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Italy, Sicily: Class of 2014

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Some of Italy's most beautiful beaches are in San Vito Lo Capo near Trapani in southwestern Sicily.

The soggy and cold 2014 vintage was a washout vintage everywhere in Italy: Everywhere except sundrenched Sicily. This viticultural wonderland at the heart of the Mediterranean saw one of the best growing seasons ever in 2014. The fortuitous vintage serves to further define the marked distinctions between Italy's peninsular wines against its island wines. With each year, these differences become more pronounced.

To my mind, however, the 2014 vintage seals the deal. Sicily has earned its ranking as one of the top three most prestigious wine regions of Italy, following Piedmont and Tuscany. I would place it above the Veneto in terms of overall fine wine performance, unity among producers, innovation and technique (including organic, biodynamic and natural wines), guardianship of indigenous grapes, and its systematic approach to appellation laws and reforms. In the past, the Sicilian wine identity was fragmented, confused and lost somewhere in that fuzzy zone between quality and quantity. In recent years, Sicily has

pulled its act together with more gumption and sheer determination than any other region I can think of.



An animal water trough built in stone marks the entrance of the Feudo Principi di Butera wine estate not far from Caltanissetta in southern Sicily.

In response to Sicily's winemaking maturity, I opted to review Sicilian wines in its own article in 2014, instead of grouping the island together with the other regions of Southern Italy. You can revisit my heartfelt "Love Letter" to Sicily here (**Sicily, a Love Letter**). That article provides much of the background information that sparked the so-called Sicilian Wine Renaissance. In a further move to underline Sicily's ongoing transformation as a varied wine region with standalone sub-regions, I reviewed the wines of Etna apart from those of the rest of Sicily. Just a few months ago, I published my article "**A Volcano on the Verge**". Some of the best Sicilian wines I tasted this year are in that article and I look forward to reviewing Etna 2014 in the upcoming spring.



The Temple of Concordia in Italy's Baroque capital is Noto



in the Baroque capital is Noto in southeastern Sicily



on Mount Etna

Sicily did not suffer the same relentless summer rain patterns that caused fruit to split and damaging vineyard erosion in Tuscany and parts of northern Italy. In fact, circular wind patterns over the Mediterranean kept heavy moisture and cloud mass away from the island. When skies were covered, the vines gained moments of coveted respite from the

strong sunlight and luminosity. This unique peek-a-boo approach between sunbeams and shade helped to advance both the color saturation and the aromatic profile of many of Sicily's most delicate indigenous grapes. The red wines of Sicily - in particular those made with grapes that have difficulty keeping their color like Frappato and Nerello Mascalese - are among the most profound, textured and loaded with hues of dark garnet, purple and black that I have ever seen. A long growing season with steep temperature variations helped to develop the aromas of these wines. Healthy rain patterns also meant that grapes did not suffer from mold diseases like downy mildew in 2014, as they had in other hot vintages. It will be a year or two before consumers get their hands on the Sicilian reds made in 2014. Based on my barrel samples, we can look forward to some of the island's best wines. For now, readers can find many of my white wine reviews in the following article.



This is an old palmento that was once used for making wine. There are thousands of these beautiful abandoned structures across Sicily and unfortunately the European Union has banned vintners from making wine in the palmenti for hygienic reasons. I personally would like to see European funds earmarked to restore these fantastic spaces.



Here is an ancient pre-phylloxera Nerello Mascalese vine.