

## Magazine Archives: Oct. 31, 2018

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### Sicilian Success

Producers on Mount Etna climb to greater heights with vigor and determination

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Europe's highest active volcano isn't the only thing heating up Sicily's Mount Etna. Thanks to the recent revitalization of ancient, abandoned vineyards on the mountain's slopes, renewed engagement from local vintners and outside investment from some of Italy's most prominent companies, the reputation of Etna's wines is skyrocketing.

Among the newcomers to the mountain are Oscar Farinetti, owner of Eataly and a number of Italian wineries, and Piedmont's Angelo Gaja. Earlier this year Farinetti purchased the 50-acre Tenuta Carranco estate in Solicchiata, simultaneously establishing a partnership with Etna local Francesco Tornatore, a businessman who produced his first commercial vintage in 2012 from historic family vineyards. In 2017, the Gaja family too joined forces with an Etna native, Alberto Aiello Graci, co-purchasing 27 acres of vines in Biancavilla on the southwestern side of the mountain.

"It was like they say in *The Godfather*," says Aiello Graci. "He made me an offer I couldn't refuse." The 50-50 partnership represents not only the opportunity to work with Gaja, but also to explore the potential of Etna's southern terroirs in addition to Aiello Graci's existing vineyards on the north side of the mountain.

Though Farinetti and Gaja finally gained a toehold on Etna after visiting for several years, both came late to the party; much of Etna's outside investment took place about a decade earlier, primarily on the northern side of the mountain. Aiello Graci, 43, is already an old hand after returning to Etna to start production at his eponymous estate in 2004. In 2000, there were fewer than 15 producers bottling for commercial sale on Etna. Today, there are more than 100.

Yet the success of the new face of Etna is in no way guaranteed. In most Italian regions, when natives abandoned the countryside during the post-World War II era to seek work in urban areas, long-rooted vineyards survived, even though many were exploited for quantity-driven wine production through the 1970s and '80s. As the push for quality in Italian wine increased in the 1990s, a foundation of old vines and winemaking understanding remained.

This was not the case on Etna. After the war, much of Etna's vineyard acreage was abandoned and expertise in agronomy and enology specific to the region and its grape varieties dissipated.

"Nerello Mascalese and Carricante are new in premium winemaking," says Patricia Toth, head of winemaking at Planeta's Etna estate, referring to the region's primary grape varieties. Planeta is a historic qualitative leader from Sicily, with six estates across the island; it purchased its first vineyards on Etna in 2008. "Previously they were produced at higher yields," Toth explains. "It's almost a research phase in Etna."

The process of reconditioning old vines, waiting for young vines to mature and rethinking vineyard management and winemaking practices takes time. "We are a young producer," says Aiello Graci. "And we have a lot of things we have to learn. But I think we are on the first step."

In the past year I have tasted more than 140 wines from Etna, nearly two-thirds of them red, along with whites and a burgeoning selection of rosés, called rosatos. All categories include outstanding results of 90 to 94 points on Wine Spectator's 100-point scale, along with two 95-point reds produced by Tenuta delle Terre Nere: the seamless Etna Prephylloxera La Vigna di Don Peppino 2016 (\$105) and the gutsy Etna San Lorenzo 2016 (\$60).

This tasting report encompasses 30 producers, a fraction of Etna's total number of commercial wineries. But with overall annual production from Etna at only about 3 million bottles as of 2016, and many producers offering multiple cuvées, this represents a good snapshot of the scope of the region's offerings in the U.S. market. (A free alphabetical list of scores and prices for all wines tasted is available.)

### Nerello Mascalese

Etna's reds are dominated by Nerello Mascalese, with a support role played by Nerello Capuccio. Both grape varieties are indigenous to Italy, and their vineyard acreage is largely limited to Sicily and the slopes of Etna. The volcano peaks at about 11,000 feet; compared with the surrounding coastal plains, Etna's vine-growing area offers a generally cooler climate, with significantly more rainfall, and a notable temperature swing between day and night promotes aromatic character and physiological maturity in the grapes.

Many vintners consider elevations from about 1,900 to 3,300 feet to be the ideal zone for Nerello Mascalese. On Etna's north face, many top sites and the heart of the Etna DOC are bounded above and below by two primary roads running at almost exactly elevations 1,900 and 3,300, bordered to the east and west by the towns of Linguaglossa and Randazzo. Vineyard acreage within the Etna DOC's geographical limits has grown from 1,620 acres in 2015 to an estimated 2,340 acres planted by spring of this year; wines produced from sites outside of the Etna DOC production zone (but still from mountainside vineyards) are labeled as Sicilia DOC or Terre Siciliane IGT.

