

Born Again Sicily

by David Lawrason

Our cover this month features a Sicilian infant among the grapes, coronated Caesar-like by a wreath of vines. You'll have to pardon Sicily for feeling a little prophetic these days, because Italy's second largest wine region is on a roll.

On the map of Europe the island of Sicily sits out in the Mediterranean like a deflated soccer ball about to be booted by the toe of Italy, westward out over the goal post at Gibraltar. The image captures the playful but fiercely competitive relationship this sunny isle "enjoys" with the rest of Italy.

In Toronto recently I was dining with a 'northern' Italian producer and I mentioned my first trip to Sicily last December. It was acknowledged that strides were being made in the wines from this hot, southern land but that 'they are not really Italian wines'. In the same spirit, many Sicilians spoke of Italy as being another country, and let it be known that northern wines owed much of their character to the bulk blended Sicilian wine therein.

Indeed, the bottling of wine in Sicily, let alone the bottling of premium wine, is a development of the past decade. A handful of large producers, led by Duca di Salaparuta and Tasca d'Almerita, have been bottling for longer, but most of the production in Italy's second largest wine region was historically handled by regional co-operatives. That is changing with many co-ops adding bottling lines, and growers splintering off to open small, estate wineries focused on premium wines.

Sicily has absorbed new grapes, techniques and ideas with the greatest of ease, perhaps because throughout history Sicily's location has made it a constant target of invasion, a trade portal and a conduit of cultural exchange. They are used to renewal and rebirth, and proud of it.

Indeed the modern style of Sicilian wine is best be categorized as New World rather than old - more California or Australia than Tuscany. This is due to the very hot, dry climate. The fruit ripens effortlessly and fully, with harvest often starting in late August. Flavours are lush and fruity, textures

soft, and in the best examples there is fine complexity and structure.

The real challenge is to pick the grapes before they suffer heat damage, and get them processed without oxidizing and stewing. Many of the newer vineyards are being planted at higher altitudes or near the sea where there are cooler microclimates. New techniques like night harvesting are beginning in the most modernized vineyards.

DONNAFUGATA

The Rallo family of Marsala has abandoned the town's famous namesake fortified wine and focused exclusively on modern, international table wines under the Donnafugata name. Led by Gabriella Anca Rallo, this progressive, savvy winery is making some of Italy's best up and down the price scale, from native and international grapes, and blends. Name a modern grape growing or wine-making technique and they are doing it. Top wine is the new barrique aged 100% nero d'avola 1995 Milla e Un Note (93). One private buyer in Quebec bought all Canada's share of the 1996. Other highlights; the chard-inzolia 1998 Chiaranda Del Merlo (89), the cab-nero 1997 Tancredi (89) and the fabulous 1998 zibbibo sweetie. from the island of Pantelleria (called Ben Rye) (95).



Wine love is learned in Sicily from a very early age, especially for the son of a winery family.

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