that with dinner and finished the meal with Diamante, a deliciously suite combination of moscato and gewürztraminer.

I spent the night in a lovely room at the winery, which mirrors the villa that Francesca lives in. The vineyards of Tasca d'Almerita are quite different than others in Sicily as it gets colder up on this mountain. Some of the hearty Italian grapes appear to like this and it shows in the wine they make. Sasha took us through the property, which includes 1,000 acres of vines, and the winery before we

sat down for a brief tasting.

The Regaleali Nozze D'Oro is a very citrusy blend of insolia and sauvignon tasca, an Austrian variety, while the Cygnus mixes cabernet sauvignon with Nero d'Avola and just a bit of soaking for a wine with blueberry and white pepper flavor. I also really liked the Sallier de La Tour Estate Bianco, a perfect pairing of viognier, Semillon and sauvignon blanc.

Regaleali just one of five locations Tasca d'Almerita has vineyards in Italy. The variety of wines they produce is enormous and I wished I had a week to try them all, but there were more Sicily wineries I needed to get to.

Marsala and Contessa Entellina with Donnafugata

After a few days on the island of Pantelleria*, we were off to Marsala. This city became known for the wine named after it, but it's no longer riding on the coattails of what's now considered just a cooking wine. Donnafugata produces an assortment of wonderful wines, especially when it comes to moscato, a wine they enhance by adding dried grapes (the best raisins you've ever tasted) into.

We stayed at Hotel Carmine in Marsala. It is hidden away on a side street so you don't expect it to be quite as grand as it is. It is a favorite of José Rallo. Along with her brother Antonio, she owns and runs Donnafugata. They are the fifth generation in their family to do so.

Dinner at Bucinieri was phenomenal. The chef/owner came out to discuss with José Rallo what he should make for us. I was able to decipher enough of the conversation to add a few suggestions of my own. What followed was the perfect meal: grilled goat cheese with grapes; eggplant; arancini; pasta with tomatoes and salted ricotta; and a chocolate ricotta cake covered in fudge sauce yet somehow feather light.

Along with the meal we tasted some of the Donnafugata wines. Anthilia, a white blend that is primarily made from catarratto is lemony and light. Chiaranda is a buttery chardonnay and Tancredi blends cabernet sauvignon with additional grapes for a fruit-filled red. We finished with Kabir, my new favorite moscato.

Before she dropped us off from dinner, José Rallo had told us the breakfast at Hotel Carmine was wonderful, but I wasn't quite prepared for all of the baked goods. It wasn't just muffins and bread, there was a selection of cakes, fruit and cheeses.

The city of Marsala is an Italian masterpiece in itself, with long and narrow alleyways leading to beautifully crafted buildings. We walked many blocks through the pedestrian mall, full of stores selling designer clothing, leather pocketbooks and jewelry for a wide range of budgets.

The Donnafugata Winery in Marsala is very large and does some of the production for other locations. It's clear that this is a family business and everyone is involved in every aspect, knows every worker and tastes every wine during every step. The barrel room, which was new and not filled to anywhere near its capacity. We finished in an intimate tasting room where Antonio Rallo joined us.

On the way to Contessa Entellina, we stopped for lunch in the picturesque town of Menfi. When we arrived at the winery, we walked through the quaint courtyard and through the home that Antonio and José's parents live in when in this area. It was rather startling to find a big winery production area when we opened a door in the dining room.

After Contessa Entellina, we made our way back to Palermo to stay overnight at the Quintacanto Hotel & Spa. It was our last night in Italy before an early morning flight home. We thought about going out and realized that we'd rather order in pizza and calzone. After all, what better place in the world to get those Italian favorites. It was a very good choice.

**The island of Pantelleria and the Anna Tasca Cooking School are both worthy of stories of their own. Stay tuned...*

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