

Observations from Sicily 2011: On assignment in Sicily (May 5, 2011)

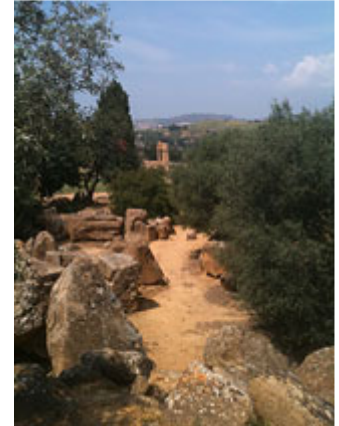
The Successful Collector – by Julian Hitner

The great chaotic island

Incredible. Inviting. Incurable. Inspirational. Such are the (English) words I think of, having just returned from my five-day sojourn in Sicily, my second visit to the largest island in the Mediterranean in less than two years.

With a population of just over five million inhabitants, Sicily is unquestionably a land of extremes: civilized, yet untamed; tangible, yet inaccessible; bountiful, yet unreliable. But this is Sicily, and to reject this land for what it is, is to deny oneself the unparalleled generosities that await those travelers with the ability to endure.

This column is dedicated to capturing such sensations as I experienced during my stay in this uniquely historical and ambiguous land, drawing my observations from its sites, its foods, and its wines.



Palermo



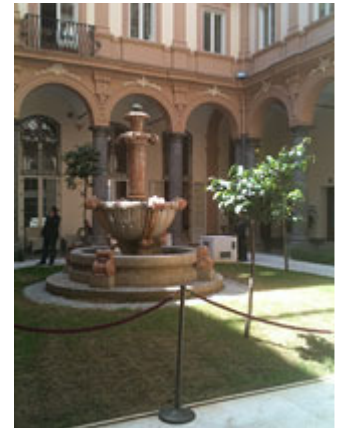
A perfect place to begin before delving into the world of Sicilian wine, Palermo, the capital city of the island, represents the epitome of Sicilian contrasts to an insatiable extreme. With a population of around 657,000, Palermo is a city trapped in its own contradictions, innately beautiful, yet (in parts) dirty to the point of disreputableness.

To roam the streets of the oldest sections of the city at the end of the day is to pay homage to a way of life that seems unaltered with the passage of time. Subtract the overhead wires, the sewers, and the streetlights and cars, and one can easily imagine what these same streets were like a century ago.

Outside a local trattoria, twenty neighbours sit down to an early Sunday dinner, laughing and exchanging remarks without a care in the world. On the table, the local white wine is clearly displayed, served out of a carafe and accompanied by all sorts of fried seafoods (common Sicilian fare) plus a few breads. Not wishing to disturb, I snap a photograph a fair distance away, right next to a collarless dog asleep near the party. There is no shortage of strays in Palermo. As a wine commentator, should I have asked about the wine? No need, for I had tasted more than my share just a few hours before.

Sicilian wines

I was staying at the marvellous Hotel Piazza Borsa in the centre of town for a buyers' and press conference for Sicilian winegrowers, and my first day in Sicily was particularly exhausting. I had just arrived from Toronto that morning. Tasting over fifty wines in just a few hours, I met with over a dozen eager producers to gain better insight as to the direction the Sicilian wine industry seems to be taking. With over 120,000 ha of vineyards, more than any other region in Italy (with only the Veneto producing more wine), it would be nothing short of an understatement to say that winegrowing is important to the Sicilian economy, one that has undergone an incredible transformation over the past ten or so years in terms of overall quality.



Beginning with the whites, which constitute a vast percentage of total wine production throughout the island, one thing became clear to me very early on: unless things dramatically change, Sicily will most likely (and increasingly) continue to be known as a source of reliably crisp, light, and refreshing everyday wines in the decades to come. And this has proved to be no bad thing, mind you, for Sicily's most prominent regional grapes have so far shown to be of more than reliable quality.



At present, Grillo seems to be the pride and joy of producers, carrying good vibrancy and lemony overtones, often accompanied by notes of green apples and wet stones. For the sake of marketing, Grillo is also often blended with Chardonnay to encourage more interest on the part of foreign consumers – i.e., those unfamiliar with Sicilian varietals.

Another grape, Catarratto, is also commonly crafted, which often tastes rather similar to Grillo, but with less minerality and intensity. Inzolia (also called Ansonica) is another prominent one, a grape of sound quality and similarities to its other two counterparts, though perhaps with a slightly honeyed element. Put together, these grapes historically made up the Marsala blend, a sorely underappreciated fortified wine now, excepting the premium bottlings, used mostly for cooking.

