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Why You Should Explore The World Of Sicilian White Wines

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Spirits

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

Vineyards in Monreale, Sicily PHOTO, J MICALLEF

Notwithstanding its reputation for sun drenched vineyards, over two-thirds of Sicily wine production is devoted to white wines. In addition, to international white grape varieties like Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc, Sicily also cultivates more than a dozen indigenous white grape varieties.

The indigenous varieties include: Carricante, Catarratto, Grillo, Insolia, Grecanico Bianca, Malvasia, Zibibbo and Moscato. The latter three are vinified both as dry wine and as late harvest or raisinated sweet dessert wines.

Additionally, many Sicilian white varieties have multiple biotypes, some of which can produce startlingly different wines. There are undoubtedly many more indigenous grape varieties waiting to be identified and cataloged.

Catarratto

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Catarratto occupies around a third of Sicily's vineyard acreage. In 2018, roughly 73,000 acres of vineyards were planted to Catarratto. The grape has seven different biotypes. The three principal ones are Catarratto Bianca, Catarratto Bianca Commune and Catarratto Bianco Lucido. As biotypes, all three are considered to be genetically identical, even though they look different. This is an ancient grape whose cultivation probably reaches back millennia.

There are noticeable differences in the wines produced by the three grapes, however although this may be more the impact of winemaking techniques or local terroir than the underlying grape genetics. Current research suggests that Catarratto is probably descendent or a parent of Garganega, the Venetian grape variety used to produce Soave. Catarratto is also believed to be a parent to around a dozen other Italian white grapes, including Tuscany's workhorse grape Trebbiano. Along with Zibibbo, it is also the parent of Grillo.

The grape is mostly planted in the western half of Sicily where it is used in the production of Marsala. It is often found bottled as a varietal or as a blend with Grillo, Insolia, Carricante or Chardonnay.

Catarratto produces a medium to full-bodied, easy drinking, low acid wine, which features dried herbal aromas of sage and thyme, along with green apple, tropical fruit notes of banana and pineapple, as well as citrus flavors ranging from lemon zest to grapefruit to orange. It often has a refreshing, bitter finish.

The grape is also widely used in the production of bulk table wines. Under the right winemaker, however, when yields are restricted, Catarratto is capable of producing full-bodied, quality wines with a pronounced lemon and herbal flavor that are reminiscent of Sauvignon Blanc, although the more pronounced, lingering bitterness on the finish of Catarratto wines is usually a good marker for distinguishing it from Sauvignon Blanc.

Among the better quality Catarratto's available consider:



Casa Vinicola Fazio, Calebianche, Catarratto PHOTO, COURTESY CASA VINICOLA FAZIO

Casa Vinicola Fazio, Calebianche Catarratto, 2018, DOC Erice. A very aromatic wine with notes of grape, lemon and green fruit. The acidity is brisk and refreshing. The finish is medium length.

See also Alessandro di Camporeale, 'Vigna di Mandranova' Catarratto, 2017, DOC Sicilia, for varietal bottling of Catarratto Lucido. This wine is more herbal on the nose, with notes of lemon and overripe apple. On the palate, there is pronounced acidity, with a slightly medicinal flavor that features lemon and green fruit and a medium length finish.

Other outstanding wines worth trying include Marco De Bartoli, 'Lucido' Catarratto, IGT Terre Siciliane; Rallo Beleda, Alcamo; DOC Sicilia; Donnafugata, Polena Sicilia, IGT Terre Siciliane and Centopassi, Terre Rosse di Giubbascio, Catarratto, IGT, Terre Siciliane.

For a sparkling version try the Castellucci Miano, Spumante Brut, IGT Terre Siciliane. These wines all sell for around \$15 to 20 a bottle.

Grillo

Grillo is another indigenous variety that is found throughout western Sicily. There are approximately 16,000 acres of Grillo in Sicily. It is also known as Riddu and Rossese Bianco.

Grillo was once the principal varietal used for the production of high-quality Marsala. Its elevated sugar levels, when ripe, made it ideal for making fortified wines. It was, however, gradually replaced by the higher yielding but lower quality Catarratto.

Grillo produces wines that range from light to succulent, with moderate acidity and pronounced sweetness. The wines offer distinctive citrus flavors, especially ripe lemon and, on occasion, grape fruit along with white flowers, dried herbal flavors, as well as apple, white peach and melon. At its best, think of a rich, custard like, lemon cream.

When its herbal notes are prominent, it can be very reminiscent of a cool climate Sauvignon Blanc. It is bottled as a single varietal and in blends with Insolia, Catarratto or Chardonnay.

Among the better producers are Donnafugata, SurSur, 2018, DOC Sicilia. The wine offers aromas of green fruit and lemon. On the palate, it has notable acidity, along with flavors of apple and lemon and a long finish. This was the best of all the Grillo wines I tasted on a recent visit to Sicily.

