

R

rising star
wine region



Family-owned producers such as Donnafugata (pictured here) and Planeta are investing in vineyards across the island, dedicated to different grapes and styles of wines.

RENAISSANCE ISLAND

SICILY FINDS ITS STAR POTENTIAL IN ANCIENT GRAPES & MODERN THINKING

BY LIZA B. ZIMMERMAN

Few regions in the world have seen so many cultural influences as Sicily. The Greeks, Phoenicians and Romans have all left their agricultural legacies over the centuries. Unfortunately for Sicily, the island's wine legacy through much of the 20th century was enigmatic at best.

This century, however, is a different story. The large, diverse island has proven to be one of the wine world's great recent renaissance stories. Sicily retains plenty of ancient credibility as home to more than 50 indigenous grape varieties. And its modern stamp of quality is evident in 23 DOCs and one DOCG, enhanced by a slew of good press and growing clout on-premise.

Shifting Gears

For a long spell in the 1970s and '80s, Corvo was about the only brand from Sicily with a notable foothold in America. Inky, fruit-forward Nero d'Avolas put the island on the wine map two decades ago when



AT A GLANCE

- ▶ Sicily is about 9,927 square miles, or about the size of Maryland.
- ▶ More than 50 native grapes are made into wine on the island.
- ▶ 86% of the island's wines are made from native grapes.
- ▶ Most producers grow at least 9 different grape varieties.
- ▶ Sicily has 23 DOCs and 1 DOCG (Cerasuolo di Vittoria).
- ▶ 57% of Sicily's wines are exported, and the U.S. is one of the top markets.

Southern Italian-centric importers, such as Winebow, started bringing Sicilian wines in as affordable by-the-bottle and glass choices.

In the past five years, cool-climate reds from the volcanic soils of Etna have been attracting attention, particularly Nerello Mascalese. Top labels include Tenuta della Terre Nere, Benanti, Cottanera and Passopisciaro.

On top of scoring a wave of good press and somm love for their collective commitment to

indigenous varieties, the island also has become a model for organic viticulture; examples include Cantine Cos, Occhipinti and Tenata della Terre Nere. Honing a retro edge, many producers have revived their ancient, gravity-flow wineries, called palmenti; and a handful are returning to the traditional method of aging wine in clay amphora.

Of course, (an island ideal for grape-growing) makes it all possible. Rich



Alessio Planeta says that Beaujolais's Morgon is an inspiration for his winery's Cerasuolo di Vittoria, and Spain's Priorat is a reference for their Nero d'Avola.

soils throughout the island, combined with a near constant breeze and hilly topography, work together to produce powerful and well-balanced wines. A high concentration of limestone in some areas, as well as many vineyards planted at high altitudes—especially around Etna—impart many of the whites with mineral notes and good structure. They also help to create elegant reds made from both native—especially Frappato and Perricone—and international grapes.

Signatures

- Lush and fruit-forward Nero d'Avolas—some of which compare to Spanish Priorats—from Southeastern area around Noto. Nero d'Avola remains arguably Sicily's most important native red variety.

- Delicate and complex reds, grown on volcanic, high-altitude terroir around Etna.

- Cerasuolo di Vittoria, Sicily's sole DOCG wine, a sleek blend of dark Nero d'Avola and bright Frappato.

What's New

Ever-more crisp, and fruit-forward whites are popping up all around the island, at great prices and from a mix of native and international varieties. Top among native grapes: Grillo, Catarratto and Insolia in single-varietal bottlings; they are blended deftly with Chardonnay as well. The emergence of high-quality Sicilian whites on the scene is long overdue and has been welcomed on national and international markets. The aromatic white Zibibbo in particular, often called the Müller-Thurgau of Italy, is being used to produce some stone fruit- and floral-driven whites that work beautifully with Asian food.



Leading Labels

Donnafugata, Firriato, Planeta, Tasca d'Almerita—which is part of the Regaleali estate—Stemmari and Cusumano are among consistent producers with broad distribution. Almost all these major producers have multiple vineyards, and the wines deliver value across price points.

Some of them also have Northern Italian viticultural mother houses, which often have deep pockets and decades of wine making perspective. For example, Zisola, outside of Noto, was founded by Filippo Mazzei in 2002; Trentino's Mezzacorona opened Feudo Arancio the previous year; and the owner of Castellare di Castellina in Chianti also runs Feudi del Pisciotto.

Rising Stars

- Cool-climate reds from Etna as well as lesser-known reds made from grapes such as Frappato, Perricone and Nerello Mascalese.

- Single-varietal Syrahs estate such as Peter Vinding-Diers produced in Melilli and Firriato's Perricone-based Ribeca.

- Organic wines are a strong trend across Sicily, and speaks to the viticultural commitment.

Selling Points

- Large-scale producers like Feudo Arancio are making great wines that retail for \$10 to \$12 a bottle.

- In the red-hot Red Blend category, Sicilian examples such as Planeta's La Segreta stand out not only for their value, but also for their style—notably dry compared to many of the new California red blends.

- Like many Mediterranean wines, Sicilian wines are known for their food friendliness. ■



Most have an image of Sicily as hot, red wine-focused territory, but today white grapes are responsible for some of its most exciting wines.

"Cool nights, our unique soil composition, and ocean proximity provide ideal conditions for white wine," says Antonio Rallo, of Donnafugata Winery and President of Wines of Sicily. Of the many indigenous grapes being rediscovered and rescued from extinction, whites are some of most fascinating and successful, he adds.

Wines of Sicily recently launched a promotional campaign for Grillo ("Go Grillo"), a fresh, aromatic white grape which currently accounts for 10% of plantings on the island. "The U.S. consumer really loves this style; Grillo has become our number two export to America, second to Nero d'Avola," Rallo says. "It's approachable and crisp like Pinot Grigio, but with more character."

Planeta was an early believer in the island's potential for outstanding whites: "When we arrived to Etna, 85% of the plantings were red and we planted 55% white grapes—we've been very pleased with the results," reports Patricia Toth, Planeta's winemaker. "Greco bianco expresses incredible minerality and freshness from the upper hillsides of the Sambuca area. Carricante, once used only for bulk production, has proved capable of elegant, bright, aromatic whites in volcanic soils of Etna." Planeta was also the first to plant Chardonnay and Fiano in Sicily in the 1980s and '90s; both have thrived.

Sicily's reputation for stand-out whites is no secret to Italians: There has been big investment by white wine specialists from Northern Italy who recognize the potential, and the island's whites are among the most distributed throughout Italy: "It's rare to find wine from Tuscany or Piedmont in Sicily, but not the other way around," says Rallo.

—KRISTEN BIELER