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## L'Avventura of Making Wine on a Volcano

The winemakers of Sicily's Etna region brave hail, rain, snow and an active volcano. But the risks have been outweighed by the rewards; their wines are some of the most interesting being produced in Italy



ILLUSTRATION: JULIEN PACAUD



By

**LETTIE TEAGUE**

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**GREAT WINEMAKERS** thrive on adversity. They embrace marginal climates, temperamental grapes and growing conditions generally ill-suited to the faint of heart. The winemakers of the Etna region of Sicily are a particularly courageous bunch. They risk hail, rain, snow *and* an active volcano in pursuit of their goal: to produce some of the greatest wines in the world.

“Every year there is something really nutty you don’t understand here,” winemaker Marco de Grazia told me last month as we stood in the courtyard of his Tenuta delle Terre Nere winery on the last day of harvest. For example, a few decades ago, lava buried an entire vineyard. And in 2014, a year that Mr. de Grazia called his “very best,” he lost 20% of his harvest to hail.

But braving the elements—and frequent ash showers—has its rewards. Some of the most interesting and characterful wines in Sicily, if not all of Italy, have been produced here in recent years, thanks to a combination of new talent and great old terroir.

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officially recognized growing zone, encompasses vineyards on the northern, eastern and southern slopes of Mount Etna. Its mineral-rich soil, particularly good for growing grapes, is ever-evolving as Etna continues to spew steam, ash and lava. The climate also varies, ranging from alpine temperatures at higher elevations to warmer climes below.

Though these conditions complicate the creation of great wine, critically praised bottlings from wineries such as Mr. de Grazia’s Tenuta delle Terre Nere, Benanti, Passopisciaro and Tenuta di Fessina have made Etna much sought-after by winemakers. The relative bargain price of the region’s vineyard land is another draw. While a hectare (2.47 acres) of great land in Tuscany could cost as much as €1 million (\$1.1 million), a planted hectare on Etna’s desirable north side can cost €80,000-€100,000, according to

Mr. de Grazia.

A



A view of the volcano out of Mr. de Grazia's dining room window. PHOTO: LETTIE TEAGUE/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

well-known winemaking consultant, Mr. de Grazia left Tuscany in 2004 to make wine in Etna, convinced of the region's promise. While he's been realizing much of that potential, there are still plenty of challenges. "The market here is very primitive," he said of Etna. "Grapes that are good, bad and indifferent cost the same."

Like Mr. de Grazia, many of Etna's superstar producers come from other places in Italy and the world. Passopisciaro's Andrea Franchetti was an actor and restaurant manager in Rome and, for a time, a wine importer in New York; Frank Cornelissen, a self-taught winemaker, came from Belgium; Massimiliano Calabretta lives part-time in Genoa; and Silvia Maestrelli, a Tuscan businesswoman, bought Tenuta di Fessina in 2007.

One of the few natives is enologist Salvo Foti, who put Etna on the winemaking map over 20 years ago when he partnered with Giuseppe Benanti of Benanti, a winery on the

southeast side of the volcano. Before their collaboration, the wines of Etna were largely undistinguished *vini di pasta*. The Benanti Pietramarina Etna Bianco Superiore was the first Etna wine I tasted, eight years ago, and I was so impressed that I traveled to Sicily to meet Mr. Foti in person. (Messrs. Foti and Benanti have since parted ways, and Mr. Benanti's sons now run the family winery.)

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Pietramarina is still one of the few great Etna whites produced from the native Carricante grape. Another, Mr. de Grazia's lush and stunning 2013 Cuvèe delle Vigne Niche Etna Bianco, was one of the three best whites of my recent trip, along with the 2010 Benanti Pietramarina and 2013 Tenuta di Fessina A'Puddara.

The vast majority of Etna wines are red, produced from the Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Cappuccio grapes. The undisputed star, Nerello Mascalese has been compared with Burgundy Pinot Noir and Piedmont Nebbiolo, and may be best described as a combination of the two. A few vintners, like Benanti, make good wines using Nerello Cappuccio, but it's mostly overlooked and, like Carricante, often underrated.

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*'Some of the most interesting and characterful wines in Italy have been produced in Etna in recent years.'*

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Some of the best wines in Etna—red or white—are produced in small zones known as *contrade*, defined by a specific location and sometimes even lava flow. As certain *contrade* became synonymous with the most sought-after Etna wines, local winemakers, in particular Messrs. de Grazia and Franchetti, championed their inclusion on labels. Mr. de Grazia, for example, uses grapes from four different *contrade* to make his most-acclaimed reds: Santo Spirito (feminine and delicate), Guardiola (concentrated and rich) and Solitano (a beautiful synthesis of the two).

Interestingly, Mr. Franchetti's wines are actually made outside the Etna DOC. His vineyards are at such high elevations that they weren't part of the original zoning. And,

because they are outside the DOC, the wines cannot carry the contrade names on the label either. Mr. Franchetti, however, cleverly circumvents this by hanging tags with the contrade names around the necks of his bottles sold at the winery and in stores.

I tasted his extensive range of 2013 wines, which are just arriving in the U.S. market, and found the Passopisciaro Porcaria—a dense, mouth-filling wine—the most immediately impressive. Others, while admirable, were still fairly young, tannic and closed.

My visit to Passopisciaro took place during a blinding rainstorm that made the outline of the steep, winding road to his winery almost impossible to see. It was nerve-racking, especially since the windshield wipers didn't work that well, but it gave me a sense of the hardships—and the beauty—that make Etna one of the most distinctive places in Italy, if not the world.

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### Oenophile // Five Etna Wines That Will Blow You Away



From left: 2010 Benanti Pietramarina Etna Bianco Superiore, 2013 Tenuta delle Terre Nere Etna Rosso, 2013 Tascante Buonora Carricante, 2013 Tenuta di Fessina A'Puddara and 2005 Calabretta Nerello Mascalese Vigne Vecchie *PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

### **2010 Benanti Pietramarina Etna Bianco Superiore \$46**

This was the first truly memorable Etna wine I ever tasted. Made by one of the region's leading producers, it's a full-bodied, lush but beautifully balanced white, with a floral nose and a firm mineral thread.

### **2013 Tenuta delle Terre Nere Etna Rosso \$18**

Although superstar winemaker Marco de Grazia makes some of the greatest small-

production contrade wines in Etna, his basic Rosso—a lively, savory red—is both a great buy and a great introduction to the region’s wines.

### **2013 Tascante Buonora Carricante \$22**

Giuseppe Tasca, a well-known producer in western Sicily, saw the promise of Etna and bought 35 acres of vineyard in 2008. This crisp rendition of the Carricante grape is “a wine that reflects the soil from which it is born,” according to the Tascas.

### **2013 Tenuta di Fessina A’Puddara \$35**

Aged in French oak for nine months, this sumptuous Carricante white is marked by beguiling floral aromas. Its name translates as “mother hen” and refers to the fact that Sicily is “a mother to all who live here.” (Sicilians are a poetic bunch.)

### **2005 Calabretta Nerello Mascalese Vigne Vecchie \$25**

Massimiliano Calabretta opted out of the Etna DOC, and the style of this red is different from other, more modern Etna Rosso bottlings. It’s a soft Old World-style wine, with notes of earth and tobacco reminiscent of a traditional Barolo.

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