

Sicily, a Love Letter



The Doric temple of Segesta between Palermo and Trapani in western Sicily.

Every wine critic has a darling. For one, the Italian region *del cuore* may be Piedmont and another may profess a profound affection for Tuscany. My amorous leanings fall south, deep south, to that delicious morsel of sun-kissed otherness known as Sicily. This report is ten years in the making and is the result of some 50 (I failed to count them all) trips to the island to visit and taste with producers. My goal was to produce the most comprehensive set of reviews for Sicilian wine ever published. As Italian reviewer with *The Wine Advocate*, I'd like to shine a stronger spotlight on the southern regions of Italy, Sicily in particular.

The Italian mainland seems perennially poised to kick the island of Sicily into oblivion. But this stubborn rock positioned fortuitously at the crossroads of the Mediterranean is safely anchored by a heightened sense of self-awareness. Emerging confidence and a philosophical maturity where wine is concerned makes Sicily, in my opinion, the most exciting region in Italy today. No other region feeds the intellect so lavishly. Sicily is constantly emitting wine stimuli, exciting ideas and new perspectives.

Consider the achievements of the past ten years: We saw the "Sicilian wine renaissance" at the dawn of the new millennium that marked a milestone shift from quantity to quality production. We saw an amazing sense of fraternal unity among producers under the respected leadership of three wise men (Lucio Tasca, Diego Planeta and Giacomo Rallo of Donnafugata). We saw the birth of Mount Etna as Italy's hottest new wine region. We saw the birth of the Sicilia DOC and greater mapping of specialized viticulture subzones. Thanks to ideal, warm-climate growing conditions, we saw important contributions to the "natural," biodynamic and organic winemaking schools. And, we saw the rise of the female winemaker *en masse* thanks to predictable demographics and a cultural premium on family businesses. No other region has accomplished as much in this brief period of time.

Sicily has something else that makes it irresistible. Simply put, it's sex appeal. It is the most erogenous of Italy's oenological zones.

An Emerging Wine Region

The future now lies in creating a distinct map of Sicilian subzones. Important work is underway, but there is much more to do. In the past, Sicily was depicted as an amorphous mass of bulk wine at the heart of the Mediterranean. Today, it counts 22 DOC zones and one DOCG zone. Some of the main DOCs include: Alcamo, Contea di Sclafani, Contessa Entellina, Eloro, Etna, Erice, Faro, Marsala, Menfi, Monreale, Noto, Sambuca di Sicilia, Sciacca, plus the smaller islands of Lipari and Pantelleria. The DOCG is Cerasuolo di Vittoria. On an even finer macro level, many producers now think in terms of single-vineyards. This is especially apparent on Etna where the northern flank of the volcano is divided into dozens of "contrade," or cru expressions. "The transformation from wine-as-industry to wine-as-territory has been finalized," says Marilena Barbera, proprietor and winemaker of Cantina Barbera in Menfi.



Raw shrimp (*gambero rosso*) make a perfect pairing partner to crisp, mineral-driven Sicilian whites made from indigenous grapes.

As a brief housekeeping note, I wanted to add that the Sicilia DOC came into existence in 2012. That means that IGT wines made before 2012 are labeled "Sicilia IGT." Many of those same wines reverted to "Sicilia DOC" in 2012. After that date, all remaining IGT wines are labeled "Terre Siciliane." Because this report includes so many wines made at the cusp of this change, the difference between Sicilia IGT and Sicilia DOC may cause understandable confusion.

Recent Vintages

Given the vast Sicilian territory, many soil types, grape varieties, wind patterns and altitudes, it is impossible to chart harvest conditions in Sicily with one magic wand. I have tried, however, to provide an overall view.

The **2013** vintage started with a relatively mild winter and cool spring. The island saw more rainfall in 2013 compared to the dryer 2011 and 2010 vintages. In the southern and western flanks of the island flowering came later than normal, but the growing cycle soon caught up to speed thanks to warm spells in May and June. July was characterized by marked diurnal shifts that helped to set color and acidity following *veraison*. Areas with early-ripening grapes, like Contessa Entellina, fared well because harvest started in mid-August when conditions were not too hot. Areas like Etna and Messina, with late-ripening grapes, experienced more difficulty during the ripening phase with heat spikes that forced uneven phenolic ripeness in some areas. Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Cappuccio that require careful tannin management show some grittiness and rawness. Nero d'Avola and other red varieties showed a steady, satisfactory performance. Over the general Sicilian territory, 2013 is considered a good vintage with a few difficult hot spots.

