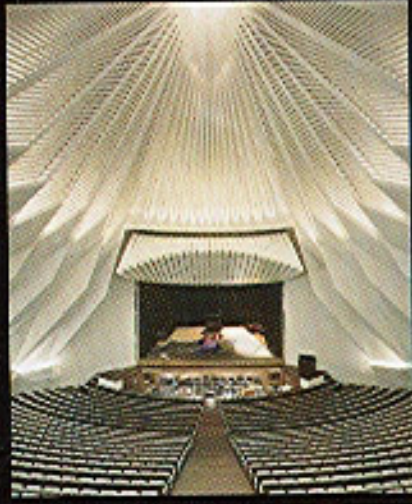
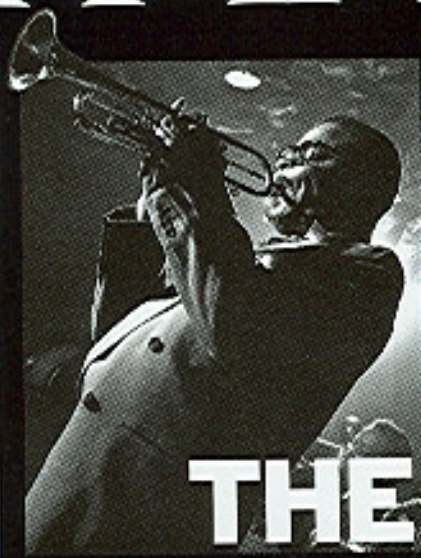


