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Feature- A Wine Day in Sicily

During the recently organised Ante Prima Tastings in Sicily, wine journalists across the world were taken to various wineries split into 8 groups, writes Subhash Arora who visited Cantine Barbera, Feudo Arancio, Donnafugata, Planeta and Settesoli- from a boutique winery to the 'biggest vineyard' in Europe.



Room with a View:
Planeta Foresteria

'Please leave your bag outside the room by 8:30 in the morning so we can load the coach and leave by 9:00' were the instructions left for me the previous night. I had been driven to Planeta Foresteria, in a small town called Menfi, about 90 kms from Palermo airport after a miracle earlier. China Airlines, the only airline that connects Delhi directly to Rome, had brought me in time for a connecting flight via Alitalia to Palermo- and the bag had arrived- something Air France could hardly ever manage on my similar trips!

By the time I had reached the Foresteria- a guest house in the forest, far from the madding crowds, I barely had time to meet with my journalist friends and the five producers enjoying the sweet wines from Pantelleria, the Sicilian elixir. This new property owned by the well- known wine estate Planeta, is extremely comfortable and elegant; the walking distance from the Mediterranean Sea would make it a favourite sojourn for wine tourists and lovers (pun intended) when it goes known outside Sicily.

The first thing I noticed, sitting in the mini coach at 9:00 in the morning, was that Sicily was full of small hills all around- of course there is Mount Etna, the active volcanic mountain which is the big landmark of Sicily-not only for wines and its unique terroir. Terre Sicane was the area we were in- a group of small hills around Menfi also known for its special terroir as the producers would insist. Our first stop was the boutique winery called Cantine Barbera.



View from the Top-
Vines, Wines and the Sea,
Cantine Barbera

Cantine Barbera

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Contact: Marilena Barbera

The young Florence educated Marilena came back in 2001 and started the small family winery, very close to the Planeta Foresteria. She is fiery and passionate about the winemaking- her family was earlier in grape growing. She has only 15 hA of vineyard land where she also grows artichokes, and olives -all organically.

Small production of 100,000 bottles means she needs to work with small importers and restaurateurs who are looking for quality and unique wines like hers and are willing to pay the adequate compensation for the hard work. In fact she is so passionate and possessive about the terroir that she does not even mention Sicily but only Menfi on some of her wine labels. She rues the fact that nobody outside the region knows or understands the Menfi terroir well.

Quality is not an issue any more with Sicilian wines, she feels. It is the terroir which is so different in this area that makes wines unique and consequently she is also against the concept of DOC Sicilia which is under discussion these days. She is happier making IGT wines with Inzolia, Nero d'Avola and Catarratto in Passito style (made after drying the grapes) though she produces DOC Menfi wines with varietals like Inzolia, Chardonnay, Merlot, and Cabernet Sauvignon too. Talking of the Merlot, she is frank enough to admit that it has gone down in demand since 15 years ago when it was planted and 'despite many producers telling you they truly express the terroir here, the fact is they were planted when there was an increasing demand and now we cannot afford to just uproot them overnight.'



She also prefers old wood to new for cellaring. 'Wine tends to be sweeter due to higher temperature and the resultant higher sugar and the new wood means overloading the wines with sweetness', she says.

She engaged a consultant winemaker who introduced big barrels in which the evolution is better. 'We clean these barrels with salt and water and they are ready to use the next year,' she says with smile, adding that she buys 8-10 barrels every year.

Exporting 70% of her small production, Marilena exports most to the US and Switzerland, a small amount going to China and Japan with UK, Germany and Netherlands markets now growing. She makes it a point to travel to the US every 2-3 months where 'I talk not only to the importers but the service staff in the restaurants or retail because they are the ones who are on the frontline making the sales and should know the uniqueness of my wines,' she says, reflecting that she knows many of them by name.

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Villa Baglio Style- Feudo Arancio

Passing through the township of Menfi which was devastated by a massive earthquake in 1968, and travelling North-West of Menfi with nothing but small hills and a few wind-mills in what seems to be a nowhere land for about 20 minutes, one finds oneself suddenly in front of a beautifully manicured wine estate, looking like a huge rustic villa in a traditional Baglio style- only a rich celebrity from the North Italy or a movie star could own -or perhaps a big cooperative. But we had been told that we would be visiting only one co-operative, Settesoli that we had passed on the way with huge stainless tanks visible from the roadside, looking more like a petroleum refinery!

As we alight from the coach, my hunch and info was right and it is owned by Mezzocorona, a big powerful co-operative based in the town of Mezzocorona, north of Trento, which I had visited several years ago.