Of reds, Nero d'Avola is unquestionably the star varietal of Sicily, planted to more hectareage than any other red grape. Indeed, there is great potential to produce excellent everyday wines from this grape, one that tends to produce wines of dark, robust fruit, solid acidity, and more complex characteristics when treated with oak. The trouble is, many producers still seem unsure as to exactly "how much" their existing bottlings can be improved on their own to satisfy the more premium end of the market, often blending Nero d'Avola with Syrah, the second-most-planted red grape on the island, with the purpose of making it deeper and more complex. Such wines typically wind up more expensive than the unblended versions at whatever category of quality they are designated, and often really do taste a great deal better.

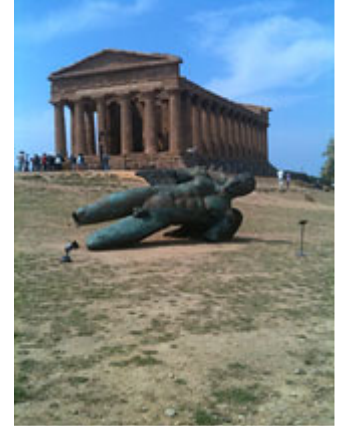


Indeed, this sort of reminds me of how it was realized in Tuscany four decades ago that Chianti Classico tasted much better when blended with Cabernet Sauvignon or Merlot. And from what I observed, this is precisely what is occurring in Sicily. Before we know it, "Super Sicilians" could turn out to be the next big thing. Or maybe not.

Syrah and (separately) the Valley of the Temples

Just as important, Syrah on its own has now emerged as one of the most prominent, best-produced varietals in Sicily, basking in the unrelenting sunny days and heat that the island is best known for, my sunburnt face and neck from the Valley of the Temples (near Agrigento) serving as a poignant illustration and reminder – the latter a subtle reference to my own idiocy for forgetting my sunblock.

Speaking of the Valley of the Temples, a quick few words on this memorizing UNESCO World Heritage are well worth some (digressional) computer screen space. Comprising the remains of seven separate Doric-style temples of ancient Greek times dating from around 600–400 BCE, exploring each of these testaments to human achievement serves, at least for me, as a fierce reminder of the how far back the history of Sicily extends. With the (comparatively) modern city of Agrigento in the distance, the contrast between the old and the new could be neither more distinct nor more humbling for just one wine commentator.



Back to Syrah: far richer than its counterparts in the northern Rhône, though not as rich as the Australian versions, the best examples of Sicilian Syrah, while having yet to develop their own unique set of flavours, are commonly awash in dark plummy fruits, licorice, leather, baked currants, vanilla, and spice. A grape with a very bright future in Sicily.

For my part, I can honestly say that I took full advantage of pairing the top Sicilian Syrahs I tasted with some of my dishes, of which a generous helping of veal escalope glassate al "Marsala" – enjoyed at the wondrous Cave Bianche Hotel on the island of Favignani – proved to be one of the most memorable.

The (current) limits of Sicilian wine

Indeed, there is no question that Sicilian producers have taken modern winemaking techniques to heart, realizing that any future successes are wholly dependent on how much they improve. But widespread improvement does not come overnight, as revealed by my visits to several distinct areas of the western half of the island. In most cases, while there were plenty of solid everyday wines to enjoy, certain shortcomings always seemed to appear, particularly with regard to the more complex, better crafted offerings.



And herein lies the next crucial stage for the overall success of the Sicilian wine industry: encouraging consumers to trade up from the abundant "entry range" choices to selections that are worth the extra cost. The question is, as of spring 2011, are more expensive Sicilian wines worth this extra cost? In short, the answer is a partial yes, in that, while there can be the occasionally excellent premium Sicilian wine, there are still only a handful which one would seriously consider procuring for more than the vast majority of current prices. Indeed, there is a lot more work to be done.

Chaotic generosity – the mighty Sicilian heart



But this does not in any way suggest any dimness of future. On the contrary, I cannot imagine a future that does not involve more persons realizing the awesome potential of the Sicilian winegrowing industry, an industry that should continue to improve as the new decade wears on.

And yet, as I hinted at earlier, to capture the essence of Sicilian culture via its foods and its wines at the present time involves more patience than some might be able to muster. Take, for instance, the last winery I visited during my stay on the island: Feudo Montoni. Now, understand that my last day in Sicily had been unbelievably hectic, beginning at 9:00 am with no chance of rest until we were to reach our hotel in Palermo near midnight. So, when the driver couldn't find the place and we (the group) had to wait inside of the bus for more than forty minutes

for persons from the winery to come and get us, suffice it to say that I was more than just a little agitated.