DEPARTURES

MAY/JUNE 2006 \$10



CULTURE



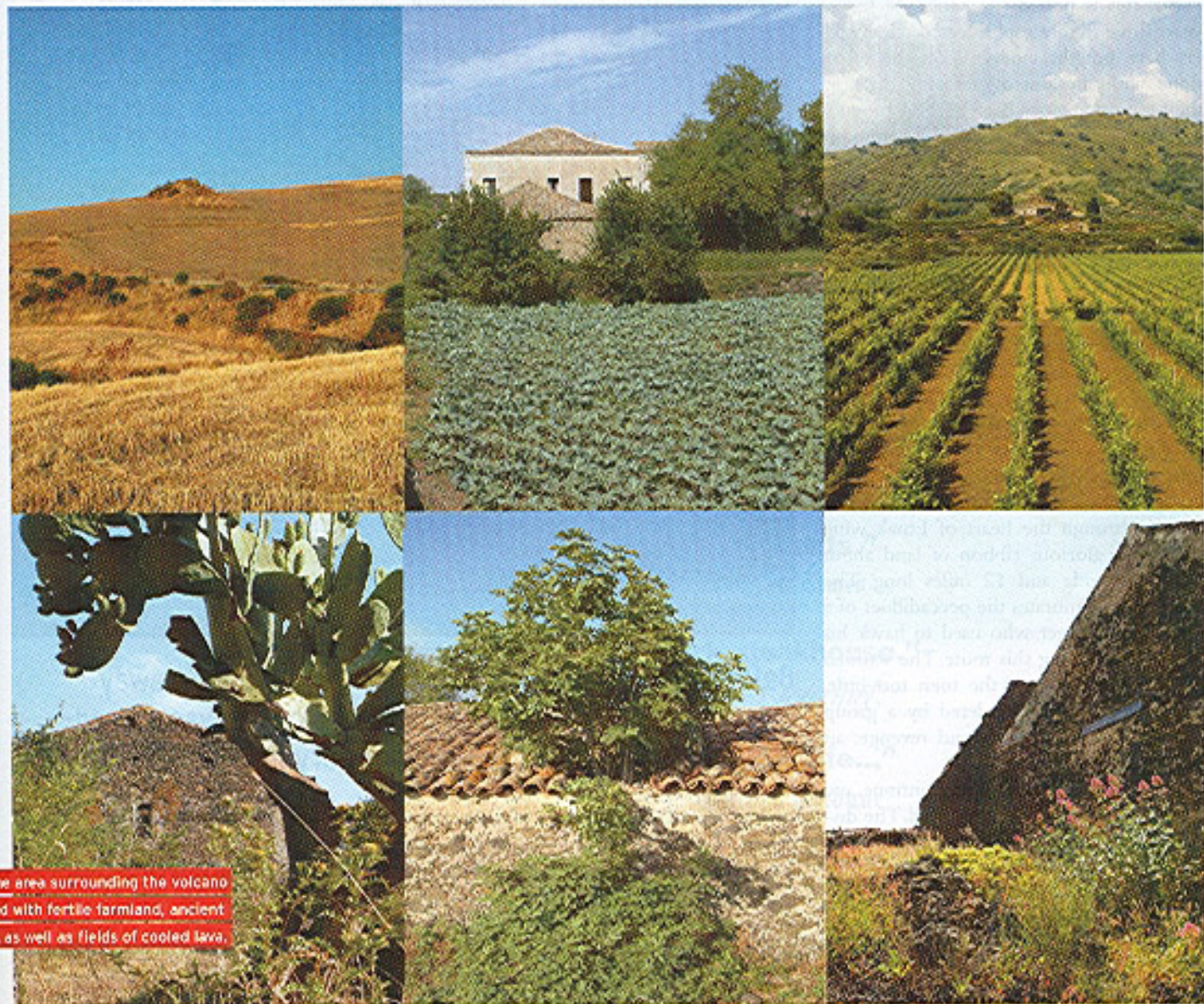
ISSUE



MUSIC FASHION ARCHITECTURE PHOTOGRAPHY COLLECTING DESIGN ART FOOD

The VOLCANO LOVERS

High on Mount Etna, three vintners of extraordinary talent are reinvigorating the winemaking traditions of Sicily's still-active volcano. **BY MICHAEL GREENBERG**



The area surrounding the volcano is dotted with fertile farmland, ancient ruins, as well as fields of cooled lava.

AT 11,000 FEET TALL, MOUNT ETNA, EUROPE'S LARGEST active volcano, presides over eastern Sicily with a deceptive serenity. The Roman name for the mountain is *Actna* (possibly derived from the ancient Greek word *aitō*, meaning "I burn"). And burn it does. In the fifth century B.C., legend has it, the philosopher Empedocles leaped into its main crater to prove he was immortal. (He was never heard from again.) As recently as 2002 the volcano erupted in a fierce spray that lit up the surrounding sea for miles. On quieter days, its steamlike

breath casts a potent spell over the landscape, a reminder to those who live there that they are at the mercy of the volcano. Etna can be benevolent: The fields of volcanic soil on its lower slopes are among the most fertile on the planet. But just as biblical are the patches of scorched earth from recent lava spills. The two exist side by side, in a constant dichotomy of fertility and desolation. "Etna provides us," says a local poet, "with a breathing god."

No less an authority than Homer sang the praises of Etna's vineyards some 2,800 years ago, declaring them "watered by Zeus,

