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Why You Should Explore The World Of Sicilian Red Wines

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Spirits

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

Vineyards in Alcamo, Sicily PHOTO, J MICALLEF

Sicily is better known for its red wines, even though they are only about a third of the Mediterranean island's output. Many a pizza or pasta dinner has been accompanied by Sicily's inexpensive, ubiquitous red wine Nero d'Avola.

The island hosts a large number of red wine varietals. International varieties include Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Syrah. More interesting are the several dozen, ancient, indigenous red wine grapes, in particular: Nero d'Avola, Nerello Mascalese, Frappato and Perricone

Nero d'Avola

Nero d'Avola is Sicily's best-known red wine grape and, at 18% of vineyard acreage, 34,000 acres, its most widely planted. The grape, grown all over Sicily, is named after the seaside town of Avola in Sicily's southeast corner in the Syracuse region.

Plantings of Nero d'Avola have begun to appear in Australia, and to a lesser extent California, although 98% of all plantings of the varietal are still in Sicily.

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It reaches its most sophisticated expression, however, in the neighboring province of Ragusa, to the west, where along with Frappato it forms the basis of Sicily's only DOCG (*Denominazione di origine controllata*) appellation: Cerasuolo di Vittoria.

Nero d'Avola, also known as Calabrese, is an ancient grape. Its cultivation in Sicily dates back more than a millennium and in all likelihood dates back much further. During the Middle Ages the town of Avola was a major shipping center for the Sicilian wine trade. Nero d'Avola was exported to cooler climates where it was used to add color and body to local wines. Its use as a blending grape persisted into the 20th century. Only in the last few decades has it begin to appear widely as a varietal bottling.

The name Nero d'Avola means black of Avola. The wine is dark, black ink colored. It is characterized by powerful tannins, medium acidity and a robust body. The grape is highly versatile, capable of being crafted into light, fruity wines redolent of strawberry, cherry, raspberry and fresh plum or, when cropped at low yields and aged in barrique, into a powerful, concentrated, dark wine exhibiting concentrated red and black fruit notes, along with flavors of dark chocolate, spice and, sometimes, coffee.

The varietal is highly expressive of where it grows. When grown on limestone, especially at altitude, Nero d'Avola showcases red fruit notes of strawberry and sour cherry with notable acidity. When grown on warmer clay soils, the red fruit notes are supplemented by elements of rose petal, black cherry, tropical spices, licorice and chocolate.

Among the more interesting wines to try, consider:

Caruso e Minini, Cutaja Nero d'Avola Riserva 2016, DOC Sicilia. This is typical, stylistically, of aged Nero d'Avola. On the nose, the wine is somewhat jammy, with

aromas of cooked red and black fruits. On the palate, it offers a distinctive but well ripened tannic backbone, along with black fruit notes of blackberry and plum. The finish is long and fruity.

The Duca di Salaparuta, Duca Enrico, IGT Terre Siciliane has a few more years of aging. On the nose, in addition to the typical red and black fruit aromas, the wine also shows a pronounced milk chocolate note. On the palate, it shows good acidity, ripe, well integrated tannins, along with notes of black fruit, chocolate and some hints of strawberry. The wine comes from Caltanissetta, in Sicily's warmer interior, and is typical of warm region, aged Nero d'Avola. It's drinkable now, but will be even better with two to three years of additional aging,

Other producers worth seeking out are:

Tasca d'Almerita, Tenuta Regaleali, 'Riserva del Conte', DOC Contea di Sclafani; Azienda Agricola Cos, Contrada Labirinto, Nero d'Avola, IGT Terre Siciliane; Cusumano 'Saganá', Nero d'Avola, IGT Terre Siciliane; Planeta, Santa Cecilia, IGT Terre Siciliane and Donnafugata 'Mille e Una Notte' DOC Entellina Rosso.

Nero d'Avola is often blended with Cabernet Sauvignon, where it takes the role of Syrah, adding red fruit and spice to the blend. See, for example, Feudo Arancio 'Cantodoro' Riserva, DOC Sicilia, a blend of 80% Nero d'Avola and 20% Cabernet Sauvignon.

