

Amongst the wider Italian wine scene there are few places releasing wines of as great excitement and interest as Etna. Yes, other regions continue to impress with fine-tuning of premium offerings, excel at finding detail in site, blending and fruit character, but Etna, amongst a few other regions, seems to have a heightened pulse at this time. The DOC itself is a horseshoe shaped area set over approximately 1000 hectares. Elevation varies, but vineyards have been planted way up the slopes of the volcano, with particular concentration around Solicchiata, Randazzo and Passopisciaro. The region is being inspected for contrade mapping to fine tune the diversity of regional character. Many escape the DOCG grading to produce wines of IGT (or IGP) and personal expression – almost a badge of honour now.

The red grape nerello mascalese is used almost exclusively by Passopisciaro – it generally makes hard, light coloured red wines so the hang time here is longer than most. In 2008 winemaker Andrea Franchetti decided to vinify separate contrada to explore the various parts of the Etna lava flow and elevations that the varying aged vineyards are located at. The maths is add unique dirt, indigenous grape variety, high vineyards, uniqueness of flavours and textures; equals a fascinating exploration.

Etna wines to me often look overtly soil-reflective – like the juice has run over the surface of the vineyard. It's something I once heard Jancis Robinson say about great rieslings. Lava flow makes for interesting vineyard land and the diversity from top to bottom of the Etna slope is marked. Winemaking at Passopisciaro tends to the minimal, with initial ferments in stainless steel tanks or smaller barrels sluiced off to old, large format oak after a shortish period of time. Let's stroll up the volcano...

Contrada Chiappemacine 2009 (\$90, 14%, cork): Set at around 550 metres above sea level, the lava flow is thinnest here and is set on limestone, into which the roots of the 80-year-old nerello vines bury themselves. Cool breezes whip through the vineyard, of which Passopisciaro own about 1 hectare.

Ruby coloured wine, transparent almost, but perfume is thick, red berry and red cherry fruited with wet log and wet asphalt aromas. It's got chalky, dusty tannins working their way through the wine, with supreme length of flavour, though tense and fine-boned as it lingers. Fruit weight is richer than other contrada, with a sour cranberry acid profile elevating freshness and energy in the wine. A more bolshy expression of Etna. **92 points, 2012-2023**

Contrada Porcaria 2009 (\$120, 14%, cork): In Italian slang porcaria translates loosely to 'shit', but poetics have it as 'ugly thing', so let's stick with that. One of Etna's more travelled winemaking contradas, known for more powerful wine styles. This site is set on a flattish area at around 650 metres above sea level and gets a long stay in the sun from its northerly aspect – resulting wines are often called 'masculine' by cognoscenti who label things such. The soil here is shale-like lava flow remnants.





Smoke, char, earth overlaid on red berry fruits. A touch of menthol and almond meal too. Exotic aromas, flavours showing some more gravelly tannin, with wet earth and powdered graphite 'minerality'. Red fruit flavours carry through, cherry cola-like sweetness sits behind the guttural savouriness. Finishes long, slender and tight, but the mid-palate flesh and loose knit feel gives the wine more unique expression. Fabulous after time open too; mellows and yet retains the slender ropes of grip. **94+ points, 2012-2028**

Contrada Sciaranuova 2009 (\$100, 14%, cork): From another contrada of renown, Sciaranuova is set at 850 metres above sea level, on an east facing exposition and more crumbly, 'wet' lava that breaks down into dark chunks of varying size. The vines are around 80-years-old. The wine is kept on skins for 15 days and given a couple of extra months in barrel to mature (18 to 20 months). Nearby is Guardiola where Passopisciaro source fruit for their straight Passopisciaro 'estate' nerello bottling.

Really floral aromas, rose petal, pot pourri, frangipani, but not overwhelmingly sweet as rich wood and spice aromas come up. Very pure fruit feel in the palate, dancing, lighter texture but again the chalky grip starts mid-palate and drags the red fruit flavours in the wine very long. There's some darker fruit in the mix, more dark earth, wet earth and sous bois rolling through the wine too. A lot of very fine detail here. The washy, juicy expressiveness up front is charming too. Wilder feel, less concentration. **93 points, 2012-2024**

Contrada Rampante 2009: (\$80, 14%, cork): Rampante translates to rampant in English, but added to 'cavallino' it becomes 'prancing horse' and 'un giovane' and it becomes 'yuppie', or so an Italian friend tells me. Some interesting cross-purpose of language working there. This is the 1000-metre-above-sea-level contrada of sandier laval soils with a dense cross hatch of various minerals. The vines are over 100-years-old.

A remarkable, pristine, succulent wine showing wonderful fruit purity but piling in ashy, smoky, graphite-like minerality, fine chains of dusty tannins, fleshiness of bright red cherry fruit and a nervous vibrancy and tension. Sits high and fresh in the palate, spiked with alpine herb coolness and raciness but without losing the gentle sweetness of fruit, yet there's this feel of licking pumice – taste and texture. Very composed and intact, inward even, and finishes way long down the palate line. A seriously delicious wine, intriguing too and giving a snapshot of its postcode emphatically. Super. **96 points, 2012-2027**

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