

# Red-Hot Sicily

A focus on quality over quantity, native grapes and a variety of microclimates is reinvigorating this rugged island at the center of Italian winemaking.

BY MONICA LARNER



Why is Sicily so special?" This question was posed to the panelists at a wine conference last year in the city of Ragusa Ibla, in the southeast corner of the Mediterranean island. The panelists—winemakers, landowners and principal representatives of the Sicilian wine industry—all made attempts to answer, but words like "territory," "climate," "history," "tradition," "indigenous" and "sustainability" failed to satisfy.

"That could describe any wine region in the world," said an audience member, to which the panelists grudgingly agreed.

On reflection, the answer was obvious, and I was happy to supply it: sex appeal.

Sicilian sex appeal is at the core of what makes this Italian region so unique today. The island is attractive not simply from an aesthetic point of view with gorgeous beaches, colorful fish markets, Greek temples, friendly people, excellent food and touring opportunities. Emerging is a self-awareness, confidence and philosophical maturity—especially where wine matters are concerned—that make Sicily intellectually seductive as well.

## Sicily's coming of age

Sicilians have been making wine since before the Greeks colonized the island in 750 B.C. Much of its recent wine history has been defined by two things: fortified Marsala (a boom-and-bust cycle whose heyday was arguably the 1800s) and cheap blending wine sold to various regions of Italy and elsewhere in Europe.

Until the 1980s, the island had been known as an industrial producer of bulk wine. Some 90% of Sicily's vineyards were (mostly Trebbiano and Catarratto), largely in Trapani Province.

The 1990s saw the so-called Sicilian Wine Renaissance, which marked a milestone shift from quantity to quality production. Aged, volume-producing vineyards were ripped out and replaced with vines trained on cordon trellises to reduce yields. More red and international varieties were introduced, and the acreage percentage devoted to white grapes dropped to 64%.

Consulting enologist Giacomo Tachis (“the father of Sassicaia”) was first to bring winemaking credibility to the island. Strong brands emerged, namely Tasca d’Almerita, Donnafugata and Planeta, which shifted the narrative to family, territory and grape.

“Sicilian producers proved they could be team players,” says Antonio Rallo of Donnafugata. He’s also the president of Assovini Sicilia, a vintners’ association with 67 members. “Under the extraordinary guidance of a group of luminary leaders, Sicily pulled its act together at a fortuitous moment when both consumers and critics were searching for exciting new territories to discover. They found Sicily.”



## Wine as territory

From 2000 to 2010, a trend celebrating indigenous varieties swept Italy. Suddenly, every forgotten corner of the peninsula claimed its own native or “traditional” grape with genetic distinctions that make it a unique expression of a specific geographic area. The poster grape for this trend is Sicily’s Nero d’Avola.

Today, Nero d’Avola is the island’s second most planted variety after Catarratto. “Like Sangiovese and Tuscany, or Malbec and Argentina, Nero d’Avola and Sicily are forever linked in the eyes of the consumer,” says Alessio Planeta, whose family business has five wineries and 10 vineyard holdings in Sicily.

So, how to characterize Sicily’s wine industry today? It’s driven by the momentum of the past 20 years.

The transformation from wine-as-industry to wine-as-territory has been finalized,” says Marilena Barbera, proprietor and winemaker of Cantine Barbera in Menfi. “Now we are seeing the birth of many tiny producers who are experimenting with new production models.”

A wave of quality-minded boutique wineries has taken root. At the helm is a dynamic new generation of Web-savvy young men and women who speak several foreign languages and have studied international marketing or completed cellar apprenticeships in France, California and Australia.

Sicily’s historic wine dynasties have all recently passed the reins to their youngest members—a refreshingly equal balance of males and females. This demographic shift is more pronounced than in any other Italian region.

With 25 centuries of winemaking history, Sicily is finally coming of age. If Piedmont is storied tradition, Tuscany is nobility and the Veneto is power and versatility, Sicily is Italy’s land of innovation.

## A wine laboratory

More than 400 Sicilian wines were tasted in advance of this feature, and one important trend immediately emerged: the high number of organic, biodynamic and natural wines submitted for review.

