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ANGELA IN ITALY - NOTES FROM A WINE-TASTIC TRIP TO SICILY

OCTOBER 07, 2017 IN BOTTLE BITCHES FIELD TRIP

I've recently returned from the beautiful island of Sicily. I'd already previewed the impressive contrasting landscape and tasted the sweet gelato, having visited there in my teens on family holidays, but now it was time to delve into the wine scene.

Trying to decide where to spend our honeymoon wasn't hard: Italy had to be the destination, as it embraces everything we love about travel; food and drink culture, and a mix of vast landscapes, cities and history. As a wine lover, it also provides an abundance of wine styles and a treasure trove of native varietals. Not only that, but Italian wine has just been getting better and better with the increase in winemaking technology, experimental plantings, blending and the embracing historical soils.



We actually started our journey to Sicily via stays in both Campania and Basilicata, before making our way over the Messina Strait to the island.

What was interesting was the contrast in wine styles against the more elegant and finessed wines we'd had in the past in the central and Northern regions, where the famous Chianti, Brunello and Barolo's hail. Campania, Puglia, Basilicata, Calabria, and Sicily were once the workhorse wine regions of Italy, dominated by co-op's turning out heaps of bland, high alcohol wines.

That, however, has all changed. What we find is the embracing of indigenous varieties such as Greco, Aglianico, Fiano and Falanghina, producing wines with a rustic edge full of juicy and fresh flavours, helped by more recent insight into vineyard techniques. What you find foremost in the south is incredible value for wines; it might be hard to find a decent Chianti in the sub-£10 price bracket these days, but this amount will get you a rather impressive Primitivo or Negroamaro. Pop another £5 on top of that, and you'll be captivated with a bottle of Aglianico del Vulture – a full bodied DOCG from Basilicata, with its classic chocolate and cherry aromas, and rustic and tannic structure that has potential to age.

But let's head over to the island of Sicily, and discover what it was that made this one of my most exciting wine regions to visit.

For starters, wine has been made in Sicily for millennia. There is evidence that Mycenaean traders cultivated grapes here as early as 1,500 BC and when the Greeks began to settle in Sicily in the 8th century BC, when they brought their love of the vine with them.

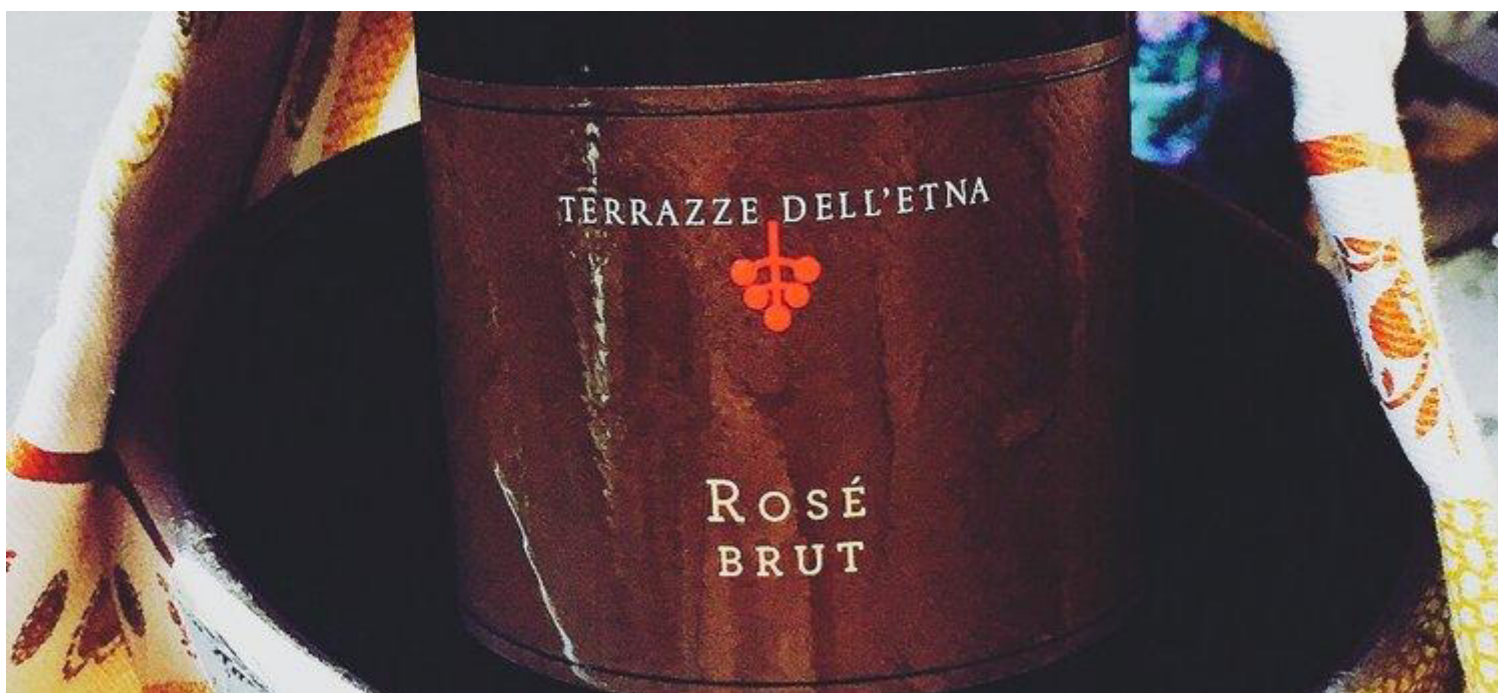
Centuries of cultural influences in food and drink followed as a variety of immigrants settled, but it wasn't until 1773 that John Woodhouse began producing what destined to become one of the island's best loved products; Marsala. He understood that the local wine could be transformed using a similar solera system used in Jerez to make Sherry. Adding alcohol would not only fortify the wine, but also help it survive the sea journey back to England - meaning that it became an instant success on the British Market.

