

n

By Norwegian
August 2016
Issue 44

Last orders
The race to save
Denmark's classic
drinking dens

Lido life
What Italians
really get up to
at the seaside

Getting wood
Why cities are
investing in timber
skyscrapers

Pole position

How Arctic Norway became the
ultimate cycling destination

A photograph of a vineyard in Sicily. The foreground shows rows of green grapevines with dark trunks, supported by wooden stakes. The vines are lush and healthy. In the background, there are rolling hills and mountains under a clear sky. The overall scene is bright and natural.

“Wine helps the world to understand us”

Sicily has been producing wine for almost 4,000 years – but it’s never been as varied or interesting as it is today. We meet some of those pushing the boundaries

Words: Mandi Keighran | Photography: Alessandra Spairani



In 1983, Sicilian teacher Gabriella Anca Rallo's father passed away, leaving her a beautiful property near Contessa Entellina. The property in the small *comune* of just over 2,000 inhabitants

located in the Valle del Belice, 80km from the island's capital, Palermo, had once been a vineyard, but the 1968 Belice earthquake had devastated the buildings and it was left to ruin.

Rallo was 39 and had been teaching English literature her whole working life, but her husband's family owned a large winery that produced Marsala. The famous, often fortified, wine had been produced in the city of the same name since the 1700s, but it had dropped out of fashion and sales were falling.

"I wanted to change that," says Rallo. "So, I decided we would make high-quality 'table' wines. I left everything I knew behind to rebuild the vineyard and learn how to grow good grapes to make great wines." Rallo called the new winery *Donnafugata* – "woman in flight" – in reference to Queen Maria Carolina, who fled Naples in the early 1800s on the arrival of Napoleon's troops, seeking refuge in Contessa Entellina.

Shortly afterwards, in the nearby region of Trapani, Vinzia Novara and her husband Salvatore »



"This is a hard land to tame, and if you understand it, you accept it as it is – that's the elegance of Sicilian wine"



Regions Contessa Entellina and Pantelleria
Hectares 270 at Contessa Entellina & 68 on Pantelleria
Annual production 2.1 million bottles
Our wine pick Limited edition Ben Ryé 2008, a sweet wine made with Zibibbo grapes from the island of Pantelleria

GABRIELLA ANCA RALLO / DONNAFUGATA

"I was a pioneer," says 74-year-old Gabriella Anca Rallo of founding *Donnafugata* with her husband Giacomo in 1983. After inheriting a run-down vineyard from her father, Rallo – a teacher of 20 years – decided to transform her husband's family's historic Marsala winery into one of Sicily's leading producers of high quality wine.

"I rebuilt the vineyards and my husband stayed in Marsala to make wine," says Rallo. "No women had done this before and people were surprised."

Now *Donnafugata* produces 18 wines with a variety of international and native grapes, including Ansonica, which is used to make *Vigna di Gabri*, an elegant white wine that's dedicated to Rallo.

Sustainability is integral to the winery's ethos, and in 2008 they introduced a night harvest, which negates the need for cooling the grapes and resulted in a 70 per cent energy saving.

The couple's daughter, José, and son, Antonio, now also work in the winery. Since her husband passed away earlier this year, Rallo has returned to work. "My husband and I had a great partnership," she says. "We were married for 53 years, and I'm so happy that we built this winery together."

donnafugata.it



From left
The barrique cellar at
Donnafugata's Marsala
cellars, built in 1851;
Terraze Dell'Etna's estate
Previous
Vinzia Novara and her dog,
Greta, at Firriato's Baglio
Soria estate in Trapani



Di Gaetano were in the process of founding Firriato Winery. While neither came from a wine-producing background – Novara was a teacher specialising in deaf education and Di Gaetano was a businessman – they were driven by a shared passion for the land and for wine.

“We have a strong sense of duty toward the land and the people of Sicily, and we wanted to celebrate the contrasts of this land and share them with the world,” says Novara. “Wines were becoming more and more the same, so we had a dream to produce something that is very expressive of the land, wines that evoke Sicily.”

It was the beginning of a new era for Sicilian viticulture, which has been around since the classical era. According to Greek legend, it was the god of wine

Above & right
The view from the
Cottanera estate in Etna
shows the diversity of
Sicily's landscape

MARIANGELA CAMBRIA / COTTANERA

Cottanera was founded by Guglielmo Cambria in the early 1990s when he converted a property bought by his father in the 1960s into a vineyard. He began growing international varietals before shifting his focus to Sicilian grapes, particularly those traditional to Etna, such as the Nerello Mascalese and Cappuccio used to produce reds, and the Inzolia and Carricante used for white wines.

It's a family business, and Cambria's three children – Mariangela, Francesco and Emanuele – and his brother Enzo also work for Cottanera. They took over the winery following the founder's death in 2010.