“Our experience with organic farming in Sicily has produced higher quality fruit than traditional farming,” says Stefano Girelli, who moved from cool-climate winemaking in his native Trentino (the northernmost region of Italy) to hot-climate Sicily. He is now co-owner of Feudo di Santa Tresa in Vittoria.

“Agriculture is a historic bond that links all Sicilian families,” says Arianna Occhipinti, who at age 29 is one of Sicily’s youngest wine stars. “Luckily, this moment is driven by a strong sense of conscientiousness, with many young enologists and viticulturists who strive to experience agriculture in the most positive way possible. Experimentation and curiosity are fundamental.”

From the Vittoria area, Occhipinti’s wines, under her own label, are biodynamic; the vines are farmed organically and fermentation takes place using indigenous yeasts.

Sicily is a farmers’ wonderland. It has roughly 300 days of abundant sunshine per year, temperate Mediterranean influences, island winds that blow from the four cardinal points to protect against frost and mildew, and one of the longest harvests on the planet (lasting more than 90 days, spanning one season to the next).

“Thanks to our climate, Sicily is ‘organic’ by definition,” says Frank Cornelissen, who makes natural wines aged in clay amphorae on Mount Etna.

Besides climate, another ace up Sicily’s sleeve is biodiversity. With 19 classified native grape varieties, Sicily boasts a unique genetic patrimony. Island-wide, or “regional,” grapes are Catarratto, Inzolia and Nero d’Avola. But “local” grapes limited to pinpoint areas include Carricante (Etna), Frappato (Vittoria), Grillo (Palermo and Trapani), Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Cappuccio (Etna) and Nocera (Faro).

“In addition to the ampelographic, biochemical and genetic work we are doing to protect our biodiversity, we have also launched a project to safeguard vitigni reliquia, or so-called antique varieties,” says Rallo. These grapes—Lucignola, Catanese Nera, Dunnuni and Tintorè, among others—were saved from extinction and are slowly being reintroduced for commercial viability.

Of course, Sicily is also home to many international varieties, with Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Chardonnay showing impressive results.

Innovation in Sicily does not begin and end with grape varieties. It extends to energy, sustainability and savvy use of the Internet. Vintner Giacomo d’Alessandro installed 800-square meters of solar panels capable of producing 85 kilowatt hours (kWh) of energy just four miles from Agrigento’s famed Temple of Concordia (built in 430 B.C.).

“Tasca d’Almerita and Planeta have started the SOStain project that certifies sustainable winegrowing,” says Alessio Planeta. “We are also working with the Italian Ministry of the Environment to study ways of reducing water and carbon footprints.”

Lastly, and perhaps due to the insular nature of island culture, Sicily has developed a keen relationship with the Internet. Barbera is arguably Sicily’s (maybe Italy’s) most prolific social media communicator. Sicily regularly nabs top prizes for Web site design. And Planeta has more Facebook “Likes” than Napa’s iconic Robert Mondavi Winery.

## Sicilian subzones

Amidst the excitement and innovation, no project is more important to Sicily’s core identity than the mapping of its subzones.

“Sicily is a continent of wine,” says Giuseppe Longo, managing director of Assovini Sicilia. “Within that continent, however, are pockets of unique climate, territory and altitude. It’s no coincidence that so many indigenous grape varieties formed over the millennia.”

In the past, Sicily was depicted as an amorphous blob of bulk wine at the center of the Mediterranean. Today, it counts 22 DOC zones (including Alcamo, Contea di Sclafani, Contessa Entellina, Etna, Erice, Faro, Marsala, Menfi, Monreale, Noto, Sambuca di Sicilia, Sciacca plus the smaller islands of Lipari and Pantelleria). It has one DOCG zone, Cerasuolo di Vittoria.



Each of these subzones is focused on shaping a distinct identity expressed through grape variety, geography and local branding.

Take media darling Mount Etna, for example. Many of Wine Enthusiast's highest ratings from this round of blind tastings went to Nerello Mascalese, Nerello Cappuccio and Carricante wines whose fruit was farmed with indigenous techniques—many vines grow without trellising in what is called the alberello (“little tree”) style, and mules are still sometimes used on the blackened slopes of the dangerous volcano. Talk about wine sex appeal.