Nerello Mascalese/Nerello Cappuccio

Nerello Mascalese is another indigenous variety whose history dates back centuries. It originated in the Mascalì plain, a flat region between Mount Etna and the coast. Along with its genetic cousin Nerello Cappuccio, its most common blending partner, the two grape varieties form the core of the highly regarded Etna Rosso wines. Nerello Mascalese is considered to be the higher quality varietal.

Sicily has approximately 7,100 acres of Nerello Mascalese and another 1,200 acres of Nerello Cappuccio. The grape varieties are similar, but Cappuccio tends to ripen earlier, is darker and less tannic. Both varieties exhibit pronounced notes of red fruit, especially ripe cherry, along with floral notes, tobacco, dried herbs and a bit of minerality.

When grown at altitude, typically around 3,000 to 3,500 feet, on the slopes of Mount Etna, Nerello Mascalese exhibits a taut, lean character, with pronounced acidity and ripe tannins, featuring red fruits, herbaceous elements, a dry earth and forest floor character and, on occasion, a pronounced minerality.

Genetic testing has suggested that Nerello may be related to Italy's most common red grape variety, Sangiovese, and may be a cross between Sangiovese and an indigenous variety. Carricante, a common neighbor on Etna, has been suggested as the other likely parent.

Among the producers of Nerello Mascalese worth exploring, consider:

Cottanera, Etna Rosso Contrada Diciassettesalme, 2017 DOC Etna. This is a bottling of 100% Nerello Mascalese. On the nose, it offers up red fruit, earth and dried floral potpourri aromas. On the palate, it exhibits red fruits, especially cherry. The wine has good structure, with a nice balance between acidity and fruit, although the tannins are still a bit grippy and it would benefit from a few more years of bottle age. Most Etna Rosso wines are released two to three years after harvest and would benefit from two to three years of additional bottling aging.

Another wine worth trying is the Pietradolce, Etna Rosso Contrada Santo Spirito, 2016, DOC Etna. This is also a 100% varietal bottling of Nerello Mascalese. The brick-colored wine exhibits red fruit aromas on the nose and palate. Here too, typical of youngish Etna Rosso wines, it exhibits pronounced acidity and tannins that are still grippy and not fully integrated.

Other producers of Etna Rosso wines include:

The various bottlings of Frank Cornelissen, especially Susucaru, both the rosé and red blend, and 'Magma Terre', both DOC Etna; Passopisciaro, Contrada G Guardiola Rosso, and Contrada R Rampante, both IGT Terre Siciliane; Donnafugata, Sul Vulcano, DOC Etna and Planeta, Etna Rosso, DOC Etna.

Calabretta offers a Nerello Mascalese–Nerello Cappuccio blend called Vigne Vecchie (old vines), IGT Terre Siciliane, from a 17-acre vineyard at an elevation of around 2,400 feet on the slopes of Mount Etna. The average age of the vines is between 60 and 80 years old, with some dating back more than a century, still on their own roots.

Prices for Nerello bottlings vary widely, with some exceeding \$100 per bottle. Most wines, however, are typically priced between \$20-\$60 per bottle.

Frappato

Frappato is used as a blending wine with Nero d'Avola in the production of Cerasuolo di Vittoria DOCG. It can also be found, although still not very common, as a varietal bottling. Sicily has about 1,600 acres of Frappato vineyards. Puglia has about 300 acres.

Frappato wines are light bodied and lightly colored. They are low in tannin and feature aromas of strawberries, violets and dried herbs. They blend well with dark colored, tannic wine, softening the sometimes hard edge of Nero d'Avola, Nerello Mascalese and Nocera.

Tenuta Gorgi Tondi, Dumè, DOC Sicilia is typical of Sicilian Frappato bottlings. The wine is a light, ruby color. On the nose, it offers red and black fruits, along with medium acidity and very ripe, well integrated tannins. The finish is medium length, with a lingering strawberry note.