Wine production flourished from here however, for most of the 20th century, it was used to produce enormous quantities of grapes to be exported elsewhere in Italy for bulk production. Now, with a viticulture research station in Palermo, subsidies from Brussels, and with investments and interest from dynamic winemakers, it's become a focus for an exciting wine scene!

So what to look for?

You'll find both single varietal wines in Sicily as well as some interesting blending with 'international varieties' like Merlot, Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon. Most common on our shelves will probably be Sicily's calling card of **Nero D'Avola** - a red wine made in the South-Eastern region of the island in the province of Syracuse, and literally translating as 'Black of Avola'. It produces medium to full-bodied, deeply coloured wines, with juicy flavours and a silky texture - you may often see it blended with Merlot. If you like Malbec, give this wine a go!





Another red to look for would be **Etna Rosso**: its historic soils, and an influx of growers and winemakers over recent decades has meant that the potential of Etna's unique volcanic land is finally being fully realised. There is a handful of different wines being made here: Etna Spumante, Etna Bianco, Etna Rosso Riserva... But the one you'll probably find on our shelves is that of Etna Rosso, a blend of the varietals Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Cappuccio. These wines are often described as being akin to the Nebbiolo's of Piedmont, and if you prefer your wines to be more of the light Pinot Noir styles, these could be for you - pale reds often perfumed with ripe berry fruit and gamey flavours.

WANT TO KNOW WHAT THE BOTTLE BITCHES THOUGHT OF
NICOSIA ETNA ROSSO? **LISTEN TO OUR PODCAST ON SICILIAN
WINE TO FIND OUT!**

In terms of whites, Inzolia, Grillo, Cataratto, as well as Chardonnay are those to look for. There is a vast difference in styles and indeed a variety of winemaking techniques, including blending and oak ageing. My bet for an interesting Sicilian white experience would be **Grillo**, which was an almost forgotten varietal until the 1960's. Grillo produces crisp and savoury wines, with notes of citrus and peach as well as passion fruit and herbs - one for the lovers of Sauvignon Blanc! It's also noted that wines from vines planted in hot regions close to the sea, such as Marsala, have a saline note to the taste, perfect if you find you have a love for wines such as Muscadet and Vinho Verde.

For me, one of Sicily's prized offerings is a wine made on the smaller island of Pantelleria named **Passito di Pantelleria**: a sweet wine of rich caramel, honey, tangerine and apricot notes, made from Zibbibo grapes that have been dried in the sun to increase their sugar concentration. A similar wine is also made in Noto, in the South East of the main island, that is slightly more delicate with honey and lemon notes.

So what to look for in the shops?

Some of my favourite wines are made by well-known producers Planeta and Donnafugata, more on the latter below when we visited their historic cellars in Marsala. But be assured you can get great value from the offerings on the shelves, and with great wines at price points around £7-12, you can have fun experimenting with the variety of styles on offer.

Back to our own journey around the island.

We started with a stay in the South-Eastern city of Noto, one of Sicily's most beautiful Baroque towns, known for its experimental culinary scene and indeed wine bars, with an abundance of offerings from Avola and Cerasuolo di Vittoria. It was here that we enjoyed a local wine by Feudo Maccari called Olli, a wine made with Grillo, producing a deep golden, medium bodied white that was full of peach and melon - perfect for the pistachio crusted tuna pasta at restaurant Dammuso. Another delight was Planeta's sweet wine Passito di Noto, a 100% Moscato Bianco wine which was light, delicately sweet with candied fruits and honey.

