

Spotlight on Sicily: Understanding the Island and Its Wines

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► *Vineyard views at Stemmari* (Allie Albanese)

Four hour dinners. Long, lingering conversations. Wine glasses that never empty and dinner plates always full. This was the norm in my house growing up, where my Sicilian father instilled in me the same deep love of togetherness, family, food and wine that he learned from his own Sicilian parents. His mother and father immigrated to the United States from Porto Empedocle, a small fishing village on the southwest coast of Sicily, bringing with them the traditions they learned from my Italian ancestors. These traditions made their way down the family chain, eventually following my family from NYC to the south where I was raised.

Having non-southern parents and no extended family in the vicinity of Marietta, GA, a place seemingly defined by the generations of Marietta-

born families that live there, my family was considered somewhat of an anomaly in this very traditional southern town. My dad spoke with a New York accent instead of a southern drawl; our meals centered around giant pots of pasta rather than buckets of fried chicken; and Italian pastries such as cannoli and sfogliatella always accompanied the pecan pie. Throw in the fact that my siblings and I were allowed to sip small bits of wine with our meals on occasion and we might as well have been aliens transplanted to Georgia from Mars! Our traditions differed drastically from those of our friends, who often displayed a notable sense of awe at how life at the Albanese house contrasted to theirs. We were different.

Fast forward to my first trip to Sicily and suddenly that feeling of being an outsider instantly changed – in the blink of an eye I gained an understanding of self that I had never had before. No longer did I wonder why my friends didn't obsess over food the way that I did. No longer did I question why I felt passionate about wine. No longer did I feel awkward for wanting to stay at the dinner table to talk, debate and laugh long after I finished eating. This was Sicily! For the first time in my life I was surrounded by people whose "normal" was the same as mine. And as cheesy as it sounds, I realized during that trip the traditions I held so dear weren't just a way of life, they were in my blood.

Since that time I've made it a mission to learn everything I can about the culture, food, wine and way of life in my family's homeland, and last year I had the wonderful opportunity to take a deep dive into the region's wine scene to learn about the efforts being made to promote quality and raise awareness of Sicilian wines around the world. And trust me when I tell you that it's no coincidence Sicilian wines are showing up more and more on store shelves and wine lists across the globe. Thanks to Sicily's rich cultural history, unique terroir, indigenous varietals and the work being done to regulate and improve its winemaking efforts, Sicily is quickly becoming one of the most popular wine regions of today.

THE ISLAND

Anyone who has been to Sicily will understand when I say that it's distinctly Italian, yet so distinctly different from anywhere else in Italy.

Much of this is due to its location at the center of the Mediterranean, where it basically serves as a point of convergence between Europe and Africa and effectively divides the Mediterranean into east and west.



(Map courtesy of Wines of Sicily)

Because of this, the island was settled by a variety of people including the Greeks, North Africans, Europeans, Arabs and Normans, as well as a number of ancient Sicilian tribes such as the Siculi (who gave their name to the island) and the Elymians (whose origin is Trojan). Thanks to this melting pot of different ethnicities, cultures and traditions, Sicily is incredibly diverse, and this diversity is a big part of its identity. An identity that Sicily has fiercely protected for thousands of years.

But the diversity doesn't end with its people. The island itself is a combination of beaches, valleys, mountains and volcanoes, giving it a dramatically varied and extremely beautiful landscape. This juxtaposition of sceneries makes it an alluring destination for people who enjoy the outdoors – everything from hiking to diving to mountain climbing to cycling can be done in one place – which, combined with its rich history of art, literature and architecture, makes it a traveler's paradise.

Sicily is one of the largest and most densely populated islands in the Mediterranean, yet because of its distance from mainland Italy, life is quite different than in parts of the country. The Sicilian dialect is basically a language in and of itself; Sicily's isolation from the rest of Italy has lessened external commercial influences and helped preserve many of its ancient traditions; and although the capital city of Palermo is bustling, the majority of the island retains a more rural way of life, where agricultural and industrial industries lie at the heart of its economy.

But what makes Sicily undeniably Italian is its extraordinary food and wine culture. Renowned for its seafood and famous for dishes such as



► *Overlooking Taormina, a hilltop town near Mount Etna on the east coast of Sicily* (Photo courtesy of Allie Albanese)

caponata, arancine, Pasta alla Norma and cannoli, it ranks high on my list of favorite cuisines of any place I've traveled in the world. There's basically no such thing as processed – whatever you eat was likely picked right out of the garden or caught out of the ocean just hours before. Couple this exquisite cuisine with Sicily's unique and beautiful wines, and you basically find yourself in foodie heaven.