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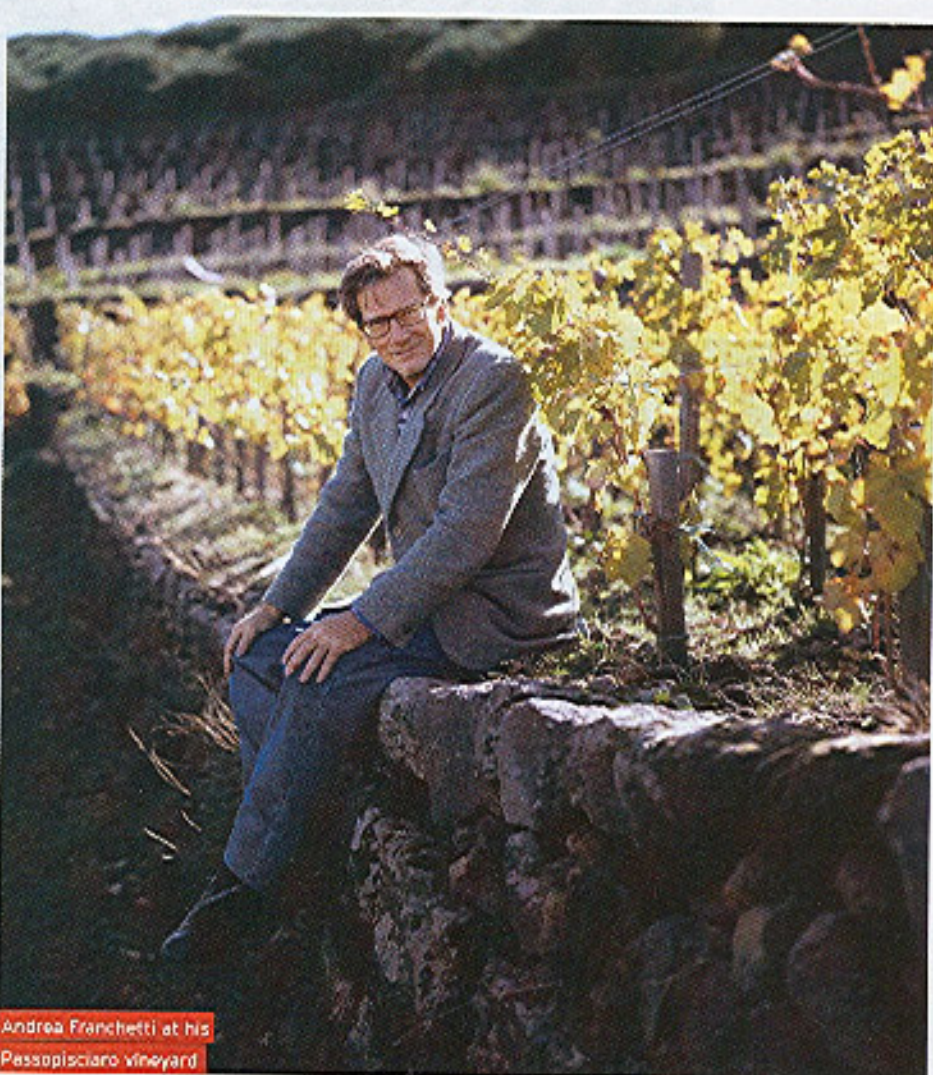
yielding wine of strength in which ambrosia and nectar flowed in abundance." Today, on the volcano's bucolic north slope, those vineyards can still be found tucked away among sleepy medieval villages. Sublimely uninterested in the lure of global marketing, locals have long been content to enjoy the nectar just among themselves. As a result, Etna's Nerello, as the native grape is called, is virtually unknown outside Sicily.

But this is poised to change. In recent years three highly sophisticated winemakers have bought vineyards on the north slope with the aim of restoring them to their forgotten glory. Each of these producers embraces a completely different philosophy. For adventurous aficionados such a development is excellent news: Friendly competition is turning Etna into a fascinating testing ground for the wine world's varying contemporary styles.

EAGER TO TASTE THE FRUITS OF their efforts, I fly to Catania, eastern Sicily's largest city, pick up a rented car, and slowly wend my way to the volcano's north side. After climbing through a couple of drowsy towns, I reach Passopisciaro, literally "fishmonger's road." At an altitude of 2,000 feet, it runs through the heart of Etna's wine country, a glorious ribbon of land about one mile wide and 12 miles long. The name commemorates the peccadilloes of a young fishmonger who used to hawk his *frutti di mare* along this route. The women liked him too much, the men too little. Eventually he was murdered by a group of jealous farmers. Love and revenge: an archetypal Sicilian tale.

It is a sparkling day as I continue my ascent onto a higher parallel road. The distance from Passopisciaro is negligible, but with the change in elevation comes a dramatically different world. Before me lies a field of ashen stone from a lava spill in the eighties; a few feet away an elderly couple are shaking olives from a tree in a small grove that was spared—a perfect portrait of Etna's fury and largesse.

After a couple of miles I reach the vineyards of Andrea Franchetti, at 3,300 feet the highest point for the cultivation of grapes—or anything else—on Etna. An Italian aristocrat in his mid-fifties, Franchetti is powerfully built and pleasantly genteel. "I arrived here four years ago," he tells me. "The area had exactly what I was looking for: deep, rich, powdery soil, late-



Andrea Franchetti at his Passopisciaro vineyard

Before me lies a field of ashen stone; a few feet away a couple are shaking olives from a tree that was spared—a perfect portrait of the volcano's fury and largesse.

harvest grapes, and the sort of saturating light that illuminates my plants equally on every side." I ask if the constant possibility of volcanic eruption gives him pause. "On the contrary," Franchetti says with a smile. "This is gladiatorial winemaking. Everything or nothing. It gives the enterprise a special fatalism and sharpness."

The world of wine is often seen as being divided between those who seek the supreme expression of a territory's soil from a single grape—the so-called Burgundy camp—and those who blend grapes, as in the great wines of Bordeaux. Franchetti is in the latter camp, and expectations for his Etna experiment are high. "The idea is to create *terroir* where none existed, an interpretation of place, an invention."