Heading to the North West of the island, hugging the mountain of Etna and passing through miles of vines towards Palermo, Sicily's bustling city offered a contrast to the quiet historical sights of the South. Palermo is like no other Italian city, a melting-pot of varied cultural influences, markets that are almost Moroccan in style, and pristine Baroque architecture alongside crumbling monuments. However, like Florence, Verona and Barcelona, hipster and student hot-spots offer some great enotecas (wine bars) and cocktail haunts to hunt out and find – many not in the usual guide books, but take a wander along the historical walks and you're sure to find some interesting bars!

Moving away from wine, I couldn't write this piece and not mention a bar we stumbled upon, **Bar Colletti**, and what might have been the best Negroni (served in a smoking dome!) I have experienced, all for the sum of 5 euros! Potent, complex, dangerous when you ask for a second, and absolutely divine! We also found an incredible traditional-method sparkling rosé made with Pinot Nero and Nerello Mascalese by Terrazze Dell'Etna, which was delicate with strawberry and cream notes. We're not really seeing the sparkling wines of Sicily on our shelves yet, but watch this space...



A highlight of our trip away had to be a visit to the historical cellars of **Donnafugata in Marsala**. Donnafugata have 3 wineries situated over the island, and have been producing wines since 1851. The initiative of this passionate family has helped develop the style and the perception of Sicilian wine all over the world. The name Donnafugata refers to the novel by Tomasi di Lampedusa entitled *Il Gattopardo* (The Leopard). A name that means “donna in fuga” (woman in flight), and refers to the story of a queen who found refuge in the part of Sicily where the company's vineyards are located today. They were one of the first families to begin making high-quality table wine when sales of traditional Marsala started to decline and, ironically, even though this winery is situated in the famous town of Sicily's sweet Marsala wines, they don't make any of it. Instead, they focus on the expression of the island's still table wines.

What is apparent first and foremost when visiting here is the idea of history and family. Now in their 5th generation, pictures of the generations adorn the walls of the winery and visitor centre, and the grand tasting room still remains in the style that Gabriella Rallo designed. We chose to do their Donna Gabriella tasting on our visit, and enjoyed 5 of their iconic and diverse wines, paired

with traditional Sicilian fayre (see below for my tasting notes on these) which was the perfect way to spend our penultimate day. I can highly recommend a visit to Donnafugata to anyone planning a trip to Sicily, or simply anyone with a passion for wine and food, as this is a must-visit region on the list!



TASTING NOTES

- **Donnafugata Brut 2012 - Marsala**

A sparkling made from Pinot Noir and Chardonnay in the traditional method. It had a fresh lemon and brioche scent, and the palate was soft with vanilla and citrus. (Not available in UK)

- **Sur Sur Grillo 2016 - Marsala**

This is a fresh and fruity Grillo wine that has crisp tropical and elderflower notes. There was a very refreshing pineapple note that lifted the wine and made it incredibly easy to sip away with!

- **Chiarandà 2015 - Contessa Entellina DOC**

This 100% Chardonnay was beautifully aged in oak, so offered rich flavours of peaches, apricots and pear with a slight nutty hint. We enjoyed this wine so much we brought some home with us!

- **Mille e Una Notte 2012 - Marsala**

A blend of [Nero d'Avola](#), Petit Verdot, Syrah, and other grapes was a burst of blackberry and plum notes with delicate spice.

- **Ben Rye – Passito di Pantelleria**

One of Donnafugata's most iconic wines made with 100% Zibbibo. I remember having this at a trade show around 5 years ago, an encounter that started my love affair for the winery. This sweet wine is so complex with honey, spice, caramel, but it's the dried apricot that steals the show - perfect for a pairing of creamy ricotta cannoli!

Note – All the above wines, with the exception of the Brut Sparkling, are imported into the UK by Liberty Wines and available at various stockists.



SOUTHERN ITALIAN TOP PICKS

- Lunch at Cera Una Volta in Potenza for THE BEST pasta we have ever eaten! (pictured above) Don't expect anyone to speak English or anything to be written in English in this quirky, middle-of-nowhere establishment for locals.
- Dinner at Buonvincino in Amalfi, specifically for the mussel soup - messy and mesmerizingly tasty.
- Dinner at Dammuso in Noto, for an incredible wine list and a seafood menu of dreams.
- Bar Colletti for smoked negroni's and free evening buffets!
- Dinner at La Dodici Lune in Matera, to feel like you are part of the family and try all the tasting plates.
- Fan of the Godfather? A visit to Bar Vitelli in Savoca is a must for movie fans (side note – food is very expensive for what it is, and the drinks very strong!)
- Gelato at Casa Stagnitta in Palermo. I think my search for the world's best pistachio ice cream is over: actual DOC Bronte Pistachio, Sicily's 'Green Gold' that are only harvested every 2 years, go into the creamiest of gelato's ever and, thinking about it now... I'm heading off again, who's with me?

CIAO!

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