

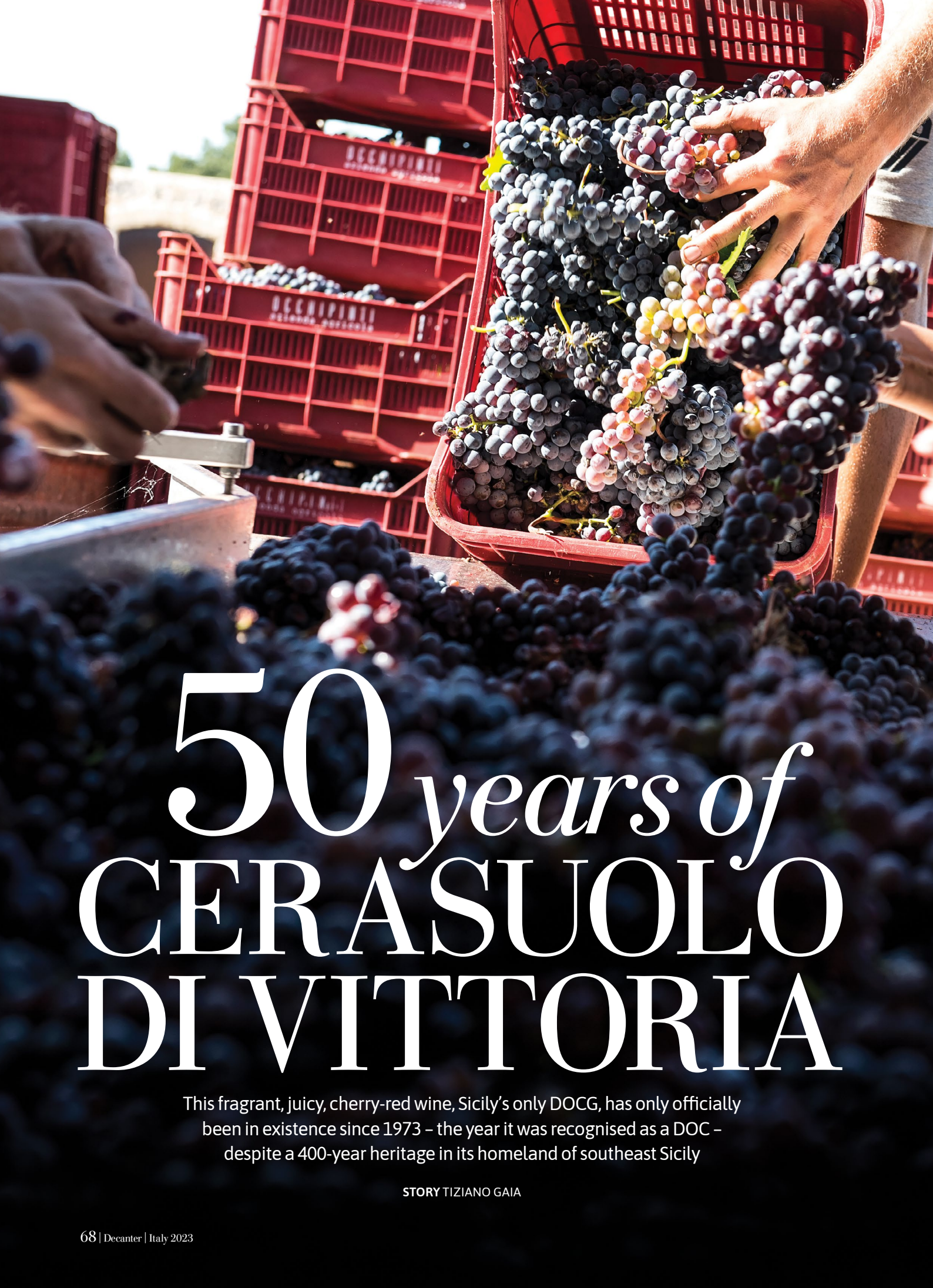


# Decanter

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# 50 *years of* CERASUOLO DI VITTORIA

This fragrant, juicy, cherry-red wine, Sicily's only DOCG, has only officially been in existence since 1973 – the year it was recognised as a DOC – despite a 400-year heritage in its homeland of southeast Sicily

STORY TIZIANO GAIA



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Perhaps it is not by chance that Inspector Montalbano, the character born from the pen of Andrea Camilleri, is an incurable gourmet. His adventures both in the novels and on screen are set in the territory of Ragusa, in southeastern Sicily. The area is renowned for its eight historic Baroque cities in the Val di Noto, recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage site since 2002. It is also considered to be the 'Sicilian Food Valley', a treasure trove of starred restaurants and local specialities, such as extra virgin olive oil or Ragusano cheese.

