

# Wine Spectator

The background of the cover is a scenic landscape. In the foreground, a town with terracotta roofs and a prominent church with a large red and white striped dome is visible. In the background, a large, snow-capped mountain range stretches across the horizon under a clear sky. The overall color palette is warm, with oranges, yellows, and reds from the town and sky, contrasting with the white snow and blue sky.

[www.winespectator.com](http://www.winespectator.com)

## SICILY'S STAR RISES

EXPLORING THE ISLAND'S  
DISTINCTIVE WINES

GREAT WINES  
OF TUSCANY

UNDISCOVERED  
UMBRIA

FRANCE'S  
LOIRE VALLEY:  
FOOD-FRIENDLY  
VALUES

OCT. 31, 2014  
\$5.95 US

44 >





RENAISSANCE

IN

*Sicily*





WINE CULTURE IS REBORN, FUELED BY PASSION,  
PERSEVERANCE AND DISTINCTIVE BOTTLINGS FROM  
AROUND THE ISLAND

BY ALISON NAPJUS • PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREA WYNER



The Sicilian town of Cesarò, with Mount Etna beyond.



Sicily in February is verdant and lush. The grapevines, emerging from their winter hibernation, are separated by rows of rich green grass and bright yellow flowers. The island's southern coast is dotted with vibrant orange groves and the pale pink of almond trees in bloom. Even the stark volcanic crags of Mount Etna are softened by wildflowers mixed with the silvery-green tufts of olive trees.

In summer, all this changes. Temperatures rise to the 90s, the sun beats down for 10 to 12 hours each day, and the rainfall that is so regular during the winter drops to almost nothing—on average, approximately 0.1 inches in the months of July and August.

"Sicily is really a land of contrasts," remarks Laurent de la Gatinais, president of his family's Rapitalà estate.

This general statement is a common refrain when referring to the many aspects of Italy's largest and most southerly island—its wines, climate and geography, its people and more. Yet these diverse strands weave an alluring tapestry, and help make Sicily one of Italy's most distinctive and exciting wine regions today.

The success of this effort can be seen most clearly in the wines of Mount Etna, Europe's tallest active volcano.

Etna accounts for only about 3 percent of Sicily's total production, but the quality and character of its wines makes it a bellwether. Its Burgundy-like reds, made primarily from the Nerello Mascalese grape, can reach impressive heights—reflecting the mountain's lofty, terraced vineyards, which I explored on a visit to Sicily this spring. In the past year, I have reviewed more than 300 wines from Sicily, and a full third of the 93 outstanding wines (90 to 94 points on *Wine Spectator's* 100-point scale) are from Etna.

Marc de Grazia, an American importer, is owner and winemaker of Etna's Tenuta delle Terre Nere, which regularly produces top bottlings from the area. Among them is the 2011 Etna Prephylloxera La Vigna di Don Peppino (92 points, \$100), a graceful red with beautiful aromatic range and supple, well-meshed tannins. Vinified from two parcels trained in Sicily's bush-vine style, known as *alberello*, these 130-year-old vines are located within the Calderara Sottana *contrada* (Etna's local term for a *crù* or single vineyard). This dense red exemplifies the rediscovery of Sicily's deep winemaking traditions at the hands of a new and energetic generation.

#### WINESPECTATOR.COM

**BONUS VIDEO** Sicily's Local Reds: Learn more about this Italian island's indigenous grapes as senior editor Alison Napjus tastes Nero d'Avola and Frappato wines with Francesca Planeta. [www.winespectator.com/103114](http://www.winespectator.com/103114).



Giuseppe Benanti (right) is a modern pioneer of Sicilian wine, a local who worked to understand his family's Etna terroirs and revitalize the area's wine scene. Today, he is joined at the winery by sons Salvino (left) and Antonio.

Like most of Sicily, Mount Etna produced significant amounts of common wine through the second half of the 19th century, but the area's vineyards were largely abandoned during the 20th century. The scourge of phylloxera, the vagaries of export markets and the encroachment of lava flows all took their toll, and many of Etna's inhabitants moved to other parts of Italy or other countries in search of better opportunities.

One local son who stayed put is Giuseppe Benanti. Along with enologist Salvo Foti, Benanti set out in 1988 to explore Etna's patchwork of soils, clonal selections and viticulture, and to produce wine whose quality would revitalize interest in the area's production. Benanti's Etna Superiore Pietramarina 2009 (92, \$50) shows the region's potential. Made from 80-year-old Carricante vines planted at an altitude of over 3,100 feet, the Pietramarina offers the petrol-tinged minerality and cut of a fine German Riesling, but with the weight of a white Burgundy, showing a richness that suggests oak when in fact it's fermented and aged entirely in stainless steel.



But what really put Mount Etna on the modern wine map was the arrival of a trio of outsiders: Terre Nere's de Grazia; Belgian Frank Cornelissen of his eponymous winery; and Andrea Franchetti of Passopisciaro (as well as Tuscany's Tenuta di Trinoro).

"We all arrived in 2001," says de Grazia. "I guess we set this place on fire, each of us in our own way. But what was important was that the first three guys who came up here really wanted to make high quality wine."

That quality is tied tightly to three factors on Mount Etna: altitude, exposure and *terroir*.

Vineyards work their way up Mount Etna's slopes, rising to about 3,600 feet (the mountain peaks at roughly 11,000 feet of elevation). Until about 1,300 feet, the vines are planted on clay and sand soils; but it's at this level and up to 3,000 feet that Etna's primary red variety, Nerello Mascalese, and its blending partner, Nerello Cappuccio, really thrive. Here, the clay and sand give way to the more seriously volcanic soils that you'd expect on the side of an active volcano. Gravelly pebbles from eruptions and broken lava flows gradually transition to increasingly fine, volcanic sand as you climb the mountain.