Matteo Covazzi - Winemaker of Feudo Arancio in the Cellar

Established in 2000 when the co-operative bought 250 hA of vineyard land and 50 hA of other crops, they now own a total of 600 hAs including vineyards in the Ragusa area in south east. 'When we came here, the vines were using Pergola system which is good for quantity but not for quality. So we gradually changed it to Guyot system, says Matteo Covazzi, the winemaker from Mezzocorona who takes us through the modern winery and wide expanse of vineyards. 'We also switched the grape mix to 50% local varieties-after all when we came down all the way, why make only the international variety?'

Grillo and Inzolia and Nero d'Avola are the popular local varieties while Cabernet, Moscato, Syrah, Chardonnay and Viognier are some of the international varieties being grown. In fact their Grillo and Inzolia are two of the best value- for- money wines.

The company uses latest technology, machine pruning (hand harvesting though), drip irrigation- they have built two artificial lakes making them self sufficient even in case of drought which has inflicted this area 7 out of past 10 years, says Matteo. It is impressive to know they are so well equipped with logistics that 'it takes a maximum of 10 minutes for grapes to be transported to the winery from any of our vineyards.'

Talking of the importance of irrigation in Sicily, he says, 'we have sensors throughout the vineyards which give us the humidity levels at 25, 50 and 75 cms deep into the soil. Besides, different varieties need varying amount of water. If we don't control irrigation, we could end up with 17 % of alcohol!'

While leaving the estate after tasting a range of their wines and loads of pre-lunch snacks I learnt from their export manager Elena Pasquazzo that Berkman Cellars India is already importing these wines in India.

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Owner: José Rallo



Donna José Rallo

Donnafugata, with a holding of 328 hA of vineyards, is synonymous with high quality Sicilian wines and its beautiful owner Jose Rallo and the Mille a Una Notte Rosso Contessa Entellina DOC which though expensive at over € 30 is a signature wine of this old family winery. The wine missed being in the Wine Enthusiast List of Top Ten Italian wines compiled by their Italian wine specialist Monica Lerner for their April issue, by the whisk of a hair. Incidentally Contessa Entellina is also the small village where we visited the family estate and were served a delicious tapas type never-ending lunch with a complete range of wines available for tasting.

But the small island south of Sicily from where comes the sweet Passito di Pantelleria DOC, is where she grows Moscato grapes (known as Zibibbo in Sicily) for the extremely popular Ben Rye. 'The island is so cut off that in bad weather, one cannot reach the island and one could be stuck on either side for a couple of days or more,' she says giving us insights into hitherto unknown hazards of winemaking.

'We like money but we love wine, so we always work on long term projects and work towards the sensorial satisfaction of our clients,' explains the philosophy of the winery. Sicilian laws provide her the flexibility to ferment the red wines in Contessa Entellina and transport to the historical winery in Marsala where malolactic fermentation takes place before bottling. 'Marsala was where our family winery was born in 1851 and so we did not want to give up that position,' she says while clarifying

she makes only dry wines on the main island and no fortified Marsala wines that were the darling of wine connoisseurs decades ago but are out of fashion now.

So how many varietals are there in Sicily, one asks her? 'There are so many clones of every varietal that it is not possible to make even a guess,' she says. 'Catarratto, for instance, is our popular variety. It has 283 known clones-80, 100 or 300! You take your pick. Nobody is going to take you to court,' adding that experimentation is welcome here and people love to break the laws and traditions all the times.'



One of the coveted
dessert wines of Sicily-
Ben Rye DOC Passito
di Pantelleria

We taste Anthilia 2009 a spicy dry, fruity and crisp wine, followed by Polena 2009 IGT, Lighea 2009, Le Fuga DOC, Vigna di Gabri DOC 2008, Chiarandá white- all of which are blends of Ansonica (same as Inzolia/Insolia), Catarratto and/or Chardonnay. All of them were very crisp, dry yet fruity and interestingly all very spicy on the palate that would go so deliciously well for most Indian palates. They would be a hit even for the vegetarians besides being a very good aperitif and a fish wine. Chiarandá del Merlo Contessa Entellina DOC 2000 was a blend of 50% each of Chardonnay and Ansonica, but I found it a bit too oaky. It would have to be a food wine, if it were to find happy customer in India. The '07 was a better balanced wine, however.

Sharazade 2008 was a decent, young and pleasant, easy drinking wine and so were Sedára 2008 and Tancredi 2006. Of course the Mille Una Notte 1999, 2003 and 2006 kept people busy in discussing which one was the best- 2003 being my personal favourite. Ben Ryé 2008 and 1999 were just the right wines to reach a crescendo before leaving for the next stop.

Donnafugata has recently switched the distributors for India- from FineWinesnMore to Aspri Spirits, both Mumbai based importers.