Cerasuolo di Vittoria was born here, and it is the only DOCG wine on the island. Winemaker Arianna Occhipinti believes the region's history holds great importance: 'I feel a deep connection with this land. Its wealth dates back to ancient times.' Occhipinti's winery is located in the town of Vittoria, near the SP68 road, which follows the course of an ancient pathway that connected coastal towns. The discovery of 3,000-year-old amphorae and grape seeds may make it the oldest 'wine route' in the world.

Vittoria's countryside is of poignant beauty with its white dry-stone walls and its traditional *viti ad alberello* (head-trained bush vines) sprouting from the ground like sceptres. Vittoria was actually founded in 1607 by Countess Vittoria Colonna, who encouraged the first settlers to farm the fertile soils. By the 19th century, wagons filled with 'Nero' or 'Vittoria' wine were regularly arriving at the port of Scoglitti to be loaded onto the ships anchored offshore.

### RED AS A CHERRY

The name 'Cerasuolo' emerged in the 20th century, in reference to the wine's colour, which recalls that of a cherry (*ceràsa*, in Sicilian dialect). 'The DOC, recognised in 1973, marks the birth of the modern Cerasuolo di Vittoria,' says Achille Alessi, president of the local Consorzio di Tutela Cerasuolo di Vittoria DOCG e Vittoria DOC, and owner of the Terre di Giurfo winery. 'Today the district occupies [approximately] just 150ha of the 110,000ha of the whole Sicilian vineyard. It is a drop in the ocean!' The one who chased that drop and found it is Stefano Girelli, a winemaker from Trentino in northeast Italy, who landed in Vittoria in 2001 and today manages two of the area's wine estates: Santa Tresa and Cortese. 'In the era of hot and powerful wines, I was attracted to this red wine of a different character: fine, elegant and fresh, with an explosive drinkability. As conventions

and tastes have evolved, today Cerasuolo di Vittoria is a great contemporary wine.'

Cerasuolo di Vittoria is a rare case among Italian wines: not the 'solo' of a single grape, nor a choral blend, but a perfect duet, with both Nero d'Avola and Frappato taking centre stage. Nero d'Avola is the most cultivated red grape in Sicily, with plantings at about 14,750ha (*Consorzio DOC Sicilia*) – it's a symbol of the region's viticulture. From this vine come deep, dark and characterful wines. Frappato, with its pale colour and its palette of floral and fruity aromas, is originally from Vittoria and mostly grows in the southeast corner of the island. Nero d'Avola contributes 50%-70% of the Cerasuolo blend, while Frappato makes up the other 30%-50% – the regulators seem to have established whose is the first voice of the duet.

Frappato is becoming a favoured variety among winemakers in Sicily, however. 'The approval of Cerasuolo di Vittoria DOCG in 2005 abolished the other varieties previously allowed, recognising Frappato as the typical variety of our territory,' says Alessi. 'But the wine is the result of the right balance between the two grapes.'

According to Occhipinti, the experience gained through blending has improved local winemakers' understanding of the individual varieties: 'Making mono-varietal wines is relatively simple,' she says. 'Working with multiple grape varieties requires a great agronomic and technical awareness. It's a bit like producing two wines in one.'

In the Vittoria district, the grapes grow in an exceptional environment. The sea is very close, there is a lot of sunshine, and the Hyblaean mountains inland offer protection from humid winds. This dry climate guarantees optimal ripening of the bunches as well as a complex aromatic profile. 'The possibility of growing excellent organic grapes is why we chose this area for our family wineries,' says Girelli.

In fact, the concentration of organic estates in Vittoria is the highest in all Sicily. 'Nature favours us wine-growers; we must reward it with practices respecting its equilibrium,' reflects Occhipinti, who wrote the book-manifesto *Natural Woman* (Fandango Libri, 2013). Even the region's grape yield is low: a maximum production of up to 52hl/ha is one of the lowest thresholds in Italy.