See also Azienda Agricola Arianna Occhipinti, Il Frappato, IGT Terre Siciliane; Azienda Agricola Cos, Frappato, IGT Terre Siciliane; Planeta Frappato, DOC Vittoria and Lamoiresca, Nerocapitano, IGT Terre Siciliane.

Where Frappato shines is in blends with Nero d'Avola, in Cerasuolo di Vittoria DOCG. Try the Donnafugata Floramundi 2017, DOCG Cerasuolo di Vittoria. The wine is dark ruby/purple colored. On the nose, it is very floral, with aromas of red and black fruit. On the palate, it offers more red and black fruit, especially strawberry and cherry flavors. It shows good acidity, but tannins are not fully integrated and are still noticeably drying on the medium length finish.

See also Planeta, Cerasuolo di Vittoria 2017, DOCG Cerasuolo di Vittoria. This wine is also



Donnafugata Floramundi 2017, DOCG Cerasuolo di Vittoria. PHOTO, COURTESY

ruby colored with aromas of floral potpourri and red fruits on the nose. On the palate, there is more red fruit, especially strawberry and some black fruit, along with good acidity and ripe, well integrated tannins. Both wines are a blend of 60% Nero d'Avola and 40% Frappato.

For other outstanding Cerasuolo di Vittoria wines see also, Azienda Agricola Cos, Cerasuolo di Vittoria Classico, DOC Cerasuolo di Vittoria; Azienda Agricola Arianna Occhipinti, 'Grotte Alte', DOCG Cerasuolo di Vittoria; Pablo Cali 'Jazz', IGT Terre Siciliane; Gulfi, Cerasuolo di Vittoria, DOCG Cerasuolo di Vittoria, and Maggiovini 'Vigna di Pettineo' DOCG, Cerasuolo di Vittoria.

Perricone

Perricone is grown primarily in western Sicily where it is used predominantly for blending. Usually combined with Nero d'Avola it produces, highly alcoholic wines. When picked ripe, Perricone produces wines that are high in acidity, with distinctive tannic backbones that feature ripe red fruit, dry herbal notes and earth, with a lingering bitter note on the finish.

Try the Feudo Montoni, Vigna del Core, Perricone, 2018, DOC Sicilia. The wine is dark red, offering up intense blackberry notes along with mulberry and milk chocolate. On the palate, there are more blackberries, along with dark fruit and milk chocolate. The wine has good acidity, but still shows the tannic edge that Perricone is known for. The finish is exceptionally long. It's drinkable now, especially with food, but would definitely improve with a few more years of aging.

Other notable producers include Tasha d'Almerita Tenuta Regaleali, 'Guarnaccio', IGT Terre Siciliane; Firriato Ribera Sicilia, IGT Terre Siciliane and Marco De Bartoli Rosso di Marco, IGT Terre Siciliane.

Syrah

Sicily produces wines from a number of international red varieties, principally Cabernet Sauvignon (5,000 acres), Merlot (2,000 acres) and Syrah (13,000 acres). While Sicily produces excellent Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, these varieties are more interesting when blended with indigenous red varieties.

Syrah, on the other hand, seems to have a particular affinity for Sicily. Syrah isn't native to Sicily, it has been cultivated there for over 150 years. In Sicily, Syrah offers up wines with lush flavors of cherries, blackberries and plums without being jammy, along with notes of pepper and dry herbs. Especially when grown at altitude on volcanic spoils, Syrah in Sicily can retain its acidity, producing powerfully concentrated fruit forward wines.

See for example, the superb Syrah produced by Peter Vinding, Montecarrubo 'Il Carrubo' and 'Cuvée Suzanne', both IGT Terre Siciliane. See also the bottlings by Planeta, Feudo Arancio, Feudo Maccari and Baglio di Pianetto.

Sicily's Mediterranean climate, its complex topography and varied soils make it a superb environment in which to grow grapes. Today, Sicily is one of the most exciting wine provinces in the world, crafting world class wines on the cutting edge of modern winemaking. Its indigenous red varieties are, under the hand of a new generation of modern winemakers, rapidly returning this Mediterranean island to its glory days of wine making. Sicilian red wines are well worth exploring and remember they are not just for pizza anymore!

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**