He has already succeeded in doing this in a part of Tuscany where grapevines had not existed, fashioning what the influential critic Robert Parker has referred to as "the wines of a genius."

True to his Bordeaux-inspired approach, Franchetti is introducing a new grape to the volcano—Cesanese, from the Lazio region, which includes Rome. His hunch is that the grape's lush aromatic qualities will harmonize with Etna's acidic soil—"the ineffable combination of contrary impulses," he explains. He takes me down to his cellar, where three men are at work hosing buckets and draining lees from a vat. They greet Franchetti warmly, protective of him, it seems, and vaguely ironic, like soldiers or subordinate members of a

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gang. "Sicilians are just as cosmopolitan as New Yorkers," he says. "They've been dealing with newcomers since the ancient Greeks arrived."

On an impulse he offers me a taste of his Ceanese, which is still aging and won't be ready to drink until 2007. Carefully, one of his employees pulls the stopper from the top of a racked barrel. He dips in the thief, as the long glass baster is called, and draws a sample. An expectant silence descends. Behind his thick glasses Franchetti watches impassively, with a hint of pride. I am put in mind of an artist in his studio letting an outsider view his most ambitious work in progress. It is a stately, complicated wine, profound rather than obliging—one that

An expansive and erudite Florentine with a degree in philosophy and classics, De Grazia is a persuasive advocate for the revival of Etna's native grape. His wine-consulting company, Marc de Grazia Selections, is celebrating its 26th year. His Etna vineyards represent the apotheosis of his experience with wine—the expression of a classical ideal.

The winery is a blur of activity. A work crew is in the process of enlarging a cellar, and De Grazia's small olive-growing operation is in full production. At the same time, his 2005 vintage has just completed

the remark that D. H. Lawrence made after visiting Etna: "Anyone who has once known this land can never be quite free from the nostalgia for it."

Betraying his friendly rivalry with Franchetti, De Grazia takes pains to let me know that his winemaker's heart is with the single-grape Burgundy school. "The challenge is to take this great traditional grape and coax from it the images of my encounter with these different patches of land, each of which produces a distinct wine. After a while, if I am successful, people will recognize these crus the way they recognize the sentences of certain writers. This is the meaning of *terroir*. It self-perpetuates. It carries on."

He invites me to lunch at a restaurant in the village of Randazzo, at the northwestern edge of the prime wine-growing region. We order *osso buco*, surprisingly delicate in a light broth, accompanied by De Grazia's 2004 vintage, which has just been bottled. The wine's balance is perfect, the tannins powerful yet soft. Its underlying liveliness brings to mind a young Barolo. As the wine opens up during our meal, it grows deeper and more silken, a superb vintage that will only improve as it continues to harden with time. De Grazia is justifiably triumphant, caressing the cork and holding it affectionately to his nose. "Life on Etna can be difficult," he says, "but this is the reward."

Finally, I look up Frank Cornelissen in the village of Sokechiata. A thin, bearded Belgian, Cornelissen is creating wine that is free of additives, stabilizers, filters, or treatments of any kind. Though he follows many of the tenets of biodynamic winemaking, he resists the label, preferring



A 1572 map of Catania with Etna, "the breathing god," at top

doesn't gush at you but reveals itself in waves. Franchetti is obviously pleased with it, though he is still tinkering with the blend. "I may add a bit of Petit Verdot," he says, "which I've planted in smaller amounts." Clearly he has no patience for those who object to the "sacrilege" of bringing foreign grapes to the ancient volcano. "Ultimately, the wine is more important than the grapes that go into it," he says. "What you taste isn't merely an expression of nature; it is nature and thought combined. One of the pleasures of winemaking is that like art, it gives you the chance to break long-standing traditions, to create something new. You try to get to the ethos of a place, to discover what belongs."

A few days later I catch up with Marco de Grazia at his impressive estate, Tenuta delle Terre Nere, nestled in a peaceful hollow a couple of miles from Franchetti's vineyards.

the delicate phase of fermentation and has been moved into barrels. Nevertheless, De Grazia finds time to take me on a walk through his property. He seems relieved to be amid the tranquility of his wrinkled vines, some of which are more than 140 years old. "People have been making wine from this soil since civilization began," he says with a glint of excitement. "It puts us in direct contact with our collective past." Unique in Italy, the vineyards are terraced with lava stone walls that have been built into the ground, easing the slope's steepness and adding to the ancient feel of the landscape. I think of

VOLCANIC SPLASH

Set to arrive in America this spring, 2004 vintages from Mount Etna's vineyards offer an excellent example of the volcano's bounty.