The vineyards are located on the northern slope of the volcanic Mount Etna, 700m above sea level, where they grow over mineral-rich lava stone without any irrigation. Most of the work is carried out by hand by a team of 25 women, who also harvest the grapes, as is the tradition in Etna. “It's like a family,” says Mariangela. “The women who work here today are the daughters and nieces of the women I worked with as a child when my grandfather had just a few hectares of grapes.” cottanera.it



Region Etna
Hectares 65
Annual production
300,000 bottles
Our wine pick Etna
Rosato, a distinctive
rosé with characteristics
of the volcanic soil
produced using 100 per
cent Nerello Mascalese



“We had a dream to produce something that is very expressive of the land – wines that evoke Sicily”

Dionysus himself who planted the first vineyard at Naxos. Archaeologists have discovered evidence that Sicilians were drinking wine as far back as the 17th century BC, long before the Greeks arrived in the eighth century. But at no point in Sicily’s millennia-long history of viniculture has the world been so interested in what’s being produced.

Today, Sicily is Italy’s biggest wine making region, with 100,000 hectares of vineyard producing 30 per cent of Italy’s wine and more wine than all of New Zealand. It’s also one of Europe’s most exciting wine regions, and business is booming. Since those early days Donnafugata has grown to produce 2.1 million bottles each year, while Firriato has six estates across Sicily, producing over four million bottles annually.

These new wines are a far cry from Marsala, and from the heavy-bodied, high-alcohol plonk that was once used to bulk up anaemic reds from other regions, which the island had become known for during the decades following the 1950s. By 1987, »

BeLow ✓
A bottle of Barone di Villagrande’s Etna Bianco Superiore with a label showing Mount Etna as a woman’s face; young grapes on the vine



BARBARA LIUZZO NICOLOSI /
BARONE DI VILLAGRANDE

One of the oldest wineries in Etna, Barone di Villagrande has a history that can be traced back to 1726. Carmelo Nicolosi Asmundo bottled the first reserves of Etna Rosso in 1948, and his son, Marco, took over the winery with his wife, Barbara, in 2013, ushering in a new era of growth.

The couple met at Catania airport 10 years ago when he asked her to carry on several bottles of wine as he was over his limit. Seven years later she left her fashion career to take over running the winery with him. “Marco and I understood that this company is a little pearl, and it would be sad not to take care of it. We changed a lot, which wasn’t easy because it was a very traditional family business. When you drink our wine, you taste Etna – the volcanic sand, the minerality, and the elegance.” villagrande.it

Regions Etna and Salina
Hectares 14 at Etna, 2 on Salina
Annual production 75,000 bottles
Our wine pick Etna Bianco Superiore, the fine white of the region first made at Barone di Villagrande in 1869 using the Carricante grape



just over 76 per cent of the wine produced in Sicily was bulk wine.

Sicily's status as an oenophile's dream destination really began to take hold in the 1990s and early 2000s as a new generation of producers caught onto the region's excellent winemaking conditions – a variety of microclimates, altitudes, and soils offering myriad terroirs. In 2011, DOC (denomination of confirmed origin) was introduced, a legal wine designation that identifies wine produced in its area of designation – from Cerasuolo di Vittoria from the region of Ragusa, to Passito from Pantelleria.

Drive across Sicily, and the changing landscape is astonishing – from arid vistas and rocky outcrops that look like they come straight out of an old Western, to lush green vineyards, groves of silvery olive trees punctuated by colourful wildflowers, and black volcanic plains. It's not surprising that many Sicilian winemakers refer to the island as a continent, so different are the various terroirs.

While 90 per cent of the island's vineyard area is located in western Sicily, it's the volcanic region of Etna, where the elegant Nerello Mascalese hails from, that is attracting the most attention globally.



Above ✓
Terrazze dell'Etna, a terraced estate comprising 34 small plots of land purchased by Nino Bevilacqua and managed by his daughter, Alessia

GAETANA JACONO / VALLE DELL'ACATE

The Jacono family has been working with wine for six generations. Giuseppe Jacono founded Valle Dell'Acate at the end of the 19th century. Today, it's led by his great-granddaughter Gaetana – but that wasn't always the plan.

"Because I'm a woman, my father didn't think that I should work at the winery," she says. "He wanted me to study pharmacy. After two years, I encouraged my younger brother to take over the pharmacy, and I came here. At first he thought I was joking."

Encouraged by her desire to promote Sicily and the Ragusa region, and a love for the ancient wine Cerasuolo di Vittoria, a blend of Nero d'Avola and Frappato grapes, she persevered.

"It caused many fights with my father, especially as I wanted to make a lot of changes for a better quality wine," she says. "But I have a huge respect for the vineyards that my father cared for like his children, and I wanted to focus on the traditional grapes of Sicily, so we came to an agreement."

