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An American guide to Sicilian wine

 September 10, 2014  Phoebe Ryan

Sicily and the wines that are breaking into the US market



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Sicily, the largest island in the Mediterranean, nestles only three kilometres from Italy's boot, at its closest point. We may easily be transported to an Italian idyll, forgetting that this island has been marred by emigration, Casa Nostra violence and soaring unemployment over the years.

But in the past decade or so Sicily has found its feet again. With unemployment falling from 23% to 11% from the 90s into the new millennium, Sicily's industry is ready to grow and achieve. That is echoed within its wine industry!

Tuscany Now spoke to US-based wine aficionado Joe Roberts on which region of Italy his tastebuds are tingling for right now, and he chose Sicily. Here's why:

"California dominates the US wine landscape. For fine wines, California is just the dominant market in the US, accounting for 90% of wine production. As the fourth largest wine producing entity, California promises big fruit and big flavour. This dominates what the US knows of fine wine. But Sicily offers a great price point and quality level. You get relatively great quality, for a great price – you can get much more "bang for your buck". There's lots of potential being realised on this classically Mediterranean island – the volcanic soils and

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September
2014

August 2014

July 2014

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May 2014

April 2014

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Sicily does not only promise a great price, though – “The more expensive wines,” Joe

Home on “are About us exciting. Villas in Italy Villas in Tuscany

Sommeliers here in the US can get really excited about these.”

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Characteristics and style



As one of Europe’s oldest viticultural regions, Sicily has an ancient oenological history. The island has more vineyards, and more grape varieties, than any other region of Italy, with a similar amount of hectares under vine as South Africa or Chile – approximately 117,000 ha.

It has plenty of its own grapes too – Inzolio, Zibibbo, Catarrato, Grillo and Grecanico.

Muscat types are believed to have been around since Arab invasions in the ninth century!

Newer imports include Chardonnay, Trebbiano and Fiano. Reds include Nero d’Avola (from robust toughies to velvety smooth expressions),

Nerello Mascalese, Frappato, Nerello Cappuccio

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with many new wineries springing up away from the classical locations around Mount Etna,

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many of its vineyards are still aimed at cultivating this sweet fortified wine). The island's fertile soils and hot dry summers make

for a low level of humidity, and these factors mean that Sicilian wines are more consistent than wines from other regions can hope to be.

A caveat, though, for those of you who have sprung up to go and buy up all the Sicilian wines on offer at your local supermarket: they *can* be consistently poor! Sicily has been seen as a huge bulk wine producer of rather ordinary produce in the past.

Since the 1980s, though, a great renaissance has been happening and many consider Sicily to be THE most interesting European wine region at present.

Whilst only twenty years ago Sicily had only just over three dozen commercial wine producers, the island today boasts almost three hundred, which illustrates the global interest in Sicilian varietals such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay, but also highlights the prominence of some of Sicily's indigenous grape varieties on the international stage.

The Nero d'Avola is probably Sicily's best known grape, whilst Carricante is the main white variety.

The West, where the hot, arid coastal conditions create conditions oenologically comparable to the Napa Valley is a good comparison point for US drinkers. Heading

East towards Etna, the arid mountainous slopes
 of the only remaining active volcano
 create an ideal terrain for viticulture.



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Sicily's native grapes probably yield the most interesting wines, but they are a challenge for wine enthusiasts to tackle something new. The Nero d'Avola generally produces deep, flavoursome wines – often with a bit of

spiciness and good structure. They range from easy drinking to robust, deep and dense wines.

Another native is Nerello Mascalese which is important in and around Etna. A third highly recommended red is called Cerasuolo di Vittoria, a blend of Nero d'Avola and Frappato.

It is lighter in style to the above, and good producers are noted below in our recommendations. Then there is Frappato – a delicate red, fragrant and easy to drink, light and ideal in the heat, as it can easily be served chilled (a drinking style which is pretty unexplored in the UK and US, but perfect for the Sicilian heat). Whites of note include Catarrato and Inzolio.

