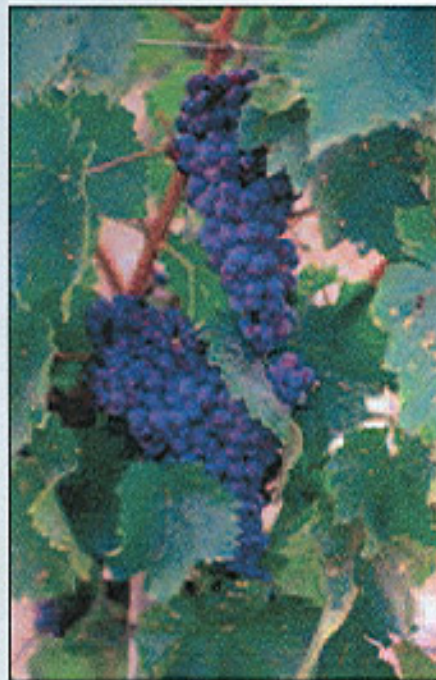


Clear vista The colorful seaside city of Erice sits above Trapani. It is known for delectable sweets and its ancient temple to Venus. Below, Nero d'Avola grapes are Sicily's red wine flagship.

Drinking from Sicily



After years on the 'B' list, Sicilian vintners are finally making a move for the spotlight

*Story and photos by
Monica Lerner*

So much attention has been heaped upon the Sicilian wine renaissance in recent years, you might be tempted to brush it off as mere marketing fizz.

The truth is that something very special is happening in island vineyards.

With an abundance of sunshine, ideal growing conditions, fertile land with gentle slopes and cooling breezes to keep grapes healthy, Sicily's vintners have few excuses for making bad wine. Yet, decidedly unsophisticated plonk is precisely what Sicily offered, back when it paid to grow for quantity, not quality.

Today, thanks to a handful of dedicated producers driven by stiffer competition from abroad, many of the wines released are beautiful expressions of Sicily itself. They are spicy, sassy, savory, rich in color and often higher in alcohol content. They enjoy special cult status, and like the tasty geographic morsel they represent, they pack loads of sex appeal.

"Sicily is an enological Etna," says Diego Cusumano who runs his boutique winery with his brother Alberto. "More than a wine renaissance, we are sitting on a volcano. Pressure has been building for a long time and it's finally ready to explode."

The Mediterranean island produces more wine than any other Italian region. With 400,000 acres planted to vine, Sicily's grape-growing potential is bigger than all of Australia. But a growing number of producers have invested in modern equipment and high profile consultants to make fantastic wine available at reasonable prices.

Among Sicily's most recognized producers are Rappalà, Donnafugata, Regaleali,

Sicily en Primeur

Sicily's vintners have finally thrown themselves a long-overdue coming out party. *Sicily en Primeur*, the first annual preview tasting event, was held March 12 to 14 in Palermo's Castello Utveglio, perched on the panoramic Monte Pellegrino that rises above the city. Some 25 producers represented by *Assovin Sicilia*, an association of winemakers, drew barrel samples for a panel of international wine critics. The event represents the first official tasting of the 2003 vintage.

2003 saw generally good conditions for island winemakers. Sicily got a few days of heavy rain in August that revitalized plants after the summer scorcher. "We got more sun and more rain than usual and came out very well," says a spokesperson for Donnafugata, which has vineyards in Contessa Ertellina. Too much rain did not help harvest conditions on Mount Etna, on the opposite end of the island. "We didn't bother harvesting one third of our fruit because it was hanging rotten on the vine," says Salvo Foti, enologist with Benanti.

Planeta and Corvo. The latter is the poster child of Sicily's enological revival. Corvo was owned by the regional government from 1961 to 2001 when it, Duca di Salaparuta and Florio were sold to Ilva, producers of Amaretto di Saronno. The parent company invested heavily in new technology and made news in February when it purchased vineyards in three different locations. The storied winery had not owned land in almost a century, and the symbolic move severed it from the murky world of grape suppliers it once relied on, giving greater control over production.

Less stringent DOC regulations are another attraction. They afford more experimentation possibilities and blending combinations. Some of Sicily's flagship wines are made of grapes indigenous to the island, like the robust Nero d'Avola, mixed with international grapes, like Cabernet Sauvignon.

Sicily is raising eyebrows in Italy's traditional wine regions. Zonia, based in Veneto, owns the Principi di Butera estate on Sicily's south coast. Another example is Andrea Franchetti, the man behind Tuscany's Tenuta di Trinoro, who makes some of Italy's most expensive and celebrated bottles.

Why would a man of Franchetti's enological pedigree come to Sicily? "I guess you could say I like adventure and risk," he says.

Adventure is what he got. Franchetti planted grapevines 1,010 meters up the flank of Europe's most dangerous volcano, Mount Etna. Sixteen of his 40 hectares are blanketed by hardened lava trails and cannot be cultivated. The rest of



Fertile acres The Regaleali estate, with sweeping spreads of vineyards, is located inland near Palermo.

GLOSSARY OF INDIGENOUS GRAPES

Reds

Nero d'Avola Fragrant and flavorful, this is Sicily's most widely cultivated red grape. It yields beautiful results, especially in the areas of Ragusa and Syracuse.

Nerello This is the vine most often associated with the black volcanic soils of Mount Etna. It's a notoriously difficult grape to work and often ends up in blends.

Whites

Carricante Another varietal found almost exclusively on Mount Etna—above 1,000 meters. It is the main component of Etna Bianco.

Catarratto This is Sicily's most common white grape and is used with Grillo and Inzolia to make the wines of Alcamo, the zone between Palermo

and Trapani.

Grecanico As its name implies, the grape probably originated in Greece. Today it is planted throughout Sicily.

Grillo Another white varietal cultivated in the Alcamo area.

Inzolia Also known as Ansonica, this is a very popular grape and is the prime ingredient of Marsala.

Malvasia Found throughout Italy, Malvasia thrives on the islands of Uperl and Salina where it is made into an aromatic sweet wine.

Trebbiano One of the most widely cultivated white grapes in Sicily.

Zibibbo Grown exclusively on the island of Pantelleria. The fruit is dried into raisins and pressed into Passito di Pantelleria.

his property is flanked by shrines and Madonna statues for safeguarding against future eruptions. They didn't work back in 1947 when this very spot was engulfed in molten rock.

"Each year new eruptions add to the soil and fresh ash always falls. The land is so fertile, I see peach and apricot trees that are eight times bigger than in Tuscany," says the owner of *Passopisciaro*, who makes a Nerello wine mixed with other odds and ends.

Count Gelasio Gaetani d'Aragona

Lovatelli, a wine consultant and Brunello di Montalcino producer, is also under the spell of Sicily. He sits on the board of the International Wine Academy in Rome and hopes to open a similar institution in the Sicilian town of Noto. Wine course, lectures and food and wine pairing events would be staged at the new academy.

The count is also helping Emanuele Filiberto di Savoia, the formerly exiled royal heir, to select a site for a future vineyard investment. The count says Sicily is highest on his list.



Morning delights

Clockwise from left, the sprawling Mercato Capo in central Palermo is freshly stocked daily before dawn; a vendor sells "stretched" zucchini in Messina; a strip of sundried tomatoes are a joy to behold in Palermo.

