



Image courtesy of Alessandro Becchina

CSD

152

# RENEWAL

WHAT'S OLD IS WHAT'S NEW

BY ROBERT CALVERT

The quilted landscape of western Sicily stretched out before me—a patch of vines here, a square of silvery-green olive trees there, a rectangle of young grain in the distance. The *sirocco* flowed in from North Africa like the hot breath

of a distant dragon. Lemony sunlight streamed down from the pristine sky. It was almost one o'clock. In a few minutes we would be heading off to lunch. There would be wine ...

Phoenician traders began settling on the western end of

Sicily as early as 1,000 B.C.; Greeks set up shop in the east in 735 B.C. They were Johnny-come-latelies. Preliminary inhabitants—Sicanians, Sicels, Elymians—had been in residence on the island since the incipient Bronze Age.

The Levantine voyagers probably colonized western Sicily in order to harvest sea salt, produced near Trapani and Marsala even today. The Greeks were farmers who, according to Sicilian-food enthusiast Tom Musco, brought figs, pome-



Thanks to Giacomo Ansaldo, a member of the team studying Sicilian varietals, for making available a copy of the group's report; to Alessandro Becchina, who allowed us to reproduce one of his father's masterful paintings; and to Jennifer Delare, who provided the splendid translation of the artist's words.

1. Giovanni Becchina, *Grape Harvest at Casazza*, oil on canvas.

2. Fireworks on Mount Etna.



## TASTING NOTES



### Tenuta delle Terre Nere Etna Rosso DOC 2014

**Region:** Etna

**Description:** Ruby red. Aromas of ripe fruit and sweet spices. Fresh, balanced and rich.

**Pairing:** Pasta dishes, meat dishes, fresh cheeses.



### Valle dell'Acate Il Frappato Vittoria DOC 2015

**Region:** Vittoria

**Description:** Brilliant ruby color. Fragrances of red fruit, raspberries, blackberries, violets and sage. Fresh and lively flavors of red fruits and rosebuds, with a dry and lingering finish.

**Pairing:** Appetizers of fresh and aged cheeses, charcuterie, Sicilian tuna, sushi and sashimi.



### Zisola Sicilia Noto Rosso DOC 2014

**Region:** Noto

**Description:** Flavors of forest fruits and orange peel, long and layered taste.

**Pairing:** Spicy fish soups, savory pasta and rice dishes, grilled red meats and vegetables.



granates, wheat, walnuts and hazelnuts to the island.

No one knows who was first to plant vineyards in Sicily. The Phoenicians may have introduced vines from the Levant and initiated winemaking in their new home. Perhaps it was emigrant Hellenes who brought vines from Greece and began making wine to fuel Sicilian symposia. The interesting thing is that some Sicilian wine grapes we think of as “indigenous” grapes today were not native to Sicily. Of course, in intervening millennia they have adapted to their new environment. And along the way, some ancient varieties intermarried, producing tasty native progeny.

### Patrimony

The Sicilian government has undertaken a study of the island’s indigenous grape varieties.

Researchers are visiting old, out-of-the-way vineyards, taking samples and analyzing DNA. They are cultivating intriguing specimens in test vineyards near Marsala and Comiso. The goal is to establish which varieties of grape are hardiest and make the tastiest wine.

**Nero d’Avola** is the best known of Sicilian red grapes. According to Karen MacNeil, it produces “intensely black-colored wines of real depth, juiciness and charm.” Originally grown in the southeast corner of the island near where the ancient Greeks settled, the “black grape of Avola” is cultivated in most of Sicily today.

**Frappato** is familiar as a component of the Cerasuolo di Vittoria blend. Wines made entirely of Frappato have been achieving repute recently, applauded for their fresh cherry

and strawberry notes. Frappato is grown mostly in the provinces of Siracusa and Ragusa. It has been associated with the city of Vittoria for three centuries or more. DNA research reveals that Frappato is related to Sangiovese and another grape called Ciliegiolo, which may account for Frappato’s attractiveness to lovers of Chianti. (Chianti is made primarily of Sangiovese and often includes a bit of cherry-flavored Ciliegiolo as well.)

**Nerello Mascalese** also is related to Sangiovese. The grape is cultivated in the provinces of Messina and Catania in northeast Sicily as well as near Agrigento, Palermo, Trapani and other spots. Nerello Mascalese wines offer a ruby color, fruity bouquet and flavors of red fruit. Nerello Mascalese is the principal indigenous red grape grown

3. Salt lagoons near Marsala.

4. Nero d’Avola on the vine.

5. Gaetana Jacono at Valle dell’Acate.

around Mount Etna. You may have tasted it when drinking wines labeled Etna DOC.

### Three Sicilian Reds

The Mazzei family ([mazzei.it](http://mazzei.it)), distinguished producers of Chianti, began developing the Zisola estate near Noto in 2003.

