

In a search for something new, turn to the wines of Sicily



Mary Ross

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A unique feature of our U.S. wine market is our eagerness to experiment. While wine drinkers elsewhere tend to stick with a favorite house wine (probably produced not too far from their kitchen table), Americans look for new grapes, new regions, new styles, packages, purchasing options and maybe something new we can't even imagine.

So, if you want a change from Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Cabernet, Malbec, Rhine, Chianti or another favorite, try something new from Sicily. You may be familiar with the red grape Nero d'Avola (also called Calabrese), one of winedom's best values. You may figure correctly that Pinot Nero is Pinot Noir. But what about grapes Grillo, Inzolia and Catarratto (also called Lucido), Grecanico, Frappato and Nerello's Cappuccio and Mascalese? As for regions, you may figure that Sicilia DOC is the islandwide, quality-controlled region and that grapes grown in Etna DOC cling to the famous volcano. But who can name any of Sicily's other 21 vineyard areas? One is Marsala. (Now your turn!)

You may even know Sicily's Corvo label, once one of America's best-selling Italian wines under the auspices of importer and Chicago son Anthony (Tony) J. Terlato, the man who "invented" another blockbuster -- Pinot Grigio. But Sicily has developed beyond the grocery liquor aisle, with leadership from producers including Planeta and Principi di Butera

(neither tasted recently by this palate), Donnafugata and Duca di Salaparuta (DDS).

According to Master Sommelier Alex LaPlatt, moderator of an excellent, virtual DDS seminar, "Sicily is producing the most exciting wines out of Italy, with their unique geology, diverse terroir, elevation and proximity to the ocean."

The Mediterranean's largest island, 100 miles northeast of Africa, offers ample sun to ripen grapes and a cold sea breeze to preserve freshness perfectly. Along with plants and the planet, Donnafugata CEO Jose Rallo gives mankind credit. "Sicily was somewhat ignored in Italy's fine wine development. We were free to find our own style, to be led by open minds, not generations of tradition."

Ask your wine merchant for their favorites from Sicily or the wines below to begin your journey into the "hinge between the grand western culture and the temptations of the desert and sun ...," in the words of Sicilian author Gesualdo Bufalino, "... between reason and magic, tempering sentiment and the heat of passions."

"Anthilia" Lucido, Donnafugata (Sicilia DOC): Pleasing and complex, this dry white has lovely entry and long palate of stone fruit and apple, with interesting minerality and bright acidity. Serve as a unique alternative to Pinot Grigio and, according to the Rallo family, "when you desire joy." (\$17)

"Lavico" Nerello Macsalese, DDS (Terre Siciliane IGT): Flavors of a berry I've never tasted and exotic spices that I can't name, with more richness than the 13.5 alcohol level would suggest. Grown in volcanic Mount Etna soil at 800 meters elevation; aged 12 months in small oak casks. Enjoy slightly cool with rich antipasti and seafood, especially "alla siciliana," topped with olives, tomatoes and capers. (\$19.99)

"Sul Vulcano," Donnafugata (Etna Rosso DOC): Like a Pinot Noir with attitude, this Nerello Mascalese offers bright berry flavors with both the flavor and tannin of brown spices. The evocative label declares love to Sicily's goddess-volcano, according to locals, their powerful feminine deity. I enjoyed mine with a delicate chill. (\$35)

"Ben Rye," Donnafugata (Passito di Pantelleria DOC): Sweeter for the sweets with decadent flavors of dried apricot and candied orange peel, named for the Arabic "Son of the wind" that blows the Mediterranean's perfumes throughout the vineyards. Serve with luscious desserts or as a dessert in itself, and good luck tempering your "heat of passions." (\$44 per 375ml bottle)

- Mary Ross is an Advanced Sommelier (Court of Master Sommeliers), a Certified Wine Educator (Society of Wine Educators) and recipient of the Wine Spectator's "Grand Award of Excellence." Write to her at food@dailyherald.com.

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