In this sweet spot for Nerello Mascalese, the clay- and sand-based vineyards found at lower altitudes (around 1,300 feet and higher) give way to volcanic conditions. Depending on the altitude and the age of the eruption on which the soil is based, the earth ranges from sandlike, compacted ash to pumice to gravelly pebbles to large chunks of deconstructed lava known as lapilli or ripiddu. These deep, porous environments encourage roots to dig far below the surface, seeking pockets of water, air and minerals.

"What I've seen on Etna-what really makes the difference-is the age of the eruption where the vineyards are located," says Alessio Planeta of Planeta winery. "It's not just contrada to contrada," he adds, referring to historic crus, known locally as contrade (the plural of contrada), that delineate the Etna DOC.

Nerello Mascalese is a late-ripening variety marked by serious tannins in the skins and pips. Though Guyot and other vineyard training systems are increasingly utilized in the region, many of the previously abandoned vineyards have been restored to the traditional method: labor-intensive terraces planted with the individual bush vines known in southern Italy as albarello. This system provides 360 degrees of sunlight, helping to ripen the grapes and the tannins in the skins and pips, ultimately providing quality material for winemakers.

"The complexity of the phenolic ripeness is really the important balance that you can find here [on Etna for Nerello Mascalese]," says Tasca d'Almerita's Alberto Tasca d'Almerita, comparing his experiences with Nerello Mascalese grown on Etna to his previous experiences growing the grape for rosé production at his family's Regaleali estate in central Sicily. Brothers Alberto and Giuseppe's interest in establishing an outpost on Etna began in 2004, when they purchased grapes from Etna and performed experimental micro-vinifications at Regaleali.

In 2009, intrigued and impressed by the results, they purchased and planted a 9.4-acre vineyard in the Piano Dario contrada, quickly learning how variegated soils, terracing and the finicky nature of Nerello Mascalese makes for distinctive challenges. The vineyard, planted entirely to Nerello Mascalese using cane-spurred training as opposed to albarello, is made up of 99 terraces climbing a 250-foot slope.

"Even on each terrace, each with only three vine rows, there can be different quality and character to the grapes," says Alberto Tasca d'Almerita. "We need three to four passes through the vineyard in order to harvest everything at optimal ripeness."

The best Etna red wines offer fine, Burgundian tannins and site-specific minerality paired with the wild herb aromatics characteristic of many Italian reds. Planeta's Etna 2016 (90 points, \$26) and Tasca d'Almerita's Nerello Mascalese Sicilia Il Tascante 2014 (90, \$55) are elegant examples in this style, while Girolamo Russo's Etna 'a Rina 2016 (92, \$40) is similarly aromatic but more robust in structure.

For an interesting comparison of two reds from the same Guardiola contrada, seek out Tenuta delle Terre Nere's ripe and mineraly Etna Guardiola 2016 (93, \$45) and Passopisciaro's fresh and perfumed Terre Siciliane Contrada G 2015 (93, \$80).

Wines from Etna are generally affordable, especially considering their overall level of quality, with the vast majority of bottlings available for \$100 or less on release. But it's also possible to find particularly good value from several producers. Cottanera, for example, produces a loamy, spicy red at less than \$20, the Etna Barbazzale 2016 (88, \$18), while for just a few dollars more you can find outstanding versions in 2016 from Pietradolce (90, \$21) and Benanti (90, \$22).

## CARRICANTE

Etna's white wines are based on the indigenous Carricante grape. For the basic Etna white category, Carricante must make up at least 60 percent of the blend; for the Superiore category, 80 percent is required. Like Nerello Mascalese, Carricante is grown almost exclusively in Sicily, and on Mount Etna in particular. Cataratto, the primary blending grape for Etna's whites, is widely planted throughout the island.

Carricante is naturally vigorous, requiring vineyard management to control yields, especially for younger vines. Carricante's most notable feature is its high acidity. As with Nerello Mascalese's tannins, Carricante's acidity must be tamed by a long growing season. However, it is that same acidity that contributes to the potential longevity of the resulting wines.

As interest in Etna whites increases, Carricante plantings have expanded in recent years, both at lower elevations alongside Nerello Mascalese and farther up the mountainside. Carricante can ripen up to altitudes of almost 4,000 feet, but many of the best examples are sourced from sites at around 3,000 feet.

The town of Milo, which sits on the eastern slope of Etna at 2,400 feet and includes vineyards to 2,950 feet within the town commune, was recognized as the ideal growing area for Carricante in the Etna whites Superiore category. Legally, all grapes given this distinction must be grown and harvested in the commune of Milo, while grapes for the general Etna whites can be sourced from anywhere within the DOC's legal boundaries. Milo is one of the rainiest places on the island, but the wind that brings precipitation from Sicily's eastern seaboard also blows it out again, and eastern exposures benefit from the early morning sun's additional daylight hours. Both of these factors help deter disease in the vineyards.