Passopisciaro

Andrea Franchetti's wine is like a rough plank of wood that has been rounded and smoothed by a master craftsman. Dignified and complex, with an outstanding finish. \$35

Guardiola, Tenuta delle Terre Nere

Marco de Grazia's Guardiola, made from a single varietal, is stately yet silken, with the structure of a classic. \$37

Caldenera Sottana, Tenuta delle Terre Nere

De Grazia's less expensive bottling is soft and lively, with a merry, berry-rich quality. \$23

Magma, Frank Cornelissen

Cornelissen culls but a few ounces of liquid from each of his vines—the result is concentrated and otherworldly. The 2004 vintage will arrive in September; 2003 is available now. \$290

Contadino-Rosso, Frank Cornelissen

The vintner's old-world wine could easily have been the *vin d'oble* of ancient times. Uncompromising yet surprisingly delicate and light. \$35

Wines from Mount Etna are never hard to find; two excellent resources are www.vinodisicilia.com and www.cornelissenwines.com.

Your home in the country. In the city.



In the cellar of Azienda Agricola Frank Cornelissen winery, the vintner and his wife, Yoko Sano, stand atop buried clay pots used for aging wine.

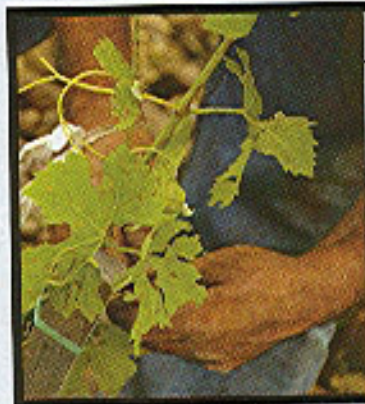
Instead to say that he adheres to what he calls a cosmic philosophy, following the natural laws of soil and sky: the viticulturalist's version of William Blake's marriage between heaven and earth. I find him in his shedlike cellar crowded with bottles, tools, and the 400-liter terra-cotta vases in which he ferments and ages his wine. His wife, Yoko Sano, is separating grapes from their stems prior to crushing, which Cornelissen does by foot in a wooden vat. "A monk's job," she says laughing. The vases are buried in the volcanic rock of the cellar floor, covered with lids that look as heavy as the boulder that blocked the entrance to the Cyclopes' mythical Etna cave. "Wood burns the flavor," he explains. "Clay is purer. It allows the grapes to be completely what they are."

Cornelissen's output is tiny—about 8,000 bottles annually, a fifth of which is his top-quality Magna. It quickly sells out at around \$100 per bottle. This year, however, Cornelissen's finest grapes didn't meet his exacting standards for Magna. "Autumn

came early and there was a great deal of rain," he says sadly. Had he been able to harvest under the full moon, he believes, the grapes would have made a crucial leap in maturation. Instead he was forced to bring them in a little early, before they were perfectly ripe, and he is bottling the result with his less expensive wines.

As for savoring his wines? Best done during a waxing moon, when it is, according to Cornelissen, more aromatic. Nev-

ertheless, he extracts a sample of his 2004 Magna from one of the sunken vases. The color is palish red, deeper at the edges, a naked drink that comes at you with a thrilling animal power. "After an hour or two of exposure to the air, the color becomes as dark as volcanic ash," he tells me. Drinking it while looking out at the lava stone and the golden terraced fields, I picture the "wine of strength, watered by Zeus" that Homer so admired. ■



ETNA'S ANCIENT GRAPE

Native to Etna, Nerello has been cultivated on the volcano since the dawn of civilization, making it as old as any wine grape on the planet. The vines are free-standing in the traditional *alberello* style—a noble sight in the vineyards. Etna's unique volcanic soil goes down to 35 feet, giving the vines an extraordinarily long life span. Plants 140 years old and still thriving are common. Wine from the higher elevations tends to be superior, with firm rounded tannins and an elegant body that has a lot in common with Europe's northern wines. In fact, during a blight in France in the twenties, Nerello is rumored to have been sold as Bordeaux. Many of Europe's most sophisticated palates were none the wiser.