Above 3,000 feet, Etna's highest-elevation vineyards are largely dedicated to white wine production and the local Carricante grape. The looser character of Etna's volcanic soils encourages root development, and they remain well-drained yet store enough water for the dry summer months.

The mountain's vineyards fan out from north to southwest, but lie primarily on the eastern side of the mountain. Harvest is typically in mid- to late October, though for some producers, it extends into



Leading Etna producer Tenuta delle Terre Nere, owned by American importer Marc de Grazia, has contributed to the growing excitement over Sicilian wine with its traditionally styled bottlings from 50- to 100-year-old bush-trained vines.

early November. Nerello Mascalese responds to the long hang time, which allows overall physiological maturity and, importantly, complete ripening of its Nebbiolo-like tannins.

The scope of elevation for plantings, the variety of exposures and the unique microclimates present on Mount Etna result in an intriguing range of *terroirs*. Nerello Mascalese seems to keenly express these distinctive sites, and its bright red fruit, herb and spice character is frequently underscored by pronounced minerality. Like Pinot Noir, Nerello Mascalese is thin-skinned and delicate, but Nerello's tannins are more akin to those of Barolo's Nebbiolo. This is particularly true when ramped up by fermentation or aging in the larger, neutral oak that is used by many of the area's producers.

As in Burgundy, producers on Mount Etna have begun to recognize the distinctive characters of wines from specific parcels and sites, and some are expressing them via *contrada*-designated bottlings.

"We're convinced we're at the beginning of a long haul," says Ciro Biondi, whose expressive 2011 Etna Cisterna Fuori Contrada Ronzini (92, \$60) comes from 5 acres of terraced vineyards in the Cisterna Fuori *contrada*. "We need at least another 30 years before we can say, 'This is Etna,' and before we can truly understand this wonderful terrain. At the moment, we don't even know what a treasure we have right under our feet."



Siblings José and Antonio Rallo run Donnafugata, founded by their parents in 1983. Among their highly rated bottlings is the Passito di Pantelleria Ben Ryé, a dessert wine made from dried Zibibbo grapes.

**E**tna's success is a theme that recurs across Sicily: A few intrepid pioneers set out to make quality wine, then an explosion of new labels follow in their footsteps. While Etna's progress is a relatively recent accomplishment, producers in other parts of Sicily have a few more years of experience in the quest for quality wine production and international recognition.

BOTTOM: ANIKA PANJALA



Duca di Salaparuta, with its Corvo label, and Tasca d'Almerita, with Regaleali, were two of only a few wineries producing well-regarded, commercially successful bottlings in the post-World War II era. Both labels continue to deliver good value today, while also producing other, higher quality offerings. Salaparuta has its rich and tarry Sicilia Duca Enrico (2010: 91, \$69), made entirely from Nero d'Avola; Tasca produces the Contea di Sclafani Rosso del Conte (2010: 91, \$70), a subtle blend of Nero d'Avola with Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc that really builds on the palate.

Many of Sicily's top producers forged their paths in the 1980s and '90s. Vittoria's COS estate, founded in 1980, is a celebrated story of three college friends—Giambattista Cilia, Giusto Occhipinti and Cirino Strano—who decided to make wine as a pastime. Today COS produces nine wines, including the Nero d'Avola Sicilia Contrada. Made entirely from *alberello*-trained Nero d'Avola vines averaging 55 years old, this is COS' weightier Nero, with extended aging before release, first in French oak barrels for 24 months, then stainless-steel tanks and bottle for another 18 months. A seamless, elegant red, with lots of red fruit and spice and herb aromatics, the 2008 bottling (94, \$85) is the highest-scoring wine of this report.

More often, new wineries have been founded by Sicilian families with several generations of history and experience on the island, often previously in high-volume grapegrowing and winemaking, along with other agricultural pursuits. Donnafugata, Firriato, Planeta and Rapalà are among the standouts in this category.

Diego Planeta, who established his winery in 1995, has regularly

del Vino (Regional Institute of Vine and Wine, or IRVV). The IRVV helped to fund experimental vineyards of international varieties, such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay, from which microvinifications were made in order to understand which of these non-native varieties might perform best in Sicily.

"At the time, he seemed mad to everyone else in Sicily," says Francesca Planeta, Diego's daughter. "But he had the vision that we had to do it to save Sicilian viticulture. He didn't do it just for Settesoli, he did it for the whole of Sicily."

Based on the success of the IRVV-partnered plantings, Settesoli began to pay members to plant these international varieties alongside established vineyards of native grapes. Although skepticism reigned initially, ultimately this step showed co-op members the viticulture and vinification techniques of grapes and regions with long histories of quality wine production and how to adapt them to Sicily.

"We needed to compare ourselves to other, established wine regions in order to improve and move forward," says Josè Rallo, who heads her family's Donnafugata estate with her brother Antonio. Founded in 1983 by the siblings' parents, Donnafugata mirrored Planeta's work at Settesoli when it shifted from quantity-driven production of indigenous varieties to plantings of international grapes geared toward lower yields and higher quality. Donnafugata's rich and toasty 2011 Contessa Entellina White Chiarandà (91, \$45) is made entirely from Chardonnay, and its Sicilia Tancredi 2010 (90, \$45) is an aromatic blend of Cabernet Sauvignon with Nero d'Avola and Tannat.

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## "NOTO IS FOR NERO D'AVOLA WHAT MONTALCINO IS FOR SANGIOVESE—IT'S DISTINCTIVE."