However, when we finally arrived at Montoni later in the evening, we were given a welcome that I shall never forget: a dozen-plus persons of remarkable friendliness and hospitality, each apologetic, albeit mostly in broken English, for our having to wait on the bus for so long. In short, my heart melted in a second. How could I remain upset with such genuinely kind-hearted individuals? Plus the olive oil was terrific, the cheeses most interesting, and the wines nothing to scoff at. Ultimately, the "waiting incident" and aftermath simply served to remind me, once again, of the contrasts that constitute Sicily: generous, yet chaotic; inviting, yet incorrigible; inspirational, yet (at least at present) only partially obtainable. In the end, I wouldn't have it any other way.



A few gems for collectors

Red Wines

Donnafugata 2006 Mille e Una Notte, Contessa Entellina DOC, Sicily, Italy: The flagship wine of Donnafugata, the 2006 Mille e una Notte unquestionably ranks as one of the finest (Sicilian) red wines of the vintage. Brilliant, dark-opaque ruby in colour, it starts off with beautiful, moderate notes of toasted oak that shortly give way to cherried mocha and currants, "dark" cedarwood, roasted meat, leather, underbrush, and spice. Complex, with delicious, finely integrated fruit (still very young), firm tannins, balanced acidity, and an elegant, polished hint of cherried currants (ever so slightly rustic) on the finish. Successfully ambitious, first-rate wine of really satisfying calibre and elegance. 90% Nero d'Avola, the rest "other grapes." Now-2016++.

(Julian Hitner, *The Successful Collector*, April 2011)

90+ *Price Unavailable* *Noble Estates (Private Order)*



Nicosia 2007 Sosta Tre Santi, IGT Sicilia, Italy: For its inaugural vintage, the 2007 Sosta Tre Santi can most certainly be considered one of the top new premium red wines that Sicily has to offer. Brilliant, dark-opaque ruby, it features enticing aromas of finely toasted oak, black mocha, blackberries, "dark" incense, wild cherried violets, and just a hint of white pepper, vanilla, and spice. Complex, with delicious, opulent fruit, firm tannins, balanced acidity, and a long, very

focused hint of dark mocha and violet black cherries on the finish. An excellent offering of real depth, intensity, and calibre. 80% Nero d'Avola and 20% Syrah – these two grapes really seem to go well together. Now–2018. (Julian Hitner, *The Successful Collector*, April 2011)

90+ *Price Unavailable Bassoalto Inc. (Private Order)*

Caruso e Minini 2008 Syrah Riserva, Delia Nivolelli DOC, Sicily, Italy: The top wine from Caruso e Minini and definitely one to watch out for, the 2008 Syrah Riserva is a truly delicious wine of real substance and style. Brilliant, dark-opaque ruby in colour, the wine is finely toasted, and offers enticing aromas of eucalyptus and baked brambleberries, giving way to plums, licorice, leather, tobacco, incense, and a hint of vanilla and spice. Complex, with delicious supple fruit, firm tannins, balanced acidity, and a lingering hint of smooth currants and licorice on the finish.

Exemplary effort and follow-through. Are such wines the future of premium Sicilian Syrah? Let's hope so. Now–2018. (Julian Hitner, *The Successful Collector*, April 2011)

90 *Price Unavailable Lamprecht International (Private Order)*

Firriato 2008 Harmonium, IGT Sicilia, Italy: Definitely a wine worth checking out, the 2008 Harmonium is the flagship red wine of Firriato and one of the best examples of pure (100%) Nero d'Avola I have probably ever tasted. Brilliant, dark-opaque ruby in colour, it delivers enticing aromas of "stewed" mocha, currants, raisins, cloves, forest floor, and spice. Complex, with very fine, generous fruit, firm tannins, balanced acidity, and a long, delicious hint of spicy baked plums on the finish. Quite an inviting, opulent wine, one that is more than likely to turn a few heads.