Sicilian wine and food

Joe suggests that Sicilian wines are “poised to gain love on the restaurant floor. They’re particularly versatile at the table. They’re very textural, and have a vibrancy – as the underdog, they have just enough character, authenticity and a little bit of rusticity. They are special and complex, but approachable. Californian wines can be too polished, an almost unapproachable beauty – they aren’t real. The US is used to that, so some of these Sicilian wines will be a breath of fresh air.”

Sicilian cuisine makes the most of the bounty of fish available off its shores, but also illustrates

an Arab influence with its use of spices. Make
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risotto by arancini - a deepfried ball of leftover
 centre of
 mozzarella or ragu. For dessert (or indeed, as a
 snack at any opportune moment) you can't say
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In regards to food matching, Sicilian wines are the perfect bedfellow to so much popular restaurant fare. With an established global Italian cuisine, Sicilian wines are poised to slip easily onto the wine menus of all restaurants offering Italianate cuisine. Joe agreed that “there’s a tradition of Italian cuisine; it’s established and there is a culture in the US of Italian dining. Sicily has that potential, ahead of Greek islands such as Santorini or Crete, for example, because of the precedence of Italian food. Simple preparation and the importance of ingredients, emphasised by natural tastes, make Italian food a firm favourite. There’s no reason Sicily shouldn’t win in that market.”

Sicilian whites are great, owing much to modern advancements. These delicately fruity and fresh wines befit both the searing heat and the seafood-dominated cuisine of this Mediterranean island.

Personal recommendations

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If you're a traditionalist, which still tempts, make sure to do your research as the quality is variable. DOCs are available across

Italy but can be less than stellar. A good

standard wine is by Cantine Pellegrino but a really good one comes from Cantine Florio and Marco de Bartoli. Best producers use only Grillo (not Inzolia or Cataratto). Interestingly,

marsala was first made by an Englishman, John Woodhouse in 1773 and production was dominated by the Brits until Florio purchased great swathes of marsala and squeezed the Brits out in 19th century!

Joe Roberts has been blown away by the house Donnafugata. "From \$12-\$85, there is nothing you can't recommend", he told us. Though it may not be glaringly obvious on the supermarket shelves in every US store, Joe suggests that it should be accessible enough by shipment.

Other producers of note include Planeta, whose label La Segreta's white has never disappointed, and whose Nero d'Avola and Frappato is good. Planeta also offers Cerasuolo di Vittoria, a great wine to try, and Sicily's only DOCG (garantita) – another blend of Frappato and Nero d'Avola. For Frappato, go to Santa Tresa.

There is also Settesoli (a really good co-op), Benanti, Regaleali (otherwise known as Tasca d'Almerita) and Occhipinti, which has received great reviews, and runs under the hand of Arianna Occhipinti, who is only 34!

About our expert:

Villas in Tuscany

Tuscany Now spoke to US-based Joe Roberts of **TNBlog** who considers to be the best American market. Joe has authored a freelance wine column for [playboy.com](#), as well as acting as wine expert on [Answers.com](#) and his blog for non-professional wine enthusiasts, and is well qualified – he holds the Level 2 and Level 3 Certificates in Wine & Spirits from the Wine and Spirit Education Trust (WSET) in England. He's also a member of the U.S.-based Society of Wine Educators, holding their Certified Specialist of Wine (CSW) qualification. He also holds the Wine Location Specialist (WLS) qualification from the Comité Interprofessionnel du Vin de Champagne (CIVC) and the Instituto dos Vinhos do Douro e Porto (IVDP), and is a member of the Wine Century Club (but that last one's just for bragging rights)!

Joe Roberts is a writer and musician in the greater Philadelphia area. His work has appeared in [Playboy.com](#), [Answers.com](#), [PalatePress.com](#), [Publix Grape Magazine](#), [The Guardian](#), and [Parade](#). He holds the Level 3 Certificate in Wine & Spirits from the Wine & Spirit Education Trust, and the Society of Wine Educators Certified Specialist of Wine certification. Roberts was included among the top fifteen entries in [IntoWine.com](#)'s list of 100 Most Influential People in the U.S. Wine Industry for 2013, and his website received the Wine Blog Awards honor for Best Wine Blog in 2010. Follow him on his blog [1winedude.com](#), or on twitter at [@1winedude](#).

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