### THE CLASSICO TRIANGLE

Juicy, fragrant and very drinkable, Cerasuolo di Vittoria is not afraid of the passage of time. Its production regulations distinguish between

'The name Cerasuolo refers to the wine's colour, which recalls that of a cherry – *ceràsa* in Sicilian dialect' ►





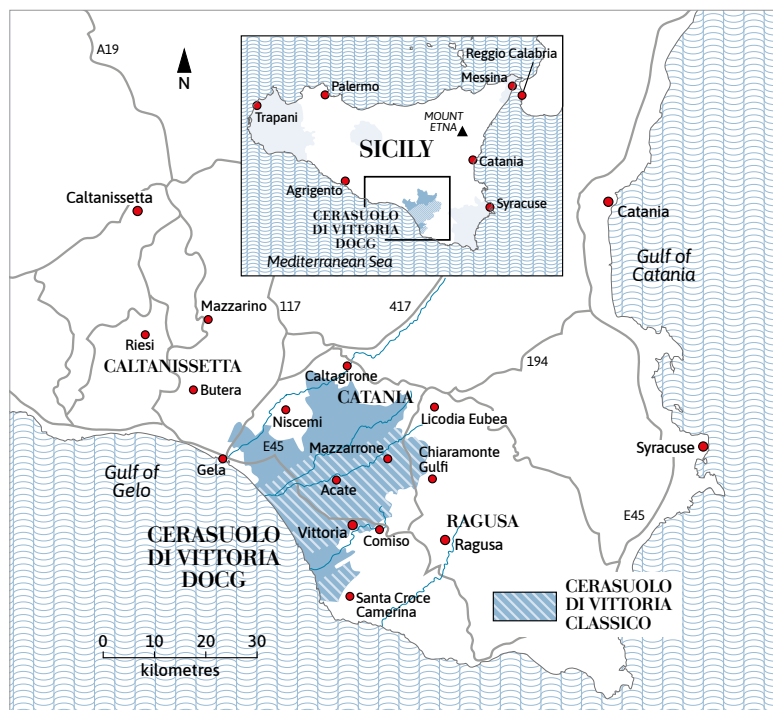
The vineyards at Cortese estate



Arianna Occhipinti

Cerasuolo di Vittoria – obtained in a large area between the provinces of Ragusa, Caltanissetta and Catania – and Cerasuolo di Vittoria Classico – reserved only for vineyards in the historical triangle formed by Vittoria, Acate and Chiaramonte Gulfi. The main difference between the two concerns the minimum maturation times: nine months for the former, giving a crunchy red wine, like a basket of cherries; and 18 months for the Classico, a spicy and velvety wine. Ageing is usually in wood, but steel or amphorae are also used by some winemakers.

Looking at the territory leads us to talk about zoning, a much-debated topic now across Italy. ‘Mapping could prove useful for fans of this style,’ says Girelli. His vineyards on the red earth in Santa Tresa, and on the limestone in Cortese, give different results in the glass. Occhipinti produces a line of ‘Frappato di contrada’, trying to understand whether the idea can be extended to a Cerasuolo. Alessi appears more cautious: ‘There are already three Cerasuolo di Vittoria wines: one coastal, one mid-hill and one near-mountain. We



MAP MAGGIE NELSON

## Cerasuolo di Vittoria: the facts

### Area planted (2021)

147ha

### Production (2021)

5,188hl

### Producers 35

### Area of production

The municipalities of Acate, Chiaramonte Gulfi, Comiso, Ragusa,

Santa Croce Camerina

and Vittoria in the province of Ragusa; Butera, Gela, Mazzarino, Niscemi and Riesi in the province of Caltanissetta; Caltagirone, Licodia Eubea and Mazzarrone in Catania province

**Blend** Must be composed of 50%-70% Nero d'Avola and 30%-50% Frappato, aged for a minimum of nine months, or 18 months for Classico

SOURCE: CONSORZIO DI TUTELA DEL VINO CERASUOLO DI VITTORIA

should enhance the characteristics of each of them even more.’ Half a century after the establishment of the DOC, Cerasuolo di Vittoria is ready to explore its roads of tomorrow.



# A slice of Sicily: Gaia's 10 Cerasuolo di Vittoria reds to try

## ① Occhipinti, Grotte Alte, Classico 2018 94

[agricolaocchipinti.it](http://agricolaocchipinti.it)

Occhipinti's vineyards sit on the limestone rock typical of the area, and most vines are cultivated *ad alberello* (head-trained bush vines). This is an ambitious blend of equal parts Nero d'Avola and Frappato that's given 32 months of ageing in Slavonian oak barrels. An intense fragrance of red cherry, wildflowers and herbal notes is followed by a deep, vibrant and persistent palate. Organic. **Drink** 2023-2028 **Alc** 13%

## ② COS, Delle Fontane, Classico 2017 93

£37.50-£38 (2015) Les Caves du Pyrene, Sip Wines  
US\$45-\$60 Amanti Vino, Eataly Vino

COS has been a pioneer of sustainability since the 1980s. This 60% Nero d'Avola, 40% Frappato blend is born of the red limestone soils of the Contrada (district) delle Fontane vineyards, and aged in Slavonian barrels. Aromas of black cherry, redcurrants and undergrowth followed by a velvety and well-balanced palate of assured longevity. Organic. **Drink** 2023-2027 **Alc** 13%