PATRICIA TOH, WINEMAKER, PLANETA

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received outstanding scores for his wines, the first of which were released in the late '90s. One example is the Planeta Chardonnay: The 2012 (90, \$42) is a fresh and focused version, offering pretty white and citrus fruit, with smoke and spice notes. The winery also impresses in the value category with the La Segreta White 2013 (89, \$14) and Red 2012 (87, \$15). These crowd-pleasing blends are based predominantly on local varieties, but each includes some international grapes as well.

Today, Planeta is one of Sicily's best-known names, but Diego Planeta's role in modern Sicilian wine began much earlier. In 1973, he commenced an almost 20-year term as president of Sicily's most successful cooperative, Cantine Settesoli, located near Menfi on the southwestern coast of the island and where Planeta would later establish his own estate.

Planeta's father was a founding member of Settesoli in 1958; the cooperative was created to help protect grapegrowers at a time when vineyard acreage was at a post-World War II high of more than half a million acres, and prices were at a dramatic low. Today it includes 2,300 members farming more than 15,000 acres of vines—roughly 5 percent of total vineyard acreage in Sicily—producing value-oriented wines under the MandraRossa label.

Diego Planeta's tenure at Settesoli included a forward-thinking partnership in the '80s with the Istituto Regionale della Vite e

"If we hadn't brought Sicilian Chardonnay or Cabernet Sauvignon to the table, we might not have been able to bring [our local] Nero d'Avola and had it accepted or even tried," Rallo reflects. "So international varieties were a marketing tool, but also a technical tool that allowed us to better understand our native varieties."

The lessons learned from international grape varieties were just the start of Sicily's trek toward quality wine production. Expertise from elsewhere in Italy, in the form of renowned consulting enologists such as Franco Giacosa, Giacomo Tacchis, Riccardo Cotarella and others, helped to refine the vision of modern Sicilian wine. But even so, Sicilian wine was a hard sell.

Carmelo Morgante remembers the difficulty his father faced in 1994 in securing Riccardo Cotarella's consultancy for their family's newly formed Morgante winery. "People thought only of Mafia when they thought of Sicily, and they couldn't see or imagine its great diversity." But, he adds, "In 1996, '97, '98, Sicily started to be known thanks to Planeta."

As Sicilian wine began to gain momentum, it sparked interest from outside investors. Among them was Antonio Moretti, owner of Tenuta Sette Ponti and Poggio al Lupo in Tuscany. Moretti founded Feudo Maccari in 2000 near Noto, an area in southeastern Sicily near the Nero d'Avola grape's original hometown of Avola. Filippo Mazzei, also from Tuscany, moved in nearby in 2002



with his Zisola estate. And north-eastern Italy's Mezzacorona cooperative from Trentino settled in central Sicily in 2002 with their Feudo Arancio property.

"The Sicilian experience has been one of the most exciting of my life," says Alessandro Cellai, winemaker for Tuscany's Castellare di Castellina and Sicily's Feudi del Pisciotto, both owned by publisher Paolo Panerai. The Feudi del Pisciotto estate is not far inland from Sicily's southern coast, located near the Sughereta di Niscemi nature reserve of ancient cork trees. The winery's 2012 Nero d'Avola Sicilia Versace (91, \$32) is suave and silky, with pure fruit character.

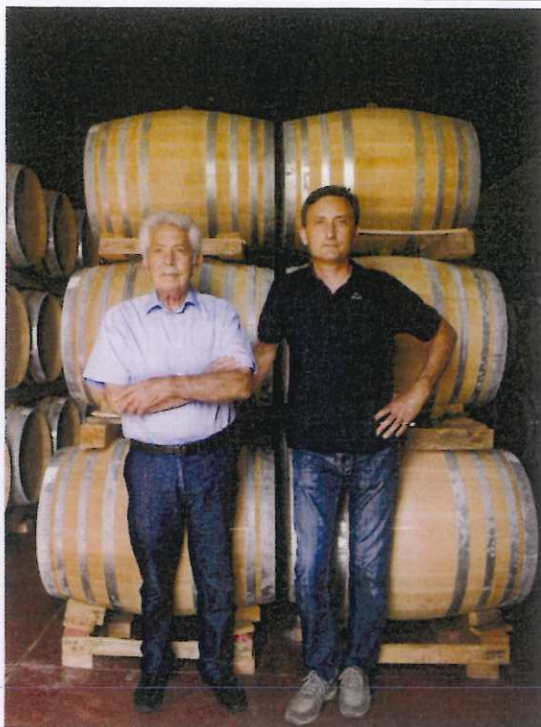
"We discovered this place with nothing here, and we thought about everything we could do. It's a different perspective from Tuscany to Sicily, but Tuscany gives us a framework and a tool set to begin. Experience is the master of life."

**W**hile international grape varieties and outside expertise and investments may have paved the way for Sicily's modern wines, the cutting edge today is the region's return to indigenous varieties and a closer look at *terroir*. Plantings of local varieties now outnumber the Cabernet and Chardonnay vineyards that were so popular 20 years ago.

"In the late 1990s—when I couldn't sell a bottle of Nero d'Avola to save my life—all I wanted was more Chardonnay to sell. But my father was already looking for Nero d'Avola properties," says Francesca Planeta.

In the past 10 to 15 years, Sicilian producers have really embraced this signature red grape. They've gone beyond the ripe, jammy character that marked many value versions, and have created a remarkable range of styles based on location and wine-making techniques.

Today there are versions of Nero d'Avola with a freshness and elegance akin to cool-climate Pinot Noir. Cantine Gulino, located in



Antonio Morgante and son Carmelo remember the not-so-bygone days when people associated Sicily only with the Mafia, not fine wine.

Sicily's southeastern corner near Siracusa, produces a bright, harmonious version in its Nero d'Avola Drus (2011: 90, \$28). Across Sicily, near Palermo in the northwest, Francesco Spadafora of his family's estate bottles a fresh Nero d'Avola Schietto (2008: 90, \$33), with pure fruit and fine-grained tannins.

