

Etna's Eruption

What's next for wine on Sicily's active volcano?



Photo by: Robert Camuto

A vineyard on the north face of Etna's smoldering peak

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Driving along the northern flanks of Sicily's Mount Etna some weeks ago, I noticed how much the wine scene there has changed in the past decade.

I'd come for the 11th edition of Contrade dell'Etna, a wine event that's part barrel tasting of the recent harvest and part Sicilian party.

"Etna was nowhere 10 or 11 years ago," said Andrea Franchetti, founder of Passopisciaro winery and creator of the event, which opened early morning on the grounds of an ornate 19th-century villa. "Now producers come from Northern Italy to see what's going on, and some start making wine."

I've been regularly traveling to Etna's vineyards since 2008. Back then, Franchetti—a self-taught Tuscan producer who arrived in Sicily in 2001 after making a success of his Tenuta di Trinoro—had joined some locals and a few foreigners to form a new wave of wine on the volcano's cool north face. Though each one had their style and personal obsession (Franchetti planted Petit Verdot for a sort of "super Etna" wine), their common goal was working with Etna's indigenous Nerello Mascalese, which produces a light ruby red wine.

Now in 2018, fewer vineyards are deserted. Lavastone terraces everywhere have been replanted everywhere with Nerello and Carricante, a local white variety often used in blends, particularly on Etna's cool, rainier eastern slopes facing the Ionian Sea. Once-abandoned 19th-century wineries from Etna's heyday have been restored, and a few newer ones built. In the past decade, both vineyard surface and wine production have doubled in the Etna Denominazione di Origine Controllata, though to a still-modest 2,200 acres producing more than 280,000 cases.

Lately, it's been difficult to keep up with the number of outsiders showing up, lured by the prospect of working with Etna's singular varieties on one of Europe's most active volcanoes.

Last year it was Piedmont legend Angelo Gaja teaming with local Alberto Graci of Graci winery to buy vineyards on Etna's lesser-known, hot and dry southwestern slopes.

"Soon there will be no more good vineyards left to buy," said Alessio Planeta of well-established Sicilian producer Planeta, who expanded his family's holdings to Etna in 2008. "Etna will be the new fine wine of Italy after Brunello and Barolo. Now in Milan or Rome, you cannot have a fine wine list without Etna."

I remember the first Contrade dell'Etna in 2008: A couple dozen producers at small tables cramped in Franchetti's winery for a tasting attended mostly by Italian press, friends and curious locals.



Molchen Photo

Vintner Andrea Franchetti of Tuscany's Tenuta di Trinoro has been bringing his vision for high-end wine to Etna with his influential Passopisciario winery.

This year's Contrade—still a laid-back walk-around void of the usual speeches, conferences and classes of most wine events—drew more than 100 producers and a couple thousand guests, including foreign importers, sommeliers and wine lovers from Italy to Miami.

The wines showed off the evolution of Etna. Gone are most of the rustic, cloudy Nerello experiments. The new-wave producers who began early—like Giuseppe Russo of Girolamo Russo, Graci, Franchetti, and American Marco de Grazia of Tenuta di Terre Nere—are now making tighter, livelier, longer reds and more complex, crisp and saline whites.

Even the wines of Etna's no-sulfur eccentric Frank Cornelissen have cleaned up dramatically as the native Belgian moved from a garage to a new winery where he lightly filters his wines and protects them with inert gas.

Benanti—a precursor of Etna's quality movement, which introduced ageworthy Carricante whites from the east side in 1990 with its Pietramarina bottling—unveiled a delicious, deep-colored 2017 Nerello rosé.

Absent was Salvo Foti, formerly Benanti's longtime enologist and a sort of lone-wolf leader of his own winemaking scene. Foti now produces wines for his I Vigneri brand and makes wines for newcomers like venture capitalist and vintner Kevin Harvey, of California's Rhys Vineyards, under the Aeris label.



Robert Camuto

Joining the newer pioneers at the Etna tasting was 11th-generation winemaker Marco Nicolosi of the historic Barone di Villagrande.

"In the past [négociants] came to Etna to *buy* wine, now producers come to *make* wine," quipped Marco Nicolosi, of the three-centuries-old Barone di Villagrande wine estate on the volcano's eastern flanks. An 11th-generation winemaker who took over in 2009, Nicolosi is one of the few traditionalists still aging reds in chestnut barrels that leave distinct resinous flavors in the wines. "This is a new springtime in Etna."

Now that Etna's collection of stunning *terroirs* and varied producers has created a lot of buzz, winemakers at this year's gathering were talking about protecting Etna's image to keep a good thing going, about upgrading the appellation to DOCG status for greater quality controls and determining ways to better classify wine-producing locales. The current practice of using *contrade*—rural subdivision units—was never intended for wine *crus*.

"Etna—also Sicily—is on top of a wave," observed Antonio Rallo of western Sicily's Donnafugata, which bought vineyards and a winery here in 2016. "Now, we have to be good enough to be able to surf it."

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