Other notable producers include the various bottlings from Marco de Bartoli, especially the Grappoli di Grillo Bianco, IGT Terre Siciliane; the Rallo, Bianco Maggiore Grillo, IGT Terre Siciliane; Barone Sergio Alegre, Grillo, IGT Terre Siciliane; Baglio di Pianetto, 'Timeo', DOC Sicilia and the Feudo Principi di Butera, Grillo, DOC Sicilia. These Grillos come from a wide area of central and western Sicily and vary in price from as little as \$10 to as much as \$30.

See also the Baglio del Cristo, Cristo di Campobello Bianco, IGT, Terre Siciliane a blend of equal portions of Grillo, Insolia, Chardonnay and Catarratto, or their Adènzia Bianco, DOC Sicilia, a 50-50 blend of Grillo and Insolia.

Insolia (Inzolia)

Insolia is a grape variety that is grown in both Sicily (96% of acreage) and in Tuscany (4%), where it is known as Ansonica. In Tuscany, it is grown primarily in the Maremma and on the island of Elba. The grape produces a naturally tannic white wine that is light to medium bodied in western Sicily, but fuller bodied in Tuscany. In Sicily, it offers aromas of yellow apple and dried apricot. In Tuscany, it is more citrusy. Sicily has over 15,000 acres of Insolia.

Wines made from Insolia are very floral and feature dry herbal, fruit and nutty aromas. They are often accompanied by a distinct minerality. These are delicate wines that offer finesse and elegance, with moderate alcohol and acidity.

See, for example, Cusumano, Angimbé, 2018, DOC Sicilia. On the nose, the wine is herbal, with lemon and slight anise notes. On the palate, it offers notable acidity along with flavors of green fruit and lemon. The finish is medium length, with a slightly bitter note.

See also, Baglio di Pianetto, Murriali, DOC Monreale; Duca di Salaparuta, Colomba Platino, IGT Terre Siciliane; Feudo Principe di Butera, Insolia, DOC Sicilia.

Donnafugata has an Insolia based blend, Vidi di Gabri, DOC Sicilia that includes Catarratto Lucido, Chardonnay, Viognier and Sauvignon Blanc, as well as a varietal bottling, Anthilia, Sicilia IGT. All of these wines generally sell for under \$15.

Carricante

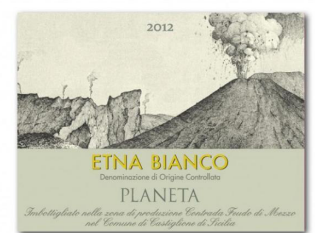
Carricante is a late ripening varietal grown principally at higher elevations, typically at altitudes between 3,000 and 3,500 feet above sea level, on the slopes of Mount Etna. There are only about 500 acres of Carricante vineyards. It has been cultivated on Mount Etna for at least a millennium.

Carricante produces a wine that offers high acidity and historically, have been capable of extending aging. It is crisp and zesty with a pronounced lemon-lime citrus note, along with green fruit and herbal aromas of anise and mint.

The better examples can exhibit a streak of Chablis like minerality, especially when vinified in a reductive style with plenty of lees contact and minimal stirring. Late harvest varieties can be exceptionally creamy with a pronounced honey note.

Among the better producers are

Planeta, Etna Bianco, 2018 DOC Etna. The wine is a rich gold color with aromas of licorice, lemon and green fruit. On the palate, there is notable acidity, along with notes of green apple, pear and lemon. The finish is exceptionally long, with notes of lemon and green apple.



Planeta, Etna Bianco PHOTO, COURTESY PLANETA

Try also the Cottanera, Etna Bianco, Contrada Caldera, 2016, DOC Etna. This wine is herbal on the nose, with aromas of green fruit overripe apple and lemon-lime notes. The palate features apple and lemon notes. This is another example of a classic Carricante style, although the acidity seems less pronounced than is typical.

Other standout producers include Pietradolce, Etna Bianco Archineri, DOC Etna; Benanti, Pietramarina Etna Bianco Superiore, DOC Etna and Tenuta di Fessina

a'Puddara, Etna Bianco, DOC Etna.

Terra Costantino, De Aetna Bianco, DOC Etna, is a blend of 80% Carricante, 15% Cataratto and 5% Minella. The latter is often blended in small quantities with Carricante. It offers a nose of creamy applesauce, green fruit, lemon and dried herba notes. On the palate, there is green fruit, apple and lemon, along with notable acidity. The finish is particularly long.

Carricante wines are generally among the most expensive Sicilian white wines, with prices between \$20 to \$50 per bottle.

Although the bulk of Sicily's wine production is still coming from cooperatives and destined for bulk wine sales, a new generation of estate winemakers are producing world class wines from indigenous white grape varieties.

These wines are uniquely Sicilian, produced from indigenous varieties whose history is intimately bound with the island. Reasonably priced and offering an aromatic and flavor profile found nowhere else, they are well worth exploring.

See also [Sicily's Wines: The Return to Greatness](#)

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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 competi... **Read More**