Benanti winery was the first to bring attention to white wine from Milo in the 1990s with its Pietra Marina white (labeled as Pietramarina at that time), which Giuseppe Benanti modeled on the white wines of France's Alsace. His twin sons Antonio and Salvino run the winery today. Pietra Marina is 100 percent Carricante from 80-year-old vineyards at 2,600 feet in Milo, and the 2015 Etna White Superiore Pietra Marina (91, \$80) is svelte and minerally, with mouthwatering acidity and salinity.

Other outstanding examples of Carricante from the broader Etna DOC include the long and creamy Etna White Nerina 2016 (92, \$50) from Girolamo Russo, and an intriguing, well-cut version from Alice Bonaccorsi, the Etna White Valcerasa 2015 (91, \$34). Al-Cantàra's tangy Etna White Occhi di Ciumi 2016 (89, \$16), a blend of Carricante with Grecanico, offers exceptional value, as does Emanuele Scammacca del Murgio's Etna White 2017 (88, \$17) and Valenti's Etna White Enrico IV 2016 (89, \$22).

## ETNA'S OUTSIDERS

Three outsiders lit the fuse on the explosion of wine production from Etna: Belgian Frank Cornelissen; Marco de Grazia, an American who grew up in Florence; and Roman Andrea Franchetti. In a remarkable piece of synchronicity, the three men purchased vineyards on Etna in 2000, ultimately establishing wineries within a 10-minute drive of one another, as well as making wine and espousing philosophy that would help to bring production from Etna to the forefront.

Cornelissen was a former wine salesman turned novice winemaker when he stepped into his role as tenacious protagonist for both the natural-wine movement and wines from Etna. Cornelissen's early attempts yielded some inconsistency-extreme highs and extreme lows-but he quickly gained a following for his distinctive bottlings that expressed the rich volcanic character of the mountain's soils. Today, with a more practiced hand in the vineyard and cellar, as well as a less dogmatic approach to the "natural" mantra, his wines are just as exciting, in my opinion, and probably more so

for their greater reliability. A fine and relatively affordable example is one of Cornelissen's introductory reds: The Etna Munjebel 2016 (93, \$45) is beautifully aromatic and mineral, a pure Nerello Mascalese that offers volume without excessive weight.

Prior to establishing his Tenuta delle Terre Nere winery on Etna, de Grazia found success in the late 1980s and 1990s importing an outstanding portfolio of boutique Italian wineries to the United States (the business is still active and thriving). His role as company head was not just that of a businessman working with the wineries to sell their wines, but also that of an advisor, advocate, educator and more. He readily applied this multitier approach to his own wines at Terre Nere-and to those of Etna as a whole. Tagging Etna the "Burgundy of the Mediterranean," the winemaker in de Grazia recognized the ability of his vineyards to convey site-specificity and terroir. Meanwhile, the businessman in him perceived the opportunities to promote these distinctions and to raise awareness of Etna as an emerging region for quality wine.

"Immediately I saw the difference between here and there," de Grazia explained to me in 2014 while we toured his vineyards. "And so I put the name of the vineyard on the label ... It caught on [with others], but the important thing is that the qualitative drive was behind it."

Using the vineyards' contrade names on the Terre Nere labels helped to give personality and identity to the winery's individual cuvées. At the same time it started a conversation about greater definition within the larger Etna DOC-the first DOC established in Sicily, in 1968. Today, it includes 2,300 acres of vineyards. A 2011 decree from the Italian government recognized the sub-zones defined by the historic contrade boundaries, not only allowing de Grazia and others to legally include cru names on their labels, but also laying the groundwork for future winemakers to further define and evaluate Etna's complex terroir.

Today, de Grazia's vineyards produce better and better results, with two whites and all seven of his 2016 reds rating 90 points or higher.

His efforts yielded the two top-scoring wines of this report, both at 95 points. The Etna Prephyloxera La Vigna di Don Peppino 2016 (\$105) comes from two parcels of 130-year-old vines located directly in front of the winery in the stony Calderara Sottana cru. The wine is silky and seamless, with a lovely array of ripe fruit, exotic spice, mineral and almond blossom. The Etna San Lorenzo 2016 (\$60) is sourced from almost 10 acres of vineyards in the San Lorenzo contrada, which sits at about 2,400 feet of elevation; it boasts bold flavor and structure deftly knit into a graceful and harmonious package.

Andrea Franchetti of Passopisciaro is an artistic soul from a prominent family in Rome. He had already put a remote part of southern Tuscany, the Val d'Orcia, on the map, with his successful Tenuta di Trinoro estate. Used to managing vines in Tuscany's heat, Franchetti saw the opportunity to contrast grape maturation on the vine in the cooler temperatures provided by the mountain's higher altitudes.