THE WINES



► *Downtown Palermo, the capital city of Sicily* (Photo courtesy of Allie Albanese)



► *Pasta alla Norma at La Locanda del Gusto in Palermo* (Photo courtesy of Allie Albanese)

Although Sicily is one of Italy's largest wine producers, up until recent years it was known primarily for producing Marsala (a **fortified** wine made on the island of Marsala that became popular with the English back in the 1700s). But winemaking in Sicily actually dates all the way back to the

8th century when the Greeks recognized the potential of the island for producing quality wines and set about planting vines using methodical viticulture practices. It was way back then that people understood how Sicily's hot Mediterranean climate was beautifully tempered by its altitude; how its large diurnal temperature swings helped stabilize the ripening process of the grapes; and how hillside vineyard exposures were ideally situated to reap the benefits of the sun while also protecting the vines from getting too much. For centuries Sicilian wines were lauded for their distinctive qualities and enjoyed great favor across Italy; however, over the years, the focus shifted to producing wine in bulk, and the resulting wines became somewhat nondescript. Quantity took center stage over quality, and a great portion of Sicilian wines were shipped to other parts of Italy and France to use for blending.



► *The ruins of Selinunte, an ancient Greek city on the southwest coast of Sicily and one of the most important Greek colonies in Sicilian history* (Photo courtesy of Allie Albanese)

But in the last 30 years or so, Sicilian wines have enjoyed a great resurgence thanks to a handful of producers leading the way back to an emphasis on quality and low yields. And although there isn't yet a lot of wine in Sicily produced at the Denominazione di Origine Controllata (DOC) level (a quality designation that determines maximum yields, varietals, **viticulture** practices, geographical

boundaries, **vinification** techniques, wine styles and alcohol levels allowed in a particular region), the Sicilia DOC is working hard to change this.

Established in 2012, the Sicilia DOC was created to implement parameters around all of these areas of wine production, with one of its primary goals being to give consumers a way to trust that the wine you're buying is made in the right way and comes from the place it says it's from. Wines produced with this designation undergo thorough analysis by its consortium to ensure that the wines are made with at least 50% indigenous grapes and that the DOC's viticulture and viniculture requirements are being adhered to and respected. Their hope is that doing so will strengthen the identity of Sicilian wines and help improve both their quality and image around the world. However, given the strict standards for inclusion in the DOC, not all wines qualify for this designation. This doesn't mean that non-Sicilia DOC wines aren't good or properly made; they simply aren't regulated or analyzed the same way. For example, it isn't uncommon for a winery to make some wines that meet the Sicilia DOC criteria while making others that meet a different DOC's criteria or that allow them to experiment in the vineyard and/or the cellar without any restrictions.

What makes the wines of Sicily particularly distinctive is the region's indigenous grape varieties, some of which are among the most ancient in the world. And while they certainly have unmistakable Old World characteristics, many winemakers are producing modern expressions of ancient grapes that showcase just how dynamic the region is.

In addition to its indigenous varieties, international grapes such as Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Sauvignon Blanc and Merlot are also grown in Sicily. In fact, today a number of wineries are experimenting with blends that combine the familiarity of well-known grapes with the distinctiveness of its much lesser known indigenous ones. Innovation is key both in the vineyards and in the cellar, and Sicily is impressively at the front of the pack in both.

THE GRAPES

Don't let Sicily's varietal names scare you — both the reds and whites are actually quite approachable. The whites tend to be citrus-forward and fresh and the reds generally lighter-bodied and juicy, each the perfect accompaniment for seafood.



► Flower garden, herb garden, vineyards, and sea -- the view from Planeta (Photo courtesy of Allie Albanese)

More white wine is produced in Sicily than red, and given the fact that it's an island it's no surprise that many of the whites make excellent porch pounders on a hot, sunny day. And while you'd expect big, heavy reds given the nature of Sicily's climate, the **terroir** around the island is so diverse that the reds range from light-bodied to full. Here's a breakdown of Sicily's most popular varietals:

WHITE

Grillo – one of Sicily's best-known grapes and its most recognized white



► *Nero d'Avola ready for crush at Stemmari* (Photo courtesy of Allie Albanese)

varietal; ranges in style from light and bright to structured and savory; citrus-forward with hints of stone fruits and green herbs; beautiful as an aperitif or served with salad, fresh fish, white meats, vegetables and seafood

Catarratto — Sicily's most planted grape; medium to full-bodied with lots of **acidity**; notes of lemon, lime, melon and fresh green herbs; excellent with veggies, shellfish, antipasta and seafood

Grecanico – medium-bodied and mild; notes of white flowers, peaches, almonds and pears; lovely with vegetables, oysters and seafood or sipped on its own

Inzolia – light and soft with lots of minerality; citrus-forward with notes of apricots, peaches, ripe red apples and almonds; pairs well with grilled fish, white meats and cheese

Zibbibo (Muscat of Alexandria) – extremely aromatic; used in making all styles of wine, from still to sweet to **passito**; notes of orange blossom, peaches and tangerines; still Zibbibo pairs well with seafood, poultry, Southeast Asian cuisine and Indian food, while sweet styles go nicely with all sorts of cheeses and desserts