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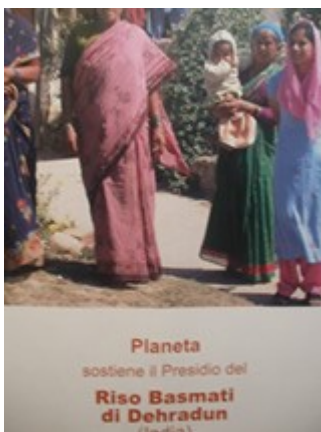


Francesca Planeta in the family private cellar of the winery

Planeta was on a high when we visited them- just a couple of days earlier, an article in the April Edition of Wine Enthusiast had selected the Planeta Santa Cecilia-a 100% Nero d'Avola as the only Sicilian wine in its List of Top Ten Italian wines. Founded by Diego Planeta who helped his daughter Francesca and sons Alessio and Santi set up the winery and helped them expand into five boutique wineries from Ulmo at Sambuca di Sicilia, Cantina Piccola and Cantina Grande at Menfi which we were visiting, Dorilli in Vittoria and Buonivini at Noto in the South East.

'Santa Cecilia is a journey through Sicily that ends in Noto, representing the best balance between grape variety Nero d'Avola, terroir and technique,' says Francesca who not only looks after the marketing but is the de-facto President of the company, also looking after the Foresteria where I had stayed the previous night. She loves details- when she asked me about my experience at the Foresteria, I suggested that like in most agri-turismos in the North Italy, it would be nice if it offered a complimentary tasting with cheese etc. and if one of the Planetas could join in to make the guests feel special; it would also help them promote their labels. She instantly excused herself to go and make a written note for action 'before I forget it.'

Founded in 1995, the company has established itself as one of the top 5 wineries in Sicily which have even helped change the past image of Sicilian wines as only cheap, bulk wines. It is interesting that the family tried growing different grape varieties 10 years before starting the winery to see which grapes would be best for the region- Sauvignon Blanc had failed miserably.



Planeta supports Basmati Rice-Poster at the winery entrance

Owning 390 hAs and experimentation helped the winery make a memorable Fiano varietal wine for the first time in Sicily. Environmental sustainability is the single common thread running through all their 5 wineries and another one coming up soon in Etna.

We had time enough to taste a few of their wines- Carricante 2009 being the first vintage, followed by Cerasuolo di Vittoria DOCG 2008- this is the only docg appellation approved in Sicily. Plumbago 2008 is also a relatively new addition –made from Nero d’Avola. The Santa Cecilia 2007 from Noto was the climax that left us wanting to drink some more of their wines but we had to move on as we were already behind schedule.

What a coincidence that when we were tasting wines in their sitting room-cum tasting room, I got a phone call from Aman Dhall of Brindco, their importers in India! A Chef had gone to India along with the export manager Penny Murray for a week of Sicilian cuisine with Planeta wine and he wanted to invite me for the opening night at San Gimignano Restaurant at the Hotel Imperial! Che coincidenza!

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Team Settesoli at the Tasting

Founded in 1958, Settesoli is the biggest co-operative in Sicily having 2377 members who own around 600 hAs of vineyards. Since they are all located in and around Menfi, where they are brought to be crushed, Settesoli calls itself the biggest single vineyard in Europe- as opposed to much bigger co-ops in North Italy like Mezzocorona, Cavit and Cantina di Soave who are much bigger with smaller co-operatives also as members.

The co-operative is headed by a President who is elected every 3 years. Diego Planeta has been the President since 1973. Its membership owns about 5% of total acreage in Sicily, making it quite powerful and influential. It makes bulk wines and also 13 million bottles of wines that range from supermarket wines to medium quality wines with a few high end labels that win international awards as well.

Supermarket chains like Tesco are its regular customers. 58% of its packaged wines are in the bottles. Although the majority of its wines are sold in Italy, it exports a good 39% in the international markets. The emphasis has been to cut down on the bulk wine for the overseas market and sell more of packaged wine- the company claims to be doing better on the bottled wine. Keeping in line with the recession in the overseas market, the bulk wines have seen a decline of around 15% in the price at around € 0.85 a liter, but today they produce 40% less bulk wine than in 2006.

Quality in quantity and consistency in quality is what drives the company to remain competitive with the New World competitors like Chile and Australia.



Diego Planeta-
President
Settesoli

Although Tesco perhaps imports the private labels at slightly less than € 1.5 per bottle, it has some decent offerings between € 2-3.50 and could be a good source for retail wines, especially for the retail chains being set up in India for their private labels. Those importers and retailers who are interested in value-for-money wines should be interested in this co-operative.

After a quick tasting of Settesoli wines at the enoteca, it was time to get to the Golf Resort and Spa near Sciacca, our home for the next two days-with the awaiting dinner and 97 wines which including some of the wines from the five wineries we had visited today.

What a wine day it had been! Sicilian wines are on the ascent and due to the price factor and reasonable quality, accentuated by the uniqueness of their local varietals, many of these wines would make a good pair with the food, palate and the wallet, especially in India where one has to be careful because of heavy taxation.

Subhash Arora

http://www.indianwineacademy.com/item_3_372.aspx