Passopisciaro encompasses more than 60 acres of vineyards spread among five different contrade. Six of the winery's bottlings are 100 percent Nerello Mascalese, which Franchetti prefers to harvest via multiple passes through the vineyards, often extending harvest into early November, an extreme for the area. Among the contrade bottlings, the Terre Siciliane Contrada P 2015 (94, \$80), from 3.7 acres of vines in the Porcaria vineyard, stands out for its robust tannins and mouthwatering acidity layered with expressive black fruit, floral and tarry mineral notes.

Franchetti was one of the first producers to follow de Grazia's example, labeling many of his wines with the name of the contrada from which the grapes are sourced. (Today he abbreviates the contrada name to just its first letter.) He embraced the concept even further in 2008 when he created

and hosted the first Le Contrade dell'Etna. The wine fair, now held annually, helped to draw early attention to Etna's wines, and continues to do so each April as it brings journalists, sommeliers and wine aficionados to the mountain's vineyards.

#### LOCAL STALWARTS

Cornelissen, de Grazia and Franchetti were catalysts for the evolution of Etna's production and ambassadors for its greater reputation in the world of wine. But other players, before and after, have been equally vital to the area's ongoing success.

In 1988, Giuseppe Benanti, a Catania businessman, set out to utilize family-owned vineyards around Trescastagni on the eastern and southeastern side of the mountain with the aim of improving overall quality and illustrating Etna's promise. Benanti partnered with consulting enologist Salvo Foti, who went on to become the godfather of winemaking on the mountain. Today, Foti produces his own I Vigneri wines, but he has also worked with many small family vineyards transitioning from making wines mainly for private consumption, as well as with larger operations establishing outposts on Etna.

Benanti and Foti applied themselves to understanding their vineyards: the elevations, exposures and soil types, and how to get the best results from varying microclimates. They worked on clonal selections of local grape varieties, and tested modern winemaking in the cellar. Like many Italian wineries pushing the envelope on their potential, they experimented with techniques and grapes more commonly used in France—though Benanti's sons have returned to more traditional varieties and production methods following their assumption of ownership.

Other local families were doing similar work in the 1990s, though generally with less overall success or recognition for their efforts at the time. Among them were the historic Barone di Villagrande estate's Nicolosi family and brothers Guglielmo and Enzo Cambria of Cottanera. Alice Bonaccorsi began work with her father, Vincenzo, in 1996, to produce wines from their Valcerasa estate. And Ciro Biondi reinvigorated his family's winery in 1999.

The endeavors of these producers, along with the dramatic, well-touted results of Cornelissen, de Grazia and Franchetti, spurred outside interest in Etna. Many wineries rooted elsewhere in Sicily, such as Planeta, Tasca d'Almerita and Firriato, purchased land prior to 2010, with Cusumano and Donnafugata joining their ranks more recently.

A number of natives have returned to the mountain, some lured by the financial assistance offered by the Italian government in 2003 that encouraged Sicilians to plant vines on Etna. Giuseppe Russo, a well-known musician, took over management of his family's Girolamo Russo estate following the death of his father in 2003. Michele Faro of Pietradolce funneled capital from his career with his family's plant nursery business to build an ultramodern winery in the Rampante contrada. A chance encounter with Salvo Foti in 2007 brought Chiara Vigo, the holder of a doctoral degree in art, back to her family's Romeo del Castello estate.

This activity has resulted in a significant uptick in working vineyard acreage, including the planting of a swath of new vineyards that came into production in the past five years, pushing annual production for the area up to an estimated 4 million bottles in 2017. The question now is whether producers can maintain their momentum, and if the marketplace will support the rapidly increasing number of Etna bottlings. But producers seem to be optimistic about the future overall.

"The Etna name right now is very attractive, but you have to know what you're doing, and you have to have control over what you're doing," says de Grazia, alluding to the ongoing viticultural and vinification education of Etna's producers and the fact that many farm small parcels of vines with production taking place in a neighboring cellar.

"I think the real issue is not the number of producers but that more than two-thirds of the producers don't have their own cellar," echoes Salvino Benanti. "[In the future], the mix of producers on Etna may change a lot, and maybe those now trying to be producers may again become grape suppliers."

"Etna is not a joke," says Michele Faro of Pietradolce. "It's not an easy area to produce wine. I think there will be a natural selection, by the consumers, but also from the producers who realize this difficulty and will fall out of love with the fashion of making wine in Etna."

A certain amount of consolidation seems inevitable on Etna, but for now, producers small and large share a more-the-merrier philosophy. It's not competition, it's camaraderie. And, says Alessio Planeta, the focus is on tapping all of Etna's potential. "We need decades to explore all the diversity of Etna, but there's great energy and passion from producers to do this."

Senior editor Alison Napjus is Wine Spectator's lead taster on the wines of Sicily.

## See Also

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