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The Power Of Mount Etna Ushers In An Old Vine Renaissance

Michelle Williams Contributor ©

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A view of Mt. Etna from Firriato Winery's Cavanera Estate MICHELLE WILLIAMS

It was a pleasant early-autumn afternoon at Firriato Winery's Cavanera Estate on the north-east slopes of Mount Etna.

Cumulus clouds linger in the bright blue sky as the volcano's familiar coronet of smoke dances upward into the atmosphere.

Built atop an ancient lava flow, the Cavanera Etna estate captures the volcano's essence through *Vitus vinifera* vines over 150-years old, some with unknown DNA. Not only are these among the region's oldest vines, but despite phylloxera's presence on Sicily, they remain un-grafted and louse-free.

This treasured vineyard was once on the chopping block in lieu of a parking lot. "When we purchased the winery, the canteen was on the opposite side of the resort. We were looking for a place to put a parking lot. The architect told me 'This is a bad vineyard. Let's build it here.' So now I joke with my agronomist, saying, 'Let's go to the parking cru,'" says Federico Lombardo di Monte Iato, Chief Operating Officer of Firriato Winery.

Mount Etna, a Stratovolcano rising 11,014 feet (3,357 meters), is one of the tallest active volcanos in Europe. History illustrates viticulture here is not for the faint of heart. Yet, those who endure the region's challenges also reap its rewards. A tapestry of sandy soils, high elevation, and cooler springs are anathema for phylloxera. Creating an oasis for own-rooted vines over one-hundred years old that produce mineral-driven, savory, refined wine.

Heroic Viticulture



Donnafugata recovered own-rooted, phylloxera-free ancient Mt. Etna vines. MICHELLE WILLIAMS

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In 2016, Antonio Rallo, CEO of Donnafugata, realized his father’s dream of producing Etna wine. “Etna’s mountain viticulture is fascinating and very different from other traditional wine-producing areas in Sicily,” he says. “It represents a new and exciting challenge for us.”

After decades of winemaking on the island of Pantelleria, Donnafugata is familiar with the challenges of volcanic viticulture. However, the two regions are quite different. Etna's unique volcanic soil originates from millennia of lava flows called *sciare*, gradually building up rock, debris, and ash over time. This extensive mineral composition, continental (alpine in some areas) climate, mountain viticulture, with a wide diurnal shift of air and soil temperature (no thermal inertia here), varied rain-fall and site-specific vineyard microclimates creates distinct wine.

Donnafugata's aim is to capture the volcano in the wine through "recovering" one-hundred plus year-old vines on top sites by slowly pruning them back to the traditional albarelo style. This is a delicate process that can take several years to complete.

Mount Etna Denominazione di Origine Controllata (DOC), established in 1968, looks like a backward shaped "C" curling around the northeastern, eastern, and southern slopes of the volcanic cone. The volcano creates a wide diversity of soil types and the elevation and slope result in a wide variety of weather conditions and topography. These characters, and its famous vineyard specific microclimates, create a sort of island within an island.

High-quality Etna wines are less about harnessing the power of the volcano, and more about seeking to understand her. The key to success for Rallo is identifying superior vineyards, plot management precision, and single-parcel vinification to capture the essence. "The variability of the site-specific vineyards according to exposure, altitude, microclimate, and composition of volcanic soils requires a lot of attention for making a great Etna wine as the peculiarities of each terroir must be perfectly understood," he says.

Learning From Old Vines



Some determined old vines at Palmento Costanzo tunnel through small stone terraces, known as ... [+] MICHELLE WILLIAMS

Hiding along the perimeter of Palmento Costanzo's stunning property is the remains of a deep *sciare* lava flow from 1879. Bordering the flow is a vineyard comprised of over 130 years old, phylloxera free, own-rooted vines. This vineyard was a key reason owners Domenico and Valérie Costanzo purchased the winery. "The original owner was selling the grapes, but when we saw the vineyard, we knew it was special," says Valérie Costanzo.