At the other end of the stylistic spectrum, Firriato's 2011 Nero d'Avola Harmonium (90, \$44), aged for 12 months in French and American oak *barriques*, is rich and chewy, with sappy fruit and smoky bacon fat notes.

"Noto is for Nero d'Avola what Montalcino is for Sangiovese—it's distinctive," says Patricia Toth, an energetic young winemaker at Planeta, speaking about their estate in the area. "You don't talk about Sangiovese styles. You talk about where they're from—this should be the same with Nero d'Avola."



Feudi del Pisciotto was carved from a tract of land adjacent to the Sughereta di Niscemi cork tree forest, near the southern coast.



Yet another champion of local varieties is Arianna Occhipinti, a 32-year-old winemaker from Vittoria, in the southeast. Occhipinti, who has become a poster child for the renaissance of Sicilian wine, is dedicated to the native Frappato and Nero d'Avola varieties, which are blended into the local DOCG wine, Cerasuolo di Vittoria. The niece of COS' Giusto Occhipinti, she produced her first wine from just 2.5 acres of vines in the 2004 vintage. "Frappato was my first love, and it formed my decision to start making wine," says Occhipinti.

That passion has her producing a straight Frappato—one of only a handful of producers to do so—and her 2012 Frappato Sicilia (90, \$42) is an intensely aromatic and mouth-watering wine, a red with real finesse. It also led her to expand her operation, including the purchase in 2005 of an abandoned farm in the center of Cerasuolo, new vineyards (she now farms 50 acres in total) and a recently launched project of affordable wines made from purchased grapes under the TAMI' label.

This kind of enthusiasm is fueling the fire in Sicily's belly. "Sicily is not easy," warns Occhipinti. "You have to be strong and have passion to make good things." But there's a spirit of camaraderie in Sicily's wine culture that's driving its progress.

"We learn from each other. It's happening all over Sicily," says Alberto Tasca d'Almerita, who heads up his family's historic winery with his brother Giuseppe. "When you are surrounded by new energy, it's very easy to explore new ideas," he adds.

With this energy, Sicilian wine producers are propelling their wines to worldwide attention. In the process, they are starting to see their bright future as well as their next hurdles. Speaking for Sicily as a whole, Tasca d'Almerita sums up that future: "We have many projects on our agenda—short-, medium- and long-term. But always we need to educate and to explain what we are doing, and to share the message of our wines, people and culture." □



**"SICILY IS NOT EASY. YOU HAVE TO BE STRONG AND HAVE PASSION TO MAKE GOOD THINGS."**

**ARIANNA OCCHIPINTI**



Arianna Occhipinti devotes her production to native grapes, which she bottles as both varietals and blends. Launching her label with a single cask in 2004, she has recently built a modern winery (top) to keep up with demand for her wines.



THE  
ABCs  
OF

# Sicily



## GEOGRAPHY *The lay of the land*

It's hard to generalize about Sicily's vineyards, because they are spread over much of the island, at varying altitudes and on different soils. To begin to understand the viticultural landscape, it's easiest to divide Sicily into the following four areas:

**WEST:** More than half of Sicily's vineyards, including about 70 percent of those devoted to white grape varieties, are planted on the hills located along the western coast and just inland. This is a modern-day nod to the historically important Marsala dessert wines, named for the port city located on the western tip of the island. Vineyards here are planted at elevations of up to 1,900 feet, on calcareous soils mixed with red clay.

**CENTRAL:** The center of the island includes broad swaths of land largely devoted to agricultural (non-vine) and pastoral purposes, but three areas can be picked out for vine growing and wine production:

South of Palermo: Vineyards are planted on hillsides at higher altitudes (about 1,300 feet); this area includes the Alcamo DOC. Soils are typically calcareous clay.

Lower-lying vineyards (from 800 feet) are found along the southern coast and its inland hills, roughly from Menfi to Licata. Vineyards are a mix of sedimentary and calcareous soils, and the hot sirocco winds from Africa keep them warm and dry.

High-elevation (up to 2,900 feet) hillside vineyards of sand and clay are found in a portion of the center of the island, including the Contea di Sclafani DOC. This area is also affected by sirocco winds, but the higher altitudes mean that the diurnal temperature swing is significant.

**SOUTHEAST:** Along with the northeast and Mount Etna, the southeast is helping to lead in terms of quality, but it produces only a small fraction of the island's wine; about 4 percent of Sicily's total vineyard plantings are located in the southeast, primarily around the towns of Vittoria and Noto.

The town of Vittoria is at the center of Sicily's only DOCG appellation, Cerasuolo di Vittoria; these lower-altitude, coastal vineyards experience generally hot and dry conditions, and the sandy soil is mixed with layers of packed calcaire and iron oxide.

Noto is the hottest part of Sicily, with coastal vineyards that are extremely calcareous, some mixed with clay and many with white rocks on the surface

that help to reflect the area's intense heat and sunlight. Noto is adjacent to the town of Avola, traditional home to Sicily's preeminent red grape, Nero d'Avola.

**NORTHEAST / MOUNT ETNA:** The plain along Sicily's northern coast includes some vineyard plantings, but most of the vineyards in the northeast wrap around Mount Etna's slopes. Vineyards rise to more than 3,600 feet, planted on volcanic soils of pebbles and sand, with a long growing season and about 47 inches of rain per year—approximately twice as much as Sicily's overall average.

## GRAPE GUIDE *Can you say "uve"?*

### NOTABLE WHITE GRAPE VARIETIES

**CARRICANTE:** Mount Etna's most important white grape, but not often grown elsewhere in Sicily.

**CATARRATTO:** Sicily's most widely planted white grape, often blended with Inzolia. High-acid, lightly fruity in flavor, sometimes with a hint of bitterness on the finish.