Likened to Burgundian Pinot Noir, Etna's red blends deliver the grace of a ballerina and the power of a kickboxer. They are packed tightly with wild berry, cassis, cola and smoky gravel notes and show firm, age-worthy tannins.

Another area of interest is Cerasuolo di Vittoria and the work being done with Frappato. These are less complex red wines, which can even be served slightly chilled, but they pair beautifully with fish, lean meats and fresh vegetables. Many are produced with organic and biodynamic fruit, and, overall, they're clean and delicious.

A special nod goes to Faro (at the northern tip of the island near Messina) and the Nocera grape. Faro could well be Sicily's next hot spot because of the elegance, deep complexity and longevity of its red wines. Noto, home to some of Sicily's best Nero d'Avola, and Menfi, a garden of native and international varieties on the southern side of Sicily, are also worthy of praise.

“I like to say that Sicily is Italy's Cinderella story,” says Vinzia Novara of Firriato, a Trapani winery producing wines from Nero d'Avola and Perricone, among others. Firriato was also the first producer to plant vines on the island of Favignana. “We believed in ourselves, in our strengths,” Novara says, “and we made miracles happen.”

## Select Wines of Sicily

Given Sicily's generally warm, sunny climate, it should come as no surprise that many of the island's best wines are red. Here are six recently reviewed favorites (five red and one white), ranging in price from a modest \$8 up to \$80. All are based on Sicily's indigenous grape varieties.

### 94 Girolamo Russo 2008 San Lorenzo (Etna).

One of the ultimate expressions of Etna, San Lorenzo is an elegant, determined and sophisticated wine with a steady stream of delicate aromas—wild berry, crushed granite, smoke and cola—that build in momentum and evolve beautifully over time. The mouthfeel is firm and structured, with polished tannins and a bright berry endnote. A Marc de Grazia selection, various American importers. Cellar Selection.

**abv:** 14.5%      **Price:** \$55

### 92 Palari 2008 Faro.

The largely unexplored Faro denomination in the northern point of Sicily is producing some of the island's best wines. The promising Nocera grape variety is used here, and Palari vintner Salvatore Geraci is one of its biggest proponents. This blended red is finely embroidered with subtle notes of forest berry, cassis, leather and spice. Panebianco.

**abv:** 13.5%      **Price:** \$80

**91 Feudo Montoni 2008 Vrucara Nero d'Avola (Sicilia).**

Vintner Fabio Sireci is a hard-working young man who knows the value of his territory. Blessed with some of the most beautiful vineyards in an isolated spot in central Sicily (Contea di Sclafani), his full attention goes to the quality of his fruit. This top-shelf expression of Nero d'Avola offers bright red fruit and softly toasted almond. Selected Estates of Europe Ltd.

**abv:** 13.5%      **Price:** \$40

**90 Graci 2010 Quota 600 (Etna).**

A blend of Carricante and Catarratto from vineyards planted 600 meters above sea level on the slopes of Mt. Etna, Quota 600 is among Sicily's best white wines. Compact, tonic and streamlined, it does a beautiful job of presenting delicate floral and peach fruit aromas against a more austere backdrop of crushed stone and talc powder. Sherbrooke Cellars.

**abv:** 12.5%      **Price:** \$39

**88 Valle dell'Acate 2010 Il Frappato (Vittoria).**

Il Frappato is a seriously fun wine that would pair with pasta, pizza or even spicy Indian food. It's a light, crisp red wine (serve it slightly chilled) with bright berry aromas of blueberry and wild strawberry. It's informal but attractively layered at the same time. Polaner Selections.

**abv:** 13%      **Price:** \$22

**86 Fondo Antico 2010 I Versi Rosso (Sicilia).**

I Versi is a youthful blend of Nero d'Avola, Merlot and Syrah that offers plump aromas of ripe cherry and blackberry backed by soft tones of cinnamon and toasted almond. It's a perfect pairing match to a heaping plate of spaghetti carbonara with crispy fried bacon. Ideal Wine and Spirits Co. Inc. Best Buy.

**abv:** 13.5%      **Price:** \$8