Now–2016++. (Julian Hitner, *The Successful Collector*, April 2011)

89++ *Price Unavailable Wine World (Private Order)*

Lombardo Salvatore 2007 Eimi, IGT Sicilia, Italy: One of several Sicilian wineries working hard to establish a name for its more premium wines, the 2007 Eimi ranks as a great find for collectors in search of something off the beaten track. Brilliant, opaque purple-ruby in colour, the wine is finely toasted, offering lovely aromas of baked plums and purple currants, stewed prunes, forest floor, incense, and spice. Complex, with assertive, richer-styled fruit, firm tannins, balanced acidity, and a deliciously solid hint of purple plums (slightly baked) on the finish. Quite a powerful, well-crafted wine, with lots of positive attributes to show for it. 100% Nero d'Avola. Now–2017. (Julian Hitner, *The Successful Collector*, April 2011)

89+ *Price Unavailable Not Available in Ontario*

Feudo Montoni 2008 Vrucara, IGT Sicilia, Italy: The star red wine of Feudo Montoni, the 2008 Vrucara is crafted from 100% Nero d'Avola. Brilliant, dark ruby-red currant in colour, the wine is definitely fashioned in more of a baked style, with pleasant notes of stewed cherries and plums, cloves, (some) cinnamon, and spice. On the palate: lovely dimension of fruit, with firm tannins, balanced acidity, and a hint of baked plums and cloves on the finish. A fairly robust wine, yet it seems to work well. Now–2015++. (Julian Hitner, *The Successful Collector*, April 2011)

88 *Price Unavailable LCBO Direct (Private Order)*

Dessert Wines

Lombardo Salvatore 2008 Passa di Nero, IGT Sicilia, Italy: The first passito-styled wine crafted from 100% Nero d'Avola I have ever tasted, and an unmistakably inviting one at that. Brilliant, opaque ruby in colour, the 2008 Passa di Nero, indeed a most unique offering, exhibits wonderfully attractive notes of sweet baked plums (somewhat fragrant), raisins, blueberries, cloves, and spice. Rather complex, with gorgeously sweet, exceptional fruit, balanced acidity, and a very long, glossy hint of sweet blueberries and plums on the finish. Incredible (and most unusual) dessert wine of unequivocal uniqueness, intensity, and quality. A wine that serves to remind us how many different

types of offerings are actually out there. Now–2020++. (Julian Hitner, *The Successful Collector*, April 2011)

92+ *Price Unavailable Not Available in Ontario*

Donnafugata 2008 Ben Ryé, Passito di Pantelleria DOC, Sicily, Italy: One of the finest, most alluring dessert wines Sicily has to offer, the 2008 Ben Ryé lives up every bit to its reputation as a sticky of superlative quality and charm. Starbright, medium orange in colour, the wine displays intensely exotic scents of marmalade and apricots, switching to orange peel, tangerines, honeysuckle, and a beautiful hint of (very subtle) nuts and spice. Complex, with amazingly full, pure sweet fruit, balanced acidity, and a lingering, immensely satisfying hint of fresh marmalade and honey on the finish. Exemplary wine of remarkable purity, freshness, and vibrancy. 100% Zibibbo (Moscato d'Alessandria). Now–2022+. (Julian Hitner, *The Successful Collector*, April 2011)

92 *Price Unavailable Noble Estates (Private Order)*

Ottoventi 2008 Scibà, IGT Sicilia Passito, Italy: Superlative passito from Ottoventi, the 2008 Scibà is a wine of remarkable expression and polish. Starbright, light gold in colour, the wine starts out with uniquely understated scents of waxy honeysuckle and lemon blossom, giving way to fresh marmalade, maple, candy drops, and spice. Complex, with lovely, expressive sweet fruit, balanced acidity, and a satisfying hint of marmalade and lemon drops on the finish. An excellent offering of marvellous harmony, integration, and polish. 100% Zibibbo (Moscato d'Alessandria). Now–2028++. (Julian Hitner, *The Successful Collector*, April 2011)

90++ *Price Unavailable Not Available in Ontario*

Fortified Wine

Caruso e Minini, Marsala Superiore Riserva, Sicily, Italy: Experiencing something of a renaissance in recent years, higher-end Marsala is beginning to garner the attention of sommeliers and wine collectors worldwide, with examples such as those of Caruso e Minini leading the way. Starbright, medium orange-brown in colour, the Marsala Superiore Riserva delivers (paradoxically) wonderful scents of rancid brown sugar and toffee, sea salt, nutmeg, lime, and a hint of iodine and spice. Complex, with beautifully vibrant, somewhat tangy fruit, balanced acidity, and a refined hint of brown sugar and iodine on the finish. Truly well crafted, balanced, and characterful. Not to be confused with all that uninteresting Marsala typically used for cooking. Now–2025++. (Julian Hitner, *The Successful Collector*, April 2011)

90 *Price Unavailable Lamprecht International (Private Order)*