**GRILLO:** Easy-drinking and fresh, with white and citrus fruit mixed with almond and saline notes. Showing increasing success in Sicily.

**INZOLIA (INSOLIA):** Low-acid, lightly floral and spicy; can lose concentration when harvested at higher yields. Also known as Ansonica in Tuscany.

**OTHER WHITE VARIETIES:** Chardonnay, Grecanico, Trebbiano di Toscana, Fiano, Zibibbo (Muscat d'Alexandria)

### NOTABLE RED GRAPE VARIETIES

**FRAPPATO:** Bright and fruity, with cherry and other red fruits; intensely floral and spicy. Blending partner of Nero d'Avola in the Cerasuolo di Vittoria DOCG.

**NERO D'AVOLA:** A bright red with flavors of dark berry and cherry fruit, game, spice and herb; shows a stylistic range from ripe and jammy to elegant and fresh. Sicily's most widely planted red grape variety.

**NERELLO MASCALESE:** Best-known from Mount Etna, but grown throughout Sicily; expressive of the soil on which it is grown, with firm tannins and flavors of cherry, tobacco, floral and spice.

**OTHER RED VARIETIES:** Cabernet Sauvignon, Nerello Cappuccio, Perricone, Syrah

### FAST FACTS

#### *Sicily by the Numbers*

**AREA OF SICILY:** 9,927 square miles (6,353,280 acres)

**ACRES UNDER VINE:** 254,410 (2013)

**HEIGHT OF MOUNT ETNA:** 10,991 feet

**AVERAGE RAINFALL PER YEAR:** 24 inches

**NUMBER OF WINERIES:** Increased from about 150 in 2000 to more than 450 in 2013



## RECOMMENDED RED WINES FROM SICILY

SCORE	WINE	PRICE
94	<b>COS</b> Nero d'Avola Sicilia Contrada 2008	\$85
92	<b>Ciro Biondi</b> Etna Cisterna Fuori Contrada Ronzini 2011	\$60
92	<b>COS</b> Nero d'Avola Terre Siciliane Nero di Lupo 2012	\$30
92	<b>Arianna Occhipinti</b> Cerasuolo di Vittoria Classico Grotte Alte 2008	\$75
92	<b>Passopisciaro</b> Sicilia Contrada G 2011	\$57
92	<b>Passopisciaro</b> Sicilia Contrada P 2011	\$60
92	<b>Spadafora</b> Sicilia Sole dei Padri 2008	\$80
92	<b>Tenuta delle Terre Nere</b> Etna Prephylloxera La Vigna di Don Peppino 2011	\$100
91	<b>Cusumano</b> Sicilia Noà Tenuta Presti e Pegni 2011	\$50
91	<b>Cusumano</b> Sicilia Sàgana Tenuta San Giacomo 2011	\$40
91	<b>Duca di Salaparuta</b> Sicilia Duca Enrico 2010	\$69
91	<b>Feudi del Pisciotto</b> Nero d'Avola Sicilia Versace 2012	\$32
91	<b>Feudo Maccari</b> Syrah Sicilia Mahàris 2012	\$60
91	<b>Firriato</b> Sicilia Santagostino Baglio Soria Red 2011	\$23
91	<b>Girolamo Russo</b> Etna Feudo di Mezzo 2011	\$48
91	<b>Gulfi</b> Sicilia Nerobufaleffj 2009	\$55
91	<b>Morgante</b> Nero d'Avola Sicilia Don Antonio 2011	\$42
91	<b>Girolamo Russo</b> Etna 'a Rina 2011	\$25
91	<b>I Vigneri di Salvo Foti</b> I Vigneri 2012	\$39
91	<b>Scilio</b> Etna Orphéus 2011	\$30
91	<b>Tasca d'Almerita</b> Contea di Sclafani Rosso del Conte 2010	\$70
91	<b>Le Vigne di Eli</b> Etna Pignatuni 2012	\$46
91	<b>Zisola</b> Noto Doppiozeta 2011	\$54
90	<b>Baglio del Cristo di Campobello</b> Nero d'Avola Sicilia Lu Patri 2011	\$43
90	<b>COS</b> Cerasuolo di Vittoria Classico 2011	\$39
90	<b>Cantine Gulino</b> Nero d'Avola Sicilia Drus 2011	\$28
90	<b>Arianna Occhipinti</b> Frappato Sicilia 2012	\$42

SCORE	WINE	PRICE
90	<b>Planeta</b> Syrah Sicilia Maroccoli 2009	\$42
90	<b>Spadafora</b> Nero d'Avola Sicilia Schietto 2010	\$33
90	<b>Spadafora</b> Sicilia Don Pietro Red 2010	\$23
90	<b>Tenuta delle Terre Nere</b> Etna 2012	\$22
90	<b>Vivera</b> Etna Martinella 2010	\$35
89	<b>Pietro Caciorgna</b> Etna 2012	\$28
89	<b>Ceuso</b> Sicilia Fastaia 2011	\$28
89	<b>Zisola</b> Sicilia 2011	\$27
88	<b>Benanti</b> Etna Rosso di Verzella 2010	\$20
88	<b>Cantina Cellaro</b> Nero d'Avola Terre Siciliane Lumà 2012	\$10
88	<b>Feudo Arancio</b> Terre Siciliane Stemmari Cantodoro 2011	\$13
88	<b>Feudo Maccari</b> Nero d'Avola Terre Siciliane 2012	\$17
88	<b>Feudo Principi di Butera</b> Terre Siciliane Symposio 2012	\$20
88	<b>Firriato</b> Etna Le Sabbie dell'Etna 2012	\$19
88	<b>Firriato</b> Nero d'Avola Terre Siciliane Chiaramonte 2012	\$17
88	<b>Morgante</b> Nero d'Avola Sicilia 2012	\$18
88	<b>Tasca d'Almerita</b> Nerello Mascalese Sicilia Tascante Ghiaia Nera 2012	\$20
87	<b>Barone Montalto</b> Cabernet Sauvignon-Nero d'Avola Sicilia Collezione di Famiglia 2011	\$11
87	<b>Le Casematte</b> Nerello Mascalese-Nocera Sicilia Figlio di Ennenne 2012	\$16
87	<b>Feudi del Pisciotto</b> Merlot-Syrah Sicilia Baglio del Sole 2012	\$14
87	<b>Cantine Francesco Minini</b> Merlot Terre Siciliane Villa Pozzi 2013	\$10
87	<b>Cantine Francesco Minini</b> Nero d'Avola Terre Siciliane Villa Pozzi 2013	\$10
87	<b>Planeta</b> Sicilia La Segreta Red 2012	\$15
86	<b>Duca di Salaparuta</b> Terre Siciliane Corvo Rosso 2012	\$13
86	<b>Feudo Arancio</b> Nero d'Avola Terre Siciliane Stemmari 2012	\$9