RED

Nero d'Avola – one of Sicily's best-known grapes and its most recognized red varietal; structured, full-bodied and **tannic**; notes of red cherries, roses, sweet spices and licorice; tasty with charcuterie, red meats, pizza and richer pastas

Frappato – light to medium-bodied with mouth-watering acidity and mild tannins; aromas and flavors of red cherry, violet, strawberry, a touch of smoke and clove; delicious served with a little chill on it; a great red sipper and excellent overall Thanksgiving wine; lovely paired with pizza, cheese, burgers and roasted meats

Nerello Mascalese – light-bodied with lots of acid, often likened to Pinot Noir; notes of red cherry, cranberry, cinnamon, peppercorn and dried red flowers; can be a touch flinty thanks to the volcanic soils around Mt. Etna, its main area of production; also a great red to serve chilled; delicious with cheese, oily fish, mushrooms and both red and white meat

Perricone – full-bodied and tannic; a touch funky with notes of red fruits, savory green herbs, bramble and wet soil; delicious with charcuterie, pasta with meat sauces, roasted vegetables and cheese

THE VALUE

The best part about Sicilian wines is the bang you get for your buck. Although the prices are slowly increasing as the rise in Sicily's popularity grows, compared to other regions in Italy and other popular wine regions



► The team at Mandrarossa is testing soils and mapping vineyards to determine the right terroir for the right varieties (Photo courtesy of Allie Albanese)

around the world, Sicily offers some of the best value wines in the market. Here are 12 to look for to help you explore the gorgeous wines from my family's homeland.

WINE: 2014 **Tenuta Tascante** 'Ghiaia' Nera Nerello Mascalese, Sicilia DOC, Italy

VARIETAL: 100% Nerello Mascalese

AVERAGE PRICE: \$20



WINE: 2016 **Cottanera** Barbazzale, Sicilia
DOC, Italy

VARIETAL: Blend of Catarratto and Viognier

AVERAGE PRICE: \$16



WINE: 2013 **Firriato** Harmonium Nero d'Avola, Sicilia DOC,
Italy

VARIETAL: 100% Nero d'Avola

AVERAGE PRICE: \$28



WINE: 2015 **Fazio** Brusio Inzolia Chardonnay, Sicilia DOC, Italy

VARIETAL: Blend of Inzolia (60%) and Chardonnay (40%)

AVERAGE PRICE: \$12



WINE: 2016 **Tenuta Rapitala** Nadir Syrah, Sicilia DOC, Italy

VARIETAL: 100% Syrah

AVERAGE PRICE: \$24

VARIETAL: 100% Grillo

AVERAGE PRICE: \$12



WINE: 2015 **Feudo Maccari** Saia Nero d'Avola, Sicilia DOC, Italy

VARIETAL: 100% Nero d'Avola

AVERAGE PRICE: \$30



WINE: 2016 **Caruso & Minini** Naturalmente Bio Catarratto, Sicilia DOC, Italy

VARIETAL: 100% Catarratto

AVERAGE PRICE: \$25

WINE: 2016 **Planeta** Frappato, Vittoria DOC, Sicily, Italy

VARIETAL: 100% Frappato

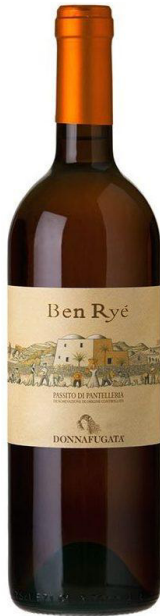
AVERAGE PRICE: \$19



WINE: 2015 **Donnafugata** Ben Ryè Passito di Pantelleria DOC, Sicily, Italy

VARIETAL: 100% Zibibbo

AVERAGE PRICE: \$76



WINE: 2015 **Cos** Pithos Bianco Grecanico, Sicily, Italy

VARIETAL: 100% Grecanico

AVERAGE PRICE: \$25

WINE: 2015 **Stemmari** Rosé, Sicily, Italy

VARIETAL: 100% Nero d'Avola

AVERAGE PRICE: \$15



Allie Albanese is a featured contributor to *Parade's* CommunityTable.com, with a column focused on wine and making wine accessible to the everyday consumer. Her goal is to introduce her readers to different wine regions, styles and price points and to educate them in a way that takes the intimidation factor out of the equation.

Allie is a Certified Sommelier through the Court of Master Sommeliers and was named the Walter Clore Certified Sommelier Exam Scholar for being the top scorer in the state of New York. Allie is also a graduate of the International Culinary Center's Intensive Sommelier Program, where she finished at the top of her class, and the founder of Parched: NYC, a website launching in 2017 that is dedicated to all things cocktail, wine and beverage-related in NY and around the world. Allie is based in NYC and when not eating and drinking her way through Manhattan, she can be found traveling and photographing her adventures both at home and abroad.

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