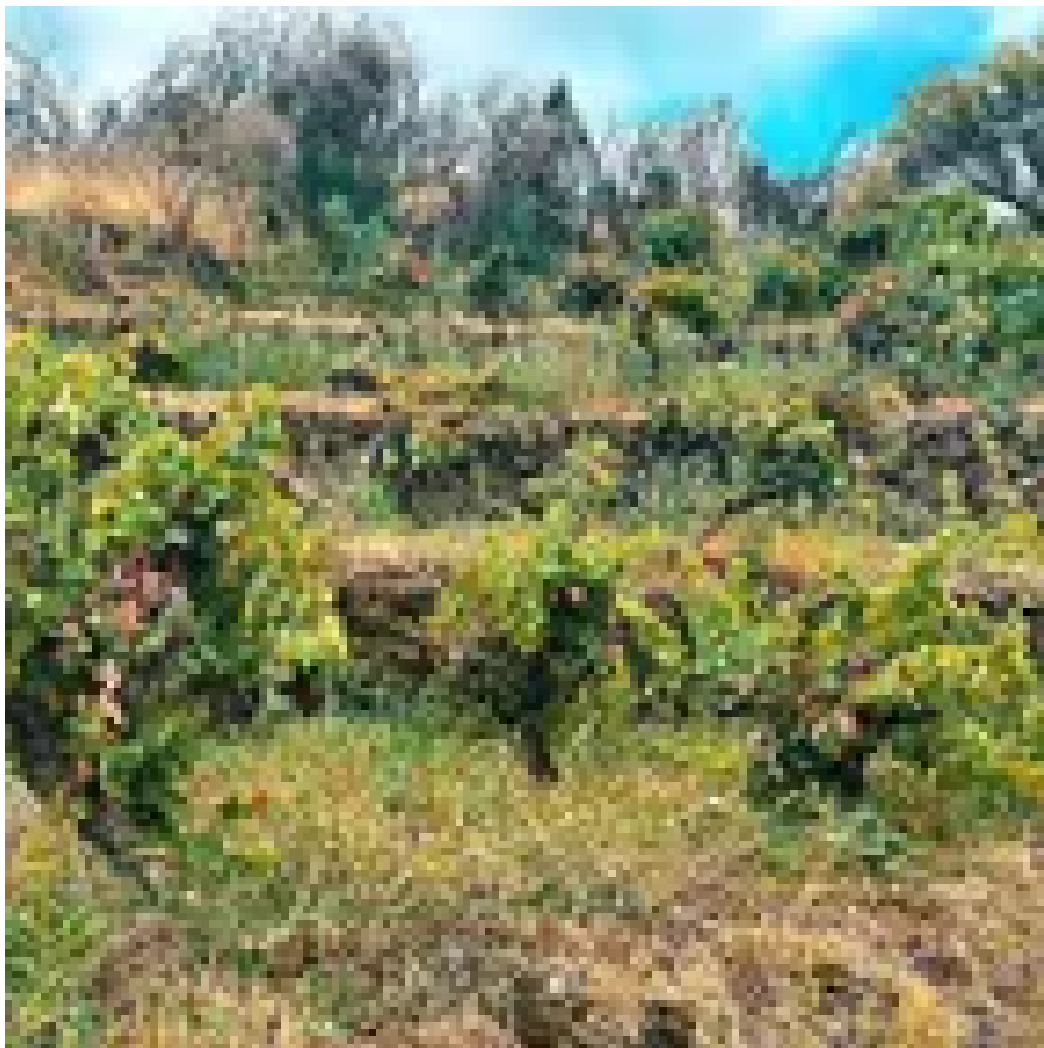
Palmento Costanzo invested in recovering the old vines by removing cement posts in favor of the traditional chestnut for albarello training, propagating new plants from old vine cuttings, tending to each vine by hand, and using organic farming practices, which Costanzo says is not easy here. "I think that being organic must be the focus of this area. It's difficult, of course, because we have to check more for disease," she says. The

abundance of butterflies filling the air speaks to the health of the vineyard.

Many of the determined old vines tunnel their way through small stone terraces, known as *custeri*. It is beautiful witnessing vines with freedom to grow as they wish. “We have the traditional varietals (Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Cappuccino), they are meant to be maintained this way,” she says.