## RECOMMENDED WHITE WINES FROM SICILY

SCORE	WINE	PRICE
92	<b>Benanti</b> Etna White Superiore Pietramarina 2009	\$50
92	<b>Tenuta delle Terre Nere</b> Etna White Cuvée delle Vigne Niche 2012	\$38
91	<b>COS</b> Grecanico Terre Siciliane Pithos Bianco 2012	\$44
91	<b>Donnafugata</b> Contessa Entellina White Chiarandà 2011	\$45
90	<b>Marco de Bartoli</b> Grillo Sicilia Grappoli 2011	\$40
90	<b>COS</b> Terre Siciliane White Rami 2012	\$30
90	<b>Duca di Salaparuta</b> Sicilia Bianca di Valguarnera 2011	\$69
90	<b>Graci</b> Etna White Arcuria 2012	\$40
90	<b>Planeta</b> Chardonnay Sicilia 2012	\$42
90	<b>Rapitalà</b> Chardonnay Terre Siciliane Grand Cru Conte Hugues Bernard de la Gatinais 2012	\$37
89	<b>Benanti</b> Etna Bianco di Caselle 2011	\$20
89	<b>Tenuta di Fessina</b> Etna White Erse 2012	\$25
89	<b>Arianna Occhipinti</b> Terre Siciliane White SP68 2013	\$28
89	<b>Planeta</b> Sicilia La Segreta White 2013	\$14
89	<b>Tasca d'Almerita</b> Carricante Sicilia Tascante Buonora 2013	\$20
89	<b>Le Vigne di Eli</b> Etna White 2013	\$25

SCORE	WINE	PRICE
89	<b>Vivera</b> Etna White Salisire 2011	\$28
88	<b>Feudo Disisa</b> Terre Siciliane White Chara 2012	\$15
88	<b>Cantine Gulino</b> Albanello Terre Siciliane Pretiosa 2012	\$19
88	<b>Rapitalà</b> Alcamo Classico Vigna Casalj 2013	\$17
88	<b>Cantine Settesoli</b> Terre Siciliane White Mandrarossa Santannella 2012	\$18
88	<b>Tasca d'Almerita</b> Sicilia Regaleali White 2013	\$15
88	<b>Tasca d'Almerita</b> Terre Siciliane White Leone 2013	\$20
87	<b>Cantina Cellaro</b> Inzolia-Chardonnay Terre Siciliane Lumà 2012	\$10
87	<b>Centonze</b> Grillo Sicilia 2012	\$14
87	<b>Rapitalà Terre</b> Siciliane White Piano Maltese 2012	\$14
86	<b>Cusumano</b> Alcamo 2012	\$13
85	<b>Cusumano</b> Insolia Terre Siciliane 2012	\$13
85	<b>Duca di Salaparuta</b> Terre Siciliane Corvo Bianco 2013	\$13
85	<b>Feudi del Pisciotto</b> Inzolia Terre Siciliane Baglio del Sole 2013	\$14

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# Sicilian STANDOUTS

SEVEN PRODUCERS THAT  
ARE SETTING THE PACE  
FOR PROGRESS

• BY ROBERT CAMUTO & ALISON NAPJUS •

## COS *A Hobby Takes Flight*

Sicily's first boutique winery began as a lark. Giuseppe Cilia—the descendent of a line of Vittoria winemakers—noticed in the summer of 1980 that his son Giambattista (Titta) and two college friends had nothing to do before beginning school in the fall. So he let the young men harvest a couple of tons of Nero d'Avola to see what they could do.

They stomped grapes with their feet, fermented the must in old cement vats in Cilia's tiny ancestral winery and filled 1,400 bottles, which they sold to a wineshop in Palermo.

COS is an acronym representing the last names of the three founders, who later bought out the Cilia family farm. Today, two of the founders remain involved in the business—Titta Cilia and Giusto Occhipinti. Together, they have built COS into one Sicily's most innovative estates, reviving the once-moribund Vittoria wine scene and its Cerasuolo di Vittoria appellation to produce bottlings of dark, powerful Nero d'Avola blended with fruity Frappato.

COS now produces 200,000 bottles a year and sells its wine across the world. The brand's success is a credit to the inquisitiveness and enthusiasm of Cilia and Occhipinti. They were among the first Sicilian winemakers to cultivate vineyards biodynamically. In the early 1980s they bought used French oak *barriques* from Angelo Gaja, though they later abandoned the small Bordeaux barrels for large oak casks and clay amphorae. "The amphora makes a wine nude," Occhipinti explains. "It shows what the *terroir* contributes to a wine." Today COS' signature Pithos wines—a red Cerasuolo-style blend and a white Grecanico—are vinified in clay amphorae buried in sand.

