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Wine-ing My Way Through Sicily0

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Wine-ing My Way Through Sicily

By Sherry Amatenstein

“Without Sicily, Italy creates no image in the soul: here is the key to everything. – Goethe

Sicily, the dazzling Mediterranean island located at the toe of Italy’s boot, variously governed by Greeks, Arabs, Normans, and Spain, is fast becoming a major wine destination rivaling Italy, its current ruler!

This is unsurprising considering Sicily’s wine making goes back 4000 years and counting, and is responsible for one-sixth of all wine making in Italy. Indeed the island boasts the hot, bone-dry summers and mild (between 50 to 60 degrees), damp winters that are perfect winemaking conditions.

Yet for decades Sicily squandered these wonderful conditions – mass-producing cheap vino sold off in vats for blending, which gave connoisseurs cause to drown their sorrows in (superior!) wine.

Happily the 1990s saw a radical shift as local producers replaced industrial vineyards with low-yield vines and began focusing on indigenous grapes previously given short shrift, finally offering a delicious alternative to the international varietals – merlot, anyone?? – being pumped out by most other Italian wine merchants.



Planeta vendemmia, courtesy of Planeta winery

Among the most renowned of these high-end local producers is Planeta (www.planeta.it/en). With six wineries situated around the island, this boutique enterprise was created by a family with winemaking roots stemming from the 15th century. Planeta became a commercial enterprise in the 1990s, in 2014 winning Best Harvest in Sicily. One of their most visited wineries is the 60-hectare Buonivini, which means ‘Good Wines’. Buonivini is home to the Nero d’Avola-based red Santa Cecilia DOC wine and the unfortified sweet wine Passito di Noto.

Visiting the winery feels like visiting a country home – albeit a sprawling tangerine colored one bordered by 120 acres of vines. Music wafts through the estate and local artists create and showcase work in the Cantina ‘Invisible’ winery – a light, airy, high tech space completely underground lined with row upon row of oak barrels destined to turn into wine that is truly bellissimo. Tours and tastings are available.

We overnighted near another Planeta estate, Ulmo, in southern Sicily, where we sampled exquisite chardonnay. Exquisite also describes La Foresteria (www.planetaestate.it), a 14-room seaside boutique mini-resort that began as the answer to where the Planeta family could house all the wine trade guests clamoring for visits. Surrounded by olive groves and vineyards, each room is uniquely styled and overlooks a view with a lustrous, multi-hued sunset. The naturally excellent wine is partnered with food that has you indulging long after your stomach cries for respite. End the meal with the icy cold lemon liqueur Limoncello.

Another superb family-run winery is Donnafugata (www.visit.donnafugata.it/en-us), located in Western Sicily. From humble beginnings in 1853 when the Rallo family began bottling Marsala wine, Donnafugata now boasts a 168-acre winery on the windswept island of Pantelleria where you can taste perhaps the best dessert wine in Italy – Ben Ryé Passito di Pantelleria AKA decadence in a glass! The winery also runs Contessa Entellina vineyards- home to 17 unique-for-the-soil-and-climate varietals. Nor surprisingly, many of the wine are award winners.



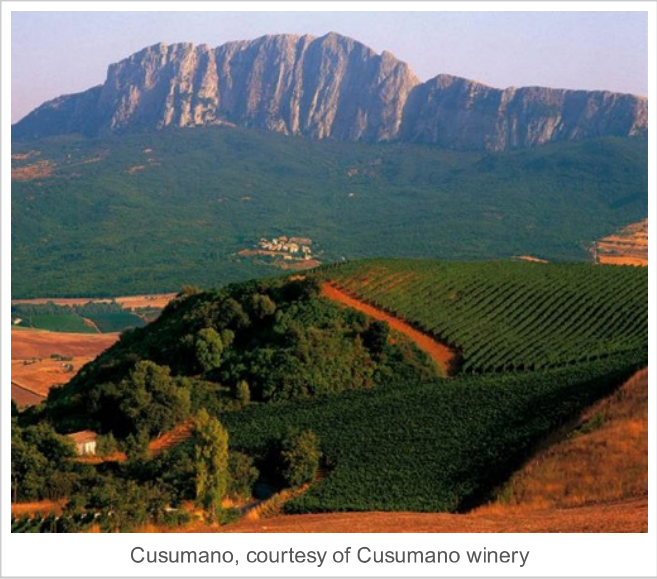
Donnafugata Cantina Marsala, courtesy of Donnafugata winery

Our Donnafugata wine immersion included a tour of the now historic cellar in Marsala where the wines have literary names like Tancerdi for the Rossini opera and A Thousand and One Nights after the Middle Eastern folk tales. Naturally there are tastings of six glorious wines and lunch. Try the SurSur – a single- variety white fragrant Grillo, whose name recalls the song of the crickets heard throughout the Sicilian countryside.

For a totally different experience, visit Palermo (www.palermo.com) – Sicily’s largest and grittiest city. Here the drivers are ruder than in New York, and the heralded food markets feature stall after stall, manned by passionate vendors, stacked with delicacies like tarrochi (blood oranges), cheeses, sardines and whole fish... Indeed, it felt like the eye of a tuna followed us down the narrow

labyrinthine alleys. This ancient city is a visual cacophony of jammed together, ever-present cathedrals, which showcase the legacy of Palermo’s numerous invaders from the Greeks to the Romans to the Spanish.

We stayed at Palermo’s 4-star Grand Hotel Piazza Borsa (www.piazzaborsa.it/index.php/en), 1300 feet from the Baroque square of Quattro Canti, and a 15-minute walk to the harbor.



Cusumano, courtesy of Cusumano winery

Another winery I still dream about weeks and weeks after my Sicilian sojourn sadly ended is near Palermo – Cusamano at Partinico. (www.cusumano.it/en). While it dates back just to 2001, Cusamano also has an intimate family imprint as it is run by brothers Alberto and Diego Cusamano, who took it over from father Francesco.

The brothers now have several holdings throughout Sicily but the Partinico winery is clearly a pride and joy. Partinico is located in a 19th century “baglio” – a fortified country residence erected around a large inner court, with a water well, and enclosed by an outer wall. There is an eye-candy, calming garden and the dining area – a study in white – has a spacious, modern feel. The wines are revered due

to the brothers’ emphasis on innovative technology coupled with an intimate knowledge of Sicilian terrain and how to create the ideal microclimate.

Cusamano’s flagship wine Noà, a red wine awash with the grapes Nero d’Avola, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon, was the first wine ever to receive a Tre Bicchieri award on its very first vintage. The wine pairings are indescribably magical, as they are served with specialties ranging from spaghetti with sea urchins to pasta with pine nuts or pistachios to fish, fish, and more amazing fish!

The only sad part about touring Sicily’s burgeoning wine scene was not having time to experience it all! This sadness of course was a great excuse to ship home some bottles of Grillo and Nero d’Avola!

BEFORE YOU GO: For a wonderful overview of Sicilian wine check out www.winesofsicily.com. And remember to look for ‘Sicilia DOC’ on the label at local wine shops.