There are seven different soils on the estate, each used to produce a distinct grape variety. In a project titled "Seven Soils for Seven Wines", Valle Dell'Acate is creating a profile of each soil and how it impacts the grapes. "It's very exciting. This kind of attention to the soil is unusual for Italian wine producers, but we work in a very serious way here." valledellacate.com



ALESSIA BEVILACQUA / TERRAZZE DELL'ETNA

Terrazze dell'Etna was initially a passion project for Sicilian engineer Nino Bevilacqua. Today, it's primarily managed by his 25-year-old daughter, Alessia. "When my father founded the winery in 2008 I was a teenager with no interest in wine production," she says, "but the first time I came here, I fell in love with Etna, and then I started to fall in love with the wine."

She grows Nerello Mascalese grapes alongside Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. Work in the vineyard is done the traditional way, by hand. In addition she's started a new venture, making jams and preserves from the many fruit trees on the estate. For Bevilacqua, who lived in Milan and New York before moving back, it's all part of the appeal of country life. "My experiences [in those cities] were fun and dynamic, and I met a lot of people," she says, "but I met myself for the first time here."

terrazzedelletna.it

Region Etna
Hectares 36
Annual production 160,000 bottles
Our wine pick Cinerco, a robust red Etna DOC made with 100 per cent Nerello Mascalese and named after a hunting dog native to the Etna region



"I have a huge respect for the vineyards my father cared for like his children, and the traditional grapes of Sicily"

"Sicily is a place of contradictions," says Mariangela Cambria, whose father founded Cottanera winery in the 1990s on an Etna vineyard bought as a family holiday home by his father in the '60s. "Here in Etna, you don't feel like you're in Sicily, it's like being in Switzerland. The wine of this place is completely different – more mineral, more elegant – than that of other parts of Sicily. It's a very strange place to be, but I love my Etna."

A strange place it may be, but it's a place that is attracting winemakers and increasing awareness of Sicily's new kind of wines around the world – particularly the mineral-rich reds. A decade ago, there were just 10 producers in the region. Today, there are close to 130, producing around 1.5 million bottles annually.

"Etna has a huge potential for wine," says Barbara Liuzzo Nicolosi Asmundo who, together with her husband Marco, runs one Etna's oldest wineries, Barone di Villagrande. "It could increase to probably four million bottles but Etna can't change too much as it's a small region." »

BeLow ✓
 Old farm equipment and aged bottles of red wine in one of the historic buildings on the Valle Dell'Acate estate in the Valle del Dirillo, Ragusa



As much as Sicily's wine industry has changed over the past three decades, some things remain the same. Many wineries continue to harvest by hand – even the largest, like Donnafugata – and the conditions mean it's fairly easy to grow grapes organically.

One thing that is changing is the wine industry's approach to tourism. As Sicilian wines garner increasing global attention, visitors are flocking to the island in ever greater numbers expressly to visit the wineries. As a result, several wine paths – such as Catania's path from Fiumefreddo to Piedimonte Etneo or the path from Sant'Alfio to Trecastagni and Viagrande – are being actively promoted and many wineries are expanding to offer accommodation, dedicated tasting and food pairing.

"Wine has a great power," says Novara, looking over the spectacular patchwork created by the vineyards of her first estate in Trapani, Baglio Soria. "It is the power to help the world understand the Sicilian land and our identity."



In Sicily, Norwegian flies to Catania from Oslo, Copenhagen, Stockholm and London; and to Palermo from Stockholm. Book flights, a hotel and rental car at norwegian.com

Left
Looking over the vineyards of Firriato Winery's Baglio Soria estate in Trapani, where visitors can stay in a luxuriously restored 17th century stone villa



VINZIA NOVARA / FIRRIATO WINERY

"I'm not in this to win the battle," says Vinzia Novara, cigar smoke billowing around her. "I want to win the war." She's talking about the struggle of running Firriato, the winery she founded with her husband, Salvatore Di Gaetano, in 1986.

When they began Novara and Di Gaetano had no experience in the wine industry, only passion. Today, they have six estates – four in Trapani (including their stunning first estate, Baglio Soria), one in Etna and the newest on Favignana, an island off Sicily's west coast. Each year they produce over four million bottles of 32 different wines, making Firriato one of the largest wineries on Sicily.

"As Sicilian wines began a revival in the '90s, we started our project to protect and promote Sicily's varied land," says Novara. "Piece by piece, we built up this mosaic of estates that show the extent of the Sicilian terroir through its wines."

From the beginning, the focus has been on native grapes, in an effort to spread knowledge of Sicily's wines across the world. "This is a hard land to tame, and if you understand it, you accept it as it is," she says. "It's where the elegance of Sicilian wine comes from." firriato.it

Regions Trapani, Etna & Favignana
Hectares 366 across six estates
Annual production four million bottles
Our wine pick Favina La Muciara, an elegant white made from Grillo, Catarratto and Zibibbo grapes grown on Favignana