"We started it as a hobby, a passion," says Occhipinti, 56, whose expressive face and bright, birdlike eyes still convey that initial ardor. "Then COS became a voyage."

—R.C.

## FEUDO MACCARI *Tuscan Transplant*

Antonio Moretti is about as much of an outsider as someone can be in rural southeastern Sicily. An elegant, white-haired, polo-playing Tuscan, he made a fashion fortune with shoe factories, collaborating with the likes of Gucci and Prada.

In the late 1990s, he turned his attention to his family's Tenuta Sette Ponti estate in the heart of Chianti and began making stellar wines



Giambattista Cilia (left) and Giusto Occhipinti of COS

there with the help of enologist Carlo Ferrini. Bitten by the winemaking bug, Moretti went on a buying spree in Tuscany's Maremma and Bolgheri regions, as well as Sicily.

Moretti first discovered southeastern Sicily in 2000 while sailing his yacht around the island, and he became fascinated with the idea of growing Nero d'Avola and Syrah on the gentle slopes around Noto. "I tasted Nero d'Avolas then and the aromas pleased me, but the wines were too jammy," says Moretti. "It was like tasting pasta that is overcooked—you could tell there was something good there if it was made the right way."

Moretti bought nearly 350 acres in the Maccari *contrada*, now planted with vineyards, olive groves and wheat. Feudo Maccari cultivates about 120 acres of bush-trained vineyards adapted to the hot climate and has an underground irrigation system to relieve vines during August heat stress. The winery has also developed its own Nero d'Avola and Syrah clones

Moretti says the area's wildly varied calcareous *terroirs* produce different expressions of Nero d'Avola, with varied structures, power and elegance. Before bottling, the wines are shipped to Tuscany and blended by a team of enologists into both a standard young Nero d'Avola, released within the year, and a premium Saia that is aged about six months in barrel. Feudo Maccari also produces still and sparkling Nero d'Avola rosés, a red Syrah called Mahàris, a white Grillo and a sweet Muscat *passito*.

In 2012, Moretti extended his holdings to Mount Etna, where he





Gulfi winery in Chiaramonte Gulfi

bought vineyards in the Santo Spirito *contrada* near the town of Passopisciaro. This fall the winery will release its first white Carricante and red Nerello Mascalese.

—R.C.

## GULFI

### *Investing in Nero d'Avola*

Vito Catania was a successful businessman in northern Italy when he inherited his family estate in Chiaramonte Gulfi, in southeastern Sicily, nearly 20 years ago.

"My father didn't know what to do with the land," says Matteo Catania, 33, who helps run the Gulfi wine company with his father, Vito, and brother Davide. "Then, he found Salvo."

Sicilian agronomist and enologist Salvo Foti—one of the most influential winemakers of eastern Sicily—has guided Gulfi, emphasizing the potential of single-vineyard Nero d'Avola.

At first, Foti planted vineyards on the Catania family's panoramic estate, perched more than 1,200 feet above the Vittoria plain and the Mediterranean Sea. Then Foti persuaded Catania to buy vineyards at Sicily's southeastern tip, 45 miles away, in the vineyards of Pachino.

Nero d'Avola, a dark grape with lots of sugar but inconsistent structure, had historically been used to add punch to wines from northern Italy and France. And though the variety has spread across Sicily, Foti insisted that only the dry, sunbaked days and sea-cooled nights of Pachino could push Nero d'Avola to full tannic maturity. He also contended that the calcareous soils of the area, which seem to alternate every 100 yards between shades of white, gray and brown, would produce a range of different wines.

"Pachino has the most diverse soils in Sicily," says Foti, 52. "We follow the ancient patterns—Nero d'Avola is here for a reason."

Gulfi works organically, using labor-intensive bush-trained cultivation to produce a total of 10 wines from 170 acres of vineyards in Chiaramonte Gulfi, Pachino and on Mount Etna. But the producer's flagship remains Nero d'Avola, including the four wines from the Pachino vineyards. The labels—Neromaccarij, Nerobaronj, Nerosanloré and Nerobufaleffj—are named by combining Nero d'Avola with the title of the individual vineyard.

—R.C.

## ARIANNA OCCHIPINTI

### *Success on a Shoestring*

Some might say that Arianna Occhipinti was a longshot for wine stardom. She began making wine a decade ago, drawing only on several acres of vines around her family's home, outside Vittoria. Now in her 11th vintage, Occhipinti, 32, is one of modern Italian wine's most dramatic success stories. Beginning with one cask (about 2,000 bottles) in 2004, she now produces some 110,000 bottles a year and can barely keep up with demand in the 25 countries she exports to.

As a teenager, Occhipinti worked under the tutelage of her uncle, Giusto Occhipinti, at COS (see profile on page 61). But after enology school, she struck out on her own. Local producers at the time were largely focused on dark, powerful expressions of Nero d'Avola, but Occhipinti, working out of a small outbuilding on her parents' property, defied convention by making a complex wine from Frappato—a light, fruity variety typically blended with Nero d'Avola in Cerasuolo di Vittoria wines.

Occhipinti quickly expanded beyond that first single cask of Frappato. In 2005, she purchased an abandoned farm in the heart of the Cerasuolo di Vittoria DOCG, and over the next few vintages, her reputation grew as quickly as her rapidly expanding winery.

She works organically and vinifies with a light touch, using indigenous yeasts. But in recent vintages, she has started to use more sulfites to inhibit the vinegary, volatile acid and off flavors that plagued some of her earlier efforts. "I am working better in the cellar," she says. "So now my wines are more complete."

