Sicily's Wines: The Return To Greatness

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Spirits
I write about wines and spirits and the hidden corners of the world

Donnafugata Ben Rye,. One of Sicily's most famous dessert wines. PHOTO, J MICALLEF

This is the first of a four-part series exploring Sicily's wines. In Part One, I will give a brief overview of Sicilian wines. In Parts Two and Three, we will highlight Sicily's top rated white and red wines. Finally, in Part Four, I will discuss the future of Sicilian wines in an interview with Lynn Sherriff, MW, a widely acknowledged authority on the subject.

Sicily is the Mediterranean's largest island. It is triangular shaped, approximately 17 miles long and 110 miles wide at its widest point. Its surface area, which includes the

offshore islands, is about 10,700 square miles.

Wine production in Sicily goes back almost three millennia. The ancient Greeks dubbed Sicily and southern Italy *Oenotria*, "land of the vine." From the beginning of recorded history, both the Phoenicians in western Sicily and the Greeks in eastern Sicily, exported Sicilian wine throughout the Mediterranean world.

The island is an ideal location in which to grow grapes. Its Mediterranean climate gives it ample sunshine, while its topography guarantees it ample rain. Precipitation ranges from less than 20 inches in the southeast to more than 39 inches in mountainous areas.

The warm, dry climate and the absence of summer rains mitigate disease pressure from mildews and rots. The coastal areas, where most of the vineyards are located, also benefit from coastal breezes. In summer the Sirocco, a hot, dry wind from the Sahara Desert, reduces humidity and also helps mitigate fungal infections. The light disease pressure means that chemical use is low. Many vineyards are farmed organically.

Typographically, Sicily consists of a coastal plain (15%), giving way to a series of low hills (60%) and a mountainous interior (25%). The southern Apennines extend into the northeast corner of Sicily to form the Madonie, Nebrodi and Peloritani mountain ranges, with elevations of 4,300 to 6,600 feet.

The Hyblaean Mountains dominate the southeast corner of Sicily. In between lies Etna, Europe's largest active volcano, rising to an elevation of just under 11,000 feet

The wide range in elevations and aspects create a broad array of growing environments and is suitable for many different grape varieties—from delicate Pinot noir to sweet, robust, sun dried Zibibbo. The result, is that Sicily can mirror wine regions ranging from Burgundy to central Italy to Jerez.

Sicily's soils range from calcareous to volcanic. Both soil types are ideal for wine grape cultivation as they are quick draining and low in nutrients. The younger volcanic soils, like the ones found on the slopes of Mount Etna, are also mineral-rich Coastal regions have mostly calcareous soils, while soils in the hilly areas consist of a mix of decomposed volcanics and igneous rocks. Some of the interior regions, like th

An example of Sicily's black volcanic soils PHOTO, J MICALLEF

province of Enna and Caltanissetta, also exhibi calcareous soils intermingled with uplifted marine sediments.

Sicily has more than 50 varieties of indigenous grapes. The better-known ones, Nero d'Avola, Grillo, Cataratto, Inzolia, Zibibbo, can be found in North America. Other varieties, including Grecanico, Perricone, Nocera, Frappato, Nerel Mascalese, are found with less frequency.

In addition, Sicily also hosts large acreages devoted to international wine varieties like, Syrah, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc. International varieties are often blended with indigenous grapes to produce distinctive and unique Sicilian wines.

Sicily has approximately 250,000 acres of vineyards, down about 10% from 2000. A its peak, in the late 19th century, the island had just under 800,000 acres of vineyards and was producing more than 212 million gallons of wine. In 2018, Sicily produced approximately 160 million gallons of wine. The region is one of Italy's largest wine producers by both acreage and volume.

The arrival of the phylloxera epidemic in Europe originally proved to be a boom for Sicilian wine. French wine producers bought up massive quantities of robust, deeply colored Sicilian wines to blend with their own, often anemic, wines.

By 1885, however, French wine production began to recover as newly planted vineyards utilizing American rootstocks began to come into production. To make matters worse, just as French demand began to slacken, Sicilian vineyards were in turn struck by phylloxera.

The phylloxera epidemic came on the heels of another agricultural crisis. Since ancient times Sicily has been the Mediterranean's breadbasket. The completion of th transcontinental railways across North America from 1869 on, flooded the world wit inexpensive American and Canadian wheat. Sicily's agricultural sector was crushed, triggering a massive migration of the population to North and South America, as wel as to Australia.

In addition, following the unification of Italy in 1870, the central government imposed

high taxes on Sicily's nascent industry, while restricting its access to northern markets in order to protect the local industry. Many manufacturing companies in Sicily and southern Italy were driven out of business. Sicily went into a long-term economic decline from which it has still not yet fully recovered.

Sicilian vineyards around Monreale, Sicily PHOTO, J MICALLEF

During the 1960s, at the urging of the Italian government and backed by generous subsidies, Sicilian grape growers were urged to replace their indigenous varieties with international ones and to adopt high yield vine management systems like tendone/pergola or cane pruned guyot. The result was soaring wine production of, often, low quality, flavorless wine that did little but feed Europe's growing wine lake

According to Tim Atkin, MW, when Piedmontese enologist Franco Giacosa arrived i Sicily, in 1968, he described Sicilian wine production as "rustic, strong, heavy and oxidized." Giacosa advised Sicilian winemakers to "avoid saying our wines came fror Sicily because the image of the place was so awful."

By the 1980s, however, even as the quality of Sicilian wine production was hitting bottom, a quality revolution was in the offing. Marco de Bartoli began a campaign to revitalize Marsala and to ban cheap, inauthentic initiations and flavored versions of Sicily's historic wine.

Diego Planeta introduced modern winemaking methods in his own namesake winer as did wine producers at COS, Donnafugata and Benanti. By 2001, Frank Cornelisse had started his estate on the slopes of Mount Etna, so too had Mick Hucknail's Il Cantante winery. Today, virtually all of Sicily's top tier wine producers have an Etna estate.

Since then, Sicilian wine producers have gone from strength-to-strength, even if 95% of Sicily's wine production is still slated for bulk table wines. The number of estate producers continues to grow, as do the accolades being heaped on Sicily's wines.

Currently, Sicily has 1 DOCG (*Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita*/Denomination of Controlled and Guaranteed Origin), 23 DOCs (*Denominazione di Origine Controllata*/Denomination of Controlled Origin) and 7 IGPs (*Indicazione Geografica Tipica*/Typical Geographic Indication). In addition to Etna, its other highly rated wine producing region is Cerasuolo di Vittorio DOCG. Th DOCG classification is Italy's highest wine quality rating.

Sicily may be an ancient land of vines, but its 21st century wine revolution has only begun. Next, we will look at the best of Sicily's white and red wines.

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I have been writing and speaking about wines and spirits for 20 years. Along the way I became a winemaker, Oregon Pinot Noir; a judge for various international competiti... **Read More**