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## WINES OF THE TIMES

### Flavors of an Island, Easy to Enjoy

By ERIC ASIMOV

IN the 19th century the nation of Italy was created by joining regions that had maintained uncomfortably separate political existences. Depending on which Italian you ask, the union may or may not have succeeded. For understanding Italian wines, though, it's fair to say it is a failure.

Too often, deep-seated regional differences among wines are lost as they are lumped together under the term Italian. While a love of wine and food may bind together Italians from Alto Adige in the north to those in Apulia in the south, the wines from each region are as different as the local grapes, soil, climate and culture. You may already know and love Amarones (from Veneto) or Chiantis (from Tuscany), but neither, as the Dining section's wine panel found out, will help you much in deciphering the wines of Sicily.

We approached our tasting of 25 Sicilian reds with great anticipation. Few wine regions have undergone as thorough a transformation as Sicily has in the last 20 years, and few are as unfamiliar. For Florence Fabricant and me, along with our guests, Howard Horvath, the wine director at Esca restaurant, and Scott Mayger, a consultant who worked most recently at Barbuto in the West Village, the tasting was a chance to reacquaint ourselves with a category that we find in restaurants all too rarely.

Even in ancient times, Sicily was known for producing vast quantities of wine. But in the last two decades

the tanks of cheap blending wine have given way to wines that at their best are fruity and embraceable yet retain the character and personality of the island.

It's not easy for a region that has been making wines out of the spotlight for centuries to give up the old ways, but in wine zones like Faro in the northeast of Sicily, Cerasuolo di

#### Humble grapes show some personality.

Vittoria in the south and Contessa Entellina in the west, winemakers have modernized their farming techniques and improved their methods in the cellar. Occasionally, the urge to modernize has gone too far, and producers have eliminated their local grapes in favor of international varieties like cabernet sauvignon, merlot and syrah. These are not necessarily bad wines. We all liked a 2001 merlot from Planeta, one of the biggest Sicilian producers. It was well made and enjoyable, but not a wine with much soul.

No, the most distinctive Sicilian wines continue to be made primarily with the traditional Sicilian grapes, most notably nero d'Avola, which makes deep, rich wines, and, to a far lesser degree, frappato, lighter and more aromatic, and nerello Mascarese, which is used primarily in the Faro zone. Some have speculated that nero d'Avola is related to syrah,

and have even gone so far as to suggest that the name syrah was derived from the Sicilian city Siracusa. Perhaps, but that connection seems tenuous to me, even if one of the wines we liked best, the 2002 Morgante Don Antonio Riserva, which was made entirely of nero d'Avola, reminded me of an Australian shiraz, though one with enhanced acidity that cried out for tomato sauce.

When tasting a wide range of wines from an up-and-coming region like Sicily, you expect a fair share of clunkers. Although we did find a few bottles that tasted like assembly-line confections or of baked, over-ripe fruit, the overall quality was exceptional — "across-the-board drinkable," as Mr. Horvath put it.

Our favorite bottle was the 2000 Nerobufaleffj (neh-ro-boof-uh-LEFF-ee) from Gulfi, made entirely of nero d'Avola. Like most of these wines, it was easy to enjoy. The Gulfi and four other wines in our Top 10 carried the designation IGT, for Indicazione Geografica Tipica, a term that gives government sanction to wines that meet less stringent rules regarding grape varieties or areas of production than required for wines that carry regional names, like Contessa Entellina or Faro.

Many forward-looking producers opt for IGT status rather than be bound by the regional rules. But sometimes those rules encourage experimentation.

Our No. 2 wine, the graceful 2002 Tancredi from Donnafugata, meets the standards for the Contessa Entellina designation, even though it is an untraditional blend of 70 percent nero d'Avola and 30 percent cabernet sauvignon. That zone was created in 1993, when blending experiments were well under way. As a result, grapes as diverse as cabernet, syrah and pinot noir can be part of the mix.

Maybe the authorities were on to something, because the cabernet lends the Tancredi subtlety and an attractive cedary tinge. By contrast, Donnafugata's 2001 Mille e Una Notte, a big, ink , powerful wine that was No. 6 on our list, is 90 percent nero d'Avola and 10 percent other local grapes. It is also twice as expensive as the Tancredi.

The Donnafugatas were not the only example of price not quite correlating with quality.

## Tasting Report: Big, Earthy and Rich With Fruit

### Donnafugata Tancredi Contessa Entellina 2002

\$27

★★½

Subtle and light-bodied, though with plenty of fruit and an herbal, cedary aroma. (William Grant & Sons, New York)

### Donnafugata Mille e Una Notte Contessa Entellina 2001

\$60

★★

Inky black with big, rich flavors and plenty of acidity and tannins. (William Grant & Sons, New York)

#### WHAT THE STARS MEAN:

(None) Pass It By  
★ Passable  
★★ Good  
★★★ Excellent  
★★★★ Extraordinary

Ratings reflect the panel's reaction to wines, which were tasted with names and vintages concealed. The panelists this week are Eric Asimov; Florence Fabricant; Howard Horvath, wine director at Esca restaurant, and Scott Mayger, a wine consultant. The tasted wines represent a selection generally available in good retail shops and restaurants. Prices are those paid in liquor shops in the New York region.

Tasting Coordinator: Bernard Kirsch

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