Costanzo is eager to learn what the old vines have to teach. “I think to imagine that they survived till now, they have strength and they are ripe for this reason. They must tell the past to teach us that we don't need to use chemicals,” she says.

Hidden Treasure



Pietradolce Winery's terrace of old vines was once hidden by overgrown vegetation.

MICHELLE WILLIAMS

Driving around Etna's northern slope searching for abandoned vineyards, Michele Faro, co-owner of Pietradolce Winery, and agronomist, Giuseppe Parlavecchio, came upon an area completely covered by overgrown vegetation. Parlavecchio explains with a gleam in his eye, they had a hunch underneath the mounds of brush was a vineyard. They cleared a pathway and discovered a hectare of 80–90-year-old vines.

They recovered the old vineyard, and several others, with extreme care. “In the past these old vines had low production and require special attention, but people did the work with their families. Today, it's different,” says Parlavecchio. “It's an investment, one the Faro family wanted to make. It requires special people to do all the work by hand, pruning each vine requires special attention, like a bonsai plant. No tractors. And in the summer, it is hot. We are totally organic, no chemicals. Nothing is uniform.”

Hiking the north slopes of Etna in the rain to meet the Pietradolce old vines feels like a treasure hunt. Thankfully Parlavecchio and Nina, the energetic winery dog, know the way. The terrace vineyards are home to hundred-plus-year-old vines surrounded by an abundance of trees—fruit, nut, and olive. Plus, wild berries, asparagus, and herbs.

Why spend the time and money searching for and recovering old, own-rooted vines? The old vines have “experience and equilibrium. Even though each vine does not produce much fruit, they give the best expression of Etna,” says Parlavecchio. “They have old memories and lots of personality. Even two meters apart, they are completely different.”

Parlavecchio is passionate about the old vines. “This is hard work. It is the work of passion. Of altitude and low production. Our wines are about balance because the vineyard gives us balance. The old vines give us balance. Bush vines. Complex. We follow Etna, our old vines, and our land.”

Certifying Antiquity



Behind this gate resides some of Mt Etna's oldest vines. Thankfully Firriato Winery did not turn it ... [+] MICHELLE WILLIAMS

Behind a locked wrought-iron fence resides some of the oldest vines on Etna. Albarello trained, with a few penetrating the surrounding *custeri*, and one climbing a tree. While peering through the fence, I am greeted by Federico Lombardo di Monte Iato, Chief Operating Officer of Firriato Winery, who unlocks the gate and introduces me to the vines. I am struck by the buoyant, sponge-like soil, organically farmed and undisturbed from tilling,

providing comfort and security for the vines like a chenille blanket.

“This is an experimental vineyard,” he says. “We found unknown DNA in some of these vines. We have eight unknown types. So, we are preserving them from extinction and studying them.” Pointing to one of the vines, he says, “This one is 168 years old. They have great secrets, great stories.” In collaboration with universities around the world and Etna DOC, Lombardo di Monte Iato is mapping the DNA of ancient vines across the region.

On Etna, volcanic soil takes on a different meaning. Lombardo di Monte Iato believes the secret here is less about geology, and more pedology (soil science). A soil map of the region resembles a mosaic. Firriato’s estate alone is home to five different soils. “I cannot conceive Etna as a single terroir, there are too many variables. Every zone gives a different wine,” he says. He attributes these dynamics to the pre-phylloxera vine’s ability to withstand infestation.

But Lombardo di Monte Iato does not want to simply be taken at his word. In partnering with the University of Palermo, the vines have been certified phylloxera free with a median age of 150 years old, some over 200 years old.

Firriato is juxtaposing these ancient vines with cutting edge modernity. *Signum Ætnæ*, meaning “the symbol of Etna,” is a limited production reserve Etna Rosso wine crafted of certified autonomous grapes from ancient vines cultivated with traditional viticulture and vinification, that includes a sophisticated anti-counterfeit system, registered with blockchain traceability and an optional non-fungible token (NFT) asset purchase.

“This wine is the soul of this place. It is absolutely Etna.”

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