Today, she bottles six different wines, all from local grape types. Last year, she moved her operation into a new, purpose-built, 14,000-square-foot winery on a historic farm that she purchased in 2011, giving her the room to work more precisely and to experiment with parcel-by-parcel vinifications.

Among Occhipinti's dreams is to create a school to help other young Italians learn how to make the leap into winemaking on a shoestring budget, as she did. "To show," she says, "that it's possible to start with desire, energy and passion, and little money."

—R.C.



## PLANETA *A Tour of Terroirs*

None has done more in the past 20 years than the Planeta family to explore Sicily's wine potential and diversity. Their energy has resulted in a sprawling Sicilian wine company run by six cousins with six estates and five wineries.

The Planeta family has owned agricultural lands in southwestern Sicily since the 17th century. But the vision for a global wine company came in the 1980s from family patriarch Diego Planeta, who recruited his nephew Alessio, then an agronomy student, along with Piedmontese enologist Carlo Corino, to plant Sicilian and international varieties on the hills of the family's remote Ulmo estate and around nearby Menfi.

"This became the laboratory for the renaissance of Sicilian viticulture," says Alessio Planeta, 47, the company's chief winemaker.

In the mid-1990s, Planeta released wines made from Cabernet, Merlot and Chardonnay that proved that Sicily could compete with the New World. The 1998 Chardonnay, for example, received 91 points from *Wine Spectator* on release. But then the family shifted its strategy, deciding to establish a collection of wineries across Sicily and explore local grapes and *terroirs*.

The first move was to the Nero d'Avola hot spot of Noto, in southeastern Sicily, followed by Vittoria, where the goal was to blend a pair of Cerasuolo di Vittoria reds from Nero d'Avola and Frappato. More recently, Planeta moved to Mount Etna, purchasing and developing the Feudo di Mezzo estate in some of the highest-altitude vineyards on the mountain, where its premium red, a Nerello Mascalese, and a white made from Carricante with 10 percent Riesling, are labeled Eruzione 1614.

The latest project—and last, Planeta claims—is a small estate on the seaside Capo di Milazzo in northeastern Sicily, where Planeta is one of a handful of producers in the historic Mamertino appellation focusing on Nero d'Avola–Nocera blends. Planeta plans to release its first vintage from the site, the 2013, this fall and is experimenting with three long-abandoned varieties from the area.

"Whenever we moved into a new place on Sicily, we started with a blank page," says Planeta. "Now that the journey around Sicily is finished, we are focusing on working better and better every year." —R.C.

## TASCA D'ALMERITA *A First Family of Sicilian Wine*

For more than half a century, the Tasca d'Almeritas have been among Sicily's greatest ambassadors, one of a handful of aristocratic families who have thrived in wine.

Since the 1800s, the family's rural base has been Regaleali, today a 1,200-acre estate in the wheat-covered heart of Sicily. And after World War II, at a time when most Sicilian producers were turning to bulk wine production, Count Giuseppe Tasca d'Almerita was one of the few to focus on quality winemaking.

With the help of Piedmontese enologist Ezio Rivella, Tasca d'Almerita produced a range of wines, including the commercially successful Regaleali Rosso and Bianco bottlings. Later, in 1970, the winery created the estate's signature red, the Nero d'Avola–dominated blend Rosso del Conte.

Today, Tasca d'Almerita provides a prime example of Sicily's diverse offerings; 20 different varieties are planted at Regaleali, with native Sicilian and Italian grapes alongside international varieties. All told, the estate produces 11 whites and reds, along with sparkling, rosé and desert bottlings.

Alberto Tasca d'Almerita, 42, has greatly expanded Tasca's presence since taking the reins of the company more than a decade ago. He has



Alberto Tasca d'Almerita

bought and developed two estates: Tascante on Mount Etna for white and red wines, and Capo Faro on the Aeolian island of Salina, where he created a spa resort in vineyards cultivated for sweet and dry Malvasia. He has also launched a pair of joint ventures, taking over management of the Sallier de la Tour estate, known for its Syrah, near Palermo; and making wine from the vineyards around the Phoenician archaeological site on the tiny island of Mozia. "We work in five different territories, so we can learn from everybody," he says.

Tasca says the company plans to experiment with some 40 indigenous varieties. "We have 150 years of projects to do," he says. —R.C.

## TENUTA DELLE TERRE NERE *An Etna Pioneer*

After 20 years championing boutique producers throughout Italy via his import company, Marc de Grazia Selections, the U.S.-born de Grazia could easily have settled down anywhere in Italy. Yet in 2001 he chose Sicily's Mount Etna, then a relatively forgotten backwater, and soon became one of the area's trailblazers.

"My two loves in the wine world are Piedmont and Burgundy," says de Grazia, whose elegant yet powerful Etna wines recall Barolo. By studying Etna's patchwork of *terroirs*, he became the first there to vineyard-designate bottlings. "I baptized this place as 'the Burgundy of the Mediterranean,'" he adds. "I guess I used it so much, it stuck."

De Grazia produced his first two vintages in a friend's cellar before building his own winery near Randazzo to vinify the 2004 vintage. He currently owns more than 55 acres of vineyards and rents an additional 11, with plans to expand to almost 75 acres by the end of 2015, thanks to new plantings. But the distinguishing feature of his vineyards is their age—between 50 and 100 years, with one additional parcel of 130-year-old pre-phyllloxera vines that goes into the La Vigna di Don Peppino bottling.

The vineyards span four of Mount Etna's *contradas*, and most are terraced and trained on a modified *alberello* system—the area's traditional, bush-vine method of vine management. De Grazia talks about his vineyards as if each were a child, and he cares for them as such. "Here," says de Grazia, "the viticulture is fundamental. I like to do everything in the vineyard 110 percent." —A.N.