**Zisola Sicilia Noto Rosso DOC 2014** (\$27) is 100 percent Nero d’Avola. Deep red in hue, it exudes raspberry and blackberry fragrances allied with a whiff of oak. (The wine was aged 10 months in oak barriques.) Its opulent flavor evolves as time passes. Initially, one discerns elements of dark fruit—juicy blackberries, black raspberries,





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dark cherries. Black pepper and orange rind soon become apparent. Ultimately, there are hints of dark chocolate and espresso. In short, this is a lush, elegant, intriguing wine. Consider serving it with charcuterie, grilled tuna, red meat, pork, mushroom risotto—or pizza. Or drink it on its own; it's a banquet in a bottle.

Valle dell'Acate (valledella cate.com) is located near the Dirillo River (known in antiquity as the Achates) in southeastern Sicily. The Jacono and Ferreri families that operate Valle dell'Acate trace their winemaking roots back to the 19th century. Gaetana Jacono, current manager, represents the sixth generation of her family in the wine business. She says: "Wine is culture, a thread winding its way uninterrupted throughout history. It is something to be handed down, something to take from the past and carry into the future."

Glowing like rubies, the **Valle dell'Acate Il Frappato Vittoria DOC 2015** (\$20) offers aromas of cherries, strawberries and raspberries with a sniff of sage and an intriguing fragrance of wet boulders. This 100 percent Frappato is made strictly in stainless steel to emphasize its lively, fruity flavors—cherries and raspberries principally, with smidgens of red apples and blueberries. Somebody wrote that this Frappato is "reminiscent of good Beaujolais." He is correct. It may be something about the wine's texture as much as its flavor. An Italian commentator wrote that Americans call this a "smiling wine." You will smile when you sip it.

Marc de Grazia was born in Washington, DC. He became passionate about wine while

studying theater in Florence in the 1970s, and after a few years he started a wine export business there. Eventually, he purchased land on the northern slopes of Mount Etna to start a winery of his own, Tenuta delle Terre Nere (tenutaterrene.com). De Grazia's vineyards lie between 600 and 1,000 meters above sea level, where cool weather and volcanic soil produce distinctive beverages.

**Tenuta delle Terre Nere**

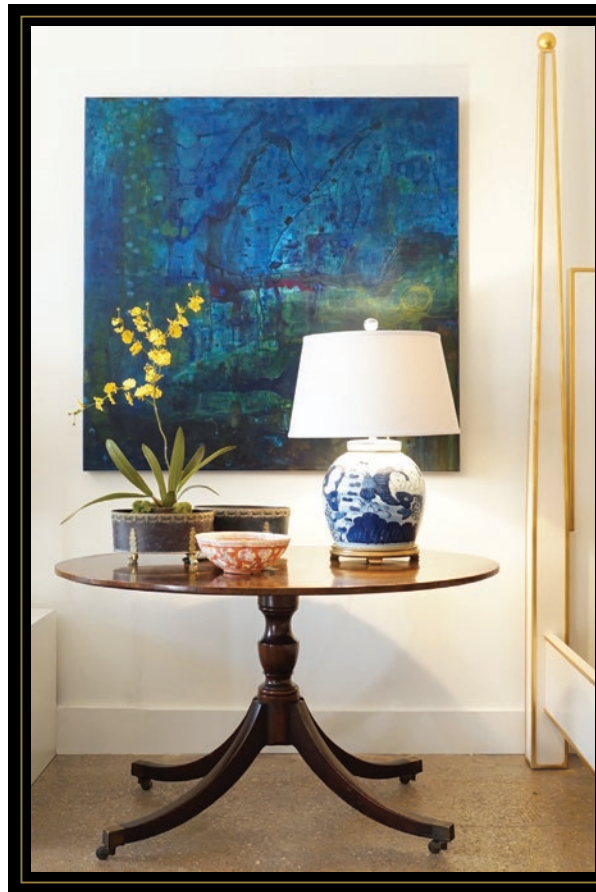
**Etna Rosso DOC 2014** (\$22) combines 95 percent Nerello Mascalese with 5 percent Nerello Cappuccio to produce a translucent ruby red wine with a bouquet of cherries, wild strawberries, pepper and wood. (It was aged in large barrels for 10 months.) Round, juicy and refreshing, its flavor of cherries and raspberries includes a subtext of blood orange zest, pepper and herbs.

**Coda**

Born in Sambuca di Sicilia in 1909, painter Giovanni Becchina loved the landscape and people of his native land. "The subject of my painting is the Sicilian countryside. ... I search not for idyllic refuge in this land; I wander, discovering the measure and beauty of pagan Greece, the tenacity of the Arabs, the resourcefulness of the Normans, the exuberance of the Spaniards—the sum of the characters that make up our people."

Sicilian winemakers are creating portraits of their land in lovely wines, liquid portraits that evoke in their flavorful way the diverse cultures and traditions of this enchanting island. ♣

**Robert Calvert** drinks and writes in Chicago. Questions or comments? Email Robert: RBCalvert@att.net.



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