## ③ Donnafugata, Floramundi 2020 93

£27.99 Liberty Wines

This well-known winery in Marsala [town] is also present in the Acate area in the south, where the soils alternate layers of sand and tuff. The dry 2020 vintage (Nero d'Avola and 30% Frappato) gives aromas of blueberries and violet with hints of black pepper. Harmonious and enveloping with silky tannins – a red that will pair with grilled or baked fish. **Drink** 2023-2026 **Alc** 13%

## ④ Planeta, Dorilli, Classico 2018 93

£26.50-£34.90 Hedonism, The Fine Wine Co,  
The Great Wine Co

Prominent producer Planeta has recovered an ancient estate in the Dorilli countryside near the sea to the south, the vines on soils rich in sand and small pebbles. Moderate yields produce this 70% Nero d'Avola, 30% Frappato blend, aged in old barriques. Aromas of black cherry, prickly pears and cardamom; the mouthfeel is smooth and elegant. **Drink** 2023-2026 **Alc** 13%

## ⑤ Tenuta Bastonaca, Classico 2019 92

£20.13 (2017) London Wine Deliveries

The head-trained bush vines of Contrada

Bastonaca district, raised on red earth soils, suit the landscape and give fragrant fruit. The result is a bright ruby-red wine (equal parts Nero d'Avola and Frappato) of a refreshing drinkability, fermented and aged only in stainless steel. Plum and Morello cherry aromas lead to a crunchy, round and long palate. An expressive, organic Classico. **Drink** 2023-2026 **Alc** 13.5%

## Feudi del Pisciotto 2020 91

[feuidelpisciotto.it](http://feuidelpisciotto.it)

Nero d'Avola (60%) and Frappato (40%) from vineyards located almost at sea level on soils with a sandy tendency. In the cellar, next to the ancient 'palmento' – the traditional building for processing the grapes – there are modern stainless steel tanks and French oak barrels. Intense aromas of ripe pomegranate and balsamic echo; warm and full-bodied in the mouth with a savoury finish. **Drink** 2023-2026 **Alc** 13.5%

## Gulfi 2021 91

£22-£23 Appellation Nation, Astrum Wine Cellars,  
Corks, Field & Fawcett, Hedonism, JN Wine,  
Sociovino, The Solent Cellar

An established name on the Sicilian wine scene, Gulfi also produces an excellent Classico wine aged in wood, but this very young and enjoyable Cerasuolo – 50% Nero d'Avola, 50% Frappato – is an enthralling red aged only in stainless steel. Intense and layered, it displays scents of wild strawberry, peach and floral hints; fresh and juicy, it's a pure expression of the Ragusa terroir. Organic. **Drink** 2023-2026 **Alc** 13.5%

## Santa Tresa 2020 91

£11.50-£15.99 Ocado, The Wine Society,  
Whitebridge Wines

Trentino-native Stefano Girelli chose an evocative place for his Sicilian challenge: the first Cerasuolo di Vittoria of the modern era was bottled in 1950 right in Vittoria's Contrada Santa Tresa. About 15% of the Nero d'Avola grapes of this 60/40 blend with Frappato are left to slightly wither on the vine. Plum and black cherry aromas. Straightforward and tasty with and a spicy finish. Organic. **Drink** 2023-2025 **Alc** 14%

## ⑥ Valle dell'Acate, Classico 2019 91

£19.95-£25 Christopher Keiller, Salusbury  
Winestore, Uncorked



Valle dell'Acate selected the plateau of Biddine Soprana in Acate to grow the grapes for its Cerasuolo: 60% Nero d'Avola, grown on dark and deep soils, and 40% Frappato from lighter and looser soils. The wine ages in barriques and tonneaux for 12 months. Classic aromas of red berries, ripe cherries, liquorice and chocolate precede a taut palate with fine tannins. Perfect with aged Ragusano DOP cheese. Organic. **Drink** 2023-2025 **Alc** 13%

## Terre di Giurfo, Maskaria 2018 90

[terredigiurfo.it](http://terredigiurfo.it)

A 'highlander' Cerasuolo di Vittoria, from vineyards at 550m on soils veined with limestone. The 60% Nero d'Avola and 40% Frappato 'mask' themselves in this blend, aged eight months in tonneaux. The wine has raspberry and blackberry aromas and spicy hints, and the palate is smooth and flowing, leading to a harmonious finish.

**Drink** 2023-2024 **Alc** 13.5% **D**