The **2012** vintage saw warmer and dryer conditions overall with heat stress for vines planted in areas prone to drought or in the thinner, calcium-rich soils found in the Ragusa and

Agrigento areas. Sicily in particular suffered from the hot anticyclone weather patterns that originated in Africa over the Sahara desert and swept over southern Italy in various violent waves throughout the summer months. Hillside and high-altitude vineyards like those on Etna 500 meters and up above sea level benefitted from large shifts between day and nighttime temperatures. Dry summer winds made for smaller, more concentrated fruit bunches in many areas and brought harvest in advance of schedule. Despite the overall heat, white grape such as Grillo, Carricante and Catarratto performed nicely in this vintage. Acidity remained a factor despite the ripeness of fruit. Despite these exceptions, 2012 was very hot. Jammy or overripe aromas are present in many Nero d'Avola expressions.

The **2011** vintage was similarly dry (and difficult) overall in Sicily and many farmers had to resort to emergency irrigation systems. Some areas saw a dramatic reduction in fruit volumes due to bad weather in the spring that negatively affected fruit setting. The Assoenologi group of oenologists estimates that 2011 produced 25% less fruit than 2010. Many coastal regions and areas with higher humidity saw huge problems with downy mildew that forced many extra passes in the vineyards for spraying. The 2011 vintage was difficult at best and disastrous in the most extreme cases.



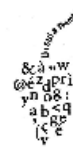
Vineyards among the volcanic landscape of Mount Etna.

Etna

"At 3 a.m., I was knocked out of bed by thunder and earth tremors. In the black of night I saw five or six flaming mouths and from each spewed a column of light. I could hear the molten rock crunching and crackling in the forest snapping tree trunks. It sounded like the footsteps of a giant beast." This is how vintner Andrea Franchetti describes the 2002 eruption he witnessed when he first arrived on Mt. Etna to make wine.

Despite the volcanic violence, Franchetti is part of a strong and vibrant community of winemakers on Etna. Often referred to by its Arabic name, mountain of fire, Etna is Italy's most talked about emerging wine zone. In just a few years, the number of winemakers on the volcano has doubled. They include the original pioneers Andrea Franchetti, Marco de Grazia, Salvo Foti, Frank Cornelissen and the Benanti and Cambria families. They also include a wave of other Sicilian producers such as Planeta, Tasca d'Almerita, Firriato and Cusumano. Lastly among them is the newest generation - the so-called "Etna Boys" such as Giuseppe Russo, Michele Faro, Alberto Graci and a new discovery, Anna Martens.

The volcano's conical form gives it a full range of exposure to the sun and weather patterns. The Nebrodi Mountains to the west form a protective barrier and soothing sea breezes come in from the east. The north flank of the volcano facing Taormina is the most promising area for viticulture. This is the so-called "golden triangle" between the towns of Linguaglossa, Castiglione di Sicilia and Randazzo. Only 2,000 hectares of vine exist, so future growth of the



region is limited. Etna also boasts some of Europe's highest altitude vineyards. It's not uncommon to see vines at up to 1,000 meters above sea level. Many of these plants are more than a century old, planted without rootstock in head-pruned bushes. Sicily's southern latitudinal positioning makes for plenty of warmth and luminosity for bringing the late-ripening Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Cappuccio grapes to maturity.



Knotted "*alberello*" vines emerge from volcanic soils at Benanti, on the lower slopes of Mount Etna in eastern Sicily.

Because the Etna region is so small, it has developed a highly focused sense of micro-territories and single-vineyards. The growing area is divided into *contrade*. Some of the most promising include Guardiola, Verzella, Santo Spirito, Caselle, Calderara Sottana, Feudo di Mezzo and San Lorenzo.

Besides Etna Rosso (usually made with Nerello Mascalese and a smaller percent of Nerello Cappuccio) and Etna Bianco (Carricante) an emerging trend sees a slew of new Etna Rosatos. Rosé made from Nerello Mascalese is one of the biggest trends on the volcano today. I was absolutely blown away by these wines, so much so that I am prepared to say I think the best Italian rosé is from Etna. They have the elegance of Bandol matched by the mineral-driven character you can only get on Etna.

—Monica Lerner