

Black Magic

Robin Lee explores the alchemy of wine making

Since 1860, when Louis Pasteur identified *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* as the yeast responsible for turning grape juice into an exquisite alcoholic beverage, science has transformed the way wine is made from being a hit-and-miss affair enveloped in mystery to a highly rational and regulated discipline. Yet science, like any human endeavour, has its failings, and one unfortunate limitation is the tendency to exclude all but the empirical from its field of inquiry, and to discount realities that are on a metaphysical level.

This may seem esoteric, but it leads to very tangible problems: just one example is decades devoted to creating high-yielding grape varieties by crossing and hybridising, without any regard to the quality of the wine produced, leading to ruinous wine lakes subsidised by the EU, as well as to the loss of diversity and local tradition.

When wine was first invented by Neolithic man it was probably by accident. Yet winemaking was never ‘natural’, and those first winemakers must have had a wizard-like level of intuition. Even with modern technology, making wine requires skill and precision. Nature is the source of raw materials, but making wine requires something more: a component of human intention. Even the wild yeasts that live on grape skins are not indigenous to grapes, it turns out, but originate from the sap of oak trees.

The word ‘alcohol’ comes from early Arabic translations of alchemical texts describing methods of distillation to produce *aqua vitae*, which was believed to have a mystical dimension, as does wine of course, a reason for its important role in religious ceremonies. Alchemists believed in a vital link between moral and physical transmutations. In its essence, alchemy was a spiritual discipline. The conversion of base metal into gold was an elaborate metaphor for personal redemption by way of purification and perfection.

The word ‘alchemy’ also comes via Arabic, from the Ancient Egyptian word *keme*, which means ‘black earth’. Does this mean that something powerful like magic comes from the earth, the *terroir*? I was in the ideal place to explore this possibility on Mount Etna, where I went to visit my friend the wine producer Andrea Franchetti (pronounced ‘Frank-etti’). The recently published *Wine Grapes: A Complete Guide to 1,368 Vine Varieties, Including Their Origins and Flavours*, by Jancis Robinson, Julia Harding and José Vouillamoz, promotes the recent trend of reviving lesser-known grape varieties as a reaction to globalisation. I knew that Andrea was cultivating one of these obscure varieties.

The volcano was smoking unnervingly in the background as we traversed the liquorice soils of the Guardiola vineyard. Andrea does not come from a winemaking family. The Franchettis are a unique and distinctive clan, who settled in Italy in the Middle Ages and perfectly encapsulate the most evocative essence of a cosmopolitan elite: romantic, idealistic, independent, artistic, nuanced and profoundly understated.

Andrea did not grow up in Sicily; nor did he grow up making wine. He learned his techniques and developed his interest and philosophy of wine on the Right Bank of Bordeaux. After this apprenticeship, he created the now world-famous Tenuta di Trinoro in Tuscany, at what might be considered a disdainful distance from any pre-existing winemaking area or appellation.

In keeping with this precedent, when he wanted to try something new and more original, he searched for somewhere perfectly situated, yet not known for producing fine wine. He found it in Sicily, on the high slopes of the north face of Mount Etna, where one arrives only after travelling through a series of heartbreakingly beautiful, crumbling and completely unheard-of cities – not towns – complete with old paving stones, magnificent stuccoed palaces and churches.

“When I first came here I hated that grape!” Andrea says when I ask him about Nerello Mascarese. “I came to make my kind of wine, but these old vines were here and so it was worth experimenting with them, but I had no interest in making a farmer’s wine. To talk about a native grape you must have a poetic vision of it. You have to fall in love.”

The road to the winery curves through the zones delineated by the different eruptions of Etna, each with its distinct soil profile and mineral deposits. Where the eruptions are recent, of 50 years ago or so, the terrain is an obsidian moonscape ending abruptly where the lava stream stopped and the landscape becomes greener, undulating, almost alpine. Other wine producers besides Andrea, some of whom are becoming well known, have plantings here as well, and, although they are all different, there is an affinity among them from a shared sense of place.

By the time we arrive at the Rampante vineyard the altitude has risen to 1,000 metres. Andrea points out the weathered stone terraces of Nerello Mascarese, which looks like an amphitheatre, built during the 19th-century wine boom when phylloxera had devastated the vineyards of France, and enterprising Burgundian *négociants* imported wine from here to sell to their customers. “We tried everything, and then realised it needs to get off the skins as soon as possible,” Andrea explains. “It has to be a light wine, not

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black like they made it. It is the wine that leads you to understand the grape.”

Later, I had the opportunity to try that wine and I couldn't stop thinking about it. It was like a piece of music that you need to hear again. It is a coppery, Venetian red. It has a delicate but persistent aroma of wild roses, pomegranate and cranberry.

“Wine can have a *terroir*; the plant can't,” says Andrea. “Aesthetic and invisible forces transform the mind of the enlightened winemaker, and consequently the wine. A grape completely depends on the kind of viticulture that is applied to it, based on a vision of the wine,” he explains. “Practices can change if you are working with one grape instead of another, but the choice of the grape with which you decide to make a wine is based again on your vision.”

When I got back to London I attended a tasting of wines made from obscure local grape varieties. The wines were all really bad – some were almost undrinkable. That was when I realised what I had really learnt on my visit to Sicily. The winemakers I met there didn't want me to try their grape: they wanted me to try their wine. The grape is not an end in itself. This idea of grape varieties being so important is a paean to relativism. Knowing about grape varieties can be useful as a general guide: they give an idea of a wine's style. Yet this has nothing to do with seriously trying to judge a wine by its grape and bamboozling people with pseudo-scientific jargon now propped up by genetic analysis.

This kind of thinking completely overlooks the essence of what wine is, or what it may be trying to express, and its very real metaphysical dimension, by focusing all the attention on the raw ingredients and the manufacturing process. It is like thinking that there really is some formula out there for turning base metals into gold, a Dark Age fallacy that has absolutely nothing to do with science and is not even what alchemy is really about. R

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Robin's recommendation:
Passopisciaro IGT 2007 £171 (6 bottles).
Available from Corney & Barrow.
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Mount Etna and the liquorice soils of Nerello Mascarese
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