

The Wines Of Etna - Excellence from An Extreme Production Zone



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Italy is one of the world's most distinctive wine producing countries, largely because of the predominance of indigenous varieties used in wines across the country. You'll quite often find a particular varietal planted in only one region or even a small production zone, such as Palagrello Nero and Palagrello Bianco in the Caserta region of Campania.

When it comes to Sicily, indigenous varieties, such as Grillo, Nero d'Avola and Frappato are also part of the viticultural landscape, but so too are international varieties, such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Syrah and Chardonnay. Given the warm - or hot, depending on your viewpoint - temperatures and ample sunshine, just about everything ripens on the island.

That means the viticultural identity of Sicily is a bit foggy (even if the weather isn't), as the best wines from here could be made from just about any variety. For years, quality wasn't even an image one associated with Sicilian wines for the most part, thanks to the quantities of bulk wines produced. Thankfully, that image has all but disappeared, and quality is abundant, be it from local or international varieties.

These last ten to fifteen years, the identity of Sicilian wines has become more and more associated with the Etna production zone, named of course for its location near this iconic volcano in the island's northeast. This has been an important step for Sicily's wine identity, for numerous reasons. First, and I believe, foremost, this is a specific district that is bringing attention to Sicily; it's not just Sicilian wine. Secondly, the wines are extremely distinctive, thanks in large part to the soils, derived from lava flow from the volcano. Finally, the style and quality of these wines - both white and red - is excellent, and in a few cases, nothing short of outstanding.

Let's look at the whites and reds and the varieties used for production of the finest Etna wines.

White

There are three or four local varieties planted here, but the most common varietal for an Etna Bianco is Carricante. The name most probably is derived from the Italian verb *caricare*, meaning "to load." Marco de Grazia, proprietor of **Tenuta delle Terre Nere**, situated at Castiglione di Sicilia, on the northern slopes of the volcano, share some of his thoughts on this grape type.

"Carricante is another example of a varietal that found its home specifically here and nowhere else in Sicily. It surely works very well on volcanic soil. It is extremely sensitive to changes in climate and soil, and therefore yields far different wines in different areas of Etna, although like most white grapes it does better in cooler climates, and therefore at higher altitudes." His Carricante vines are planted between 600-900 meters (1970-2950 feet) above sea level.

de Grazia produces three different versions of Etna Bianco; a classic, 60% Carricante, with the remainder of the blend divided between indigenous varieties Cataratto and Minella, along with small percentage of Grecanico; this wine like many examples of Etna Bianco, is treated in steel tanks. He also produces two examples of Etna Bianco from *contrade* (single vineyards) that are aged in oak. "The wood adds a certain creaminess," remarks deGrazia, "but I use steel for the basic *bianco* because I like it freshest, although to be honest, it gets better and better with a few years - up to five, six years of age."

The various offerings of Etna Bianco from Tenute delle Terre Nere are among the finest available today; also look for the examples from Pietradolce, Alta Mora (Cusumano), Graci and Planeta.

Red

Etna Rosso has become a remarkable category in a short time frame, as the finest examples are not only among the best of Sicily, but in reality, among the best red wines of Italy as a whole. The primary grape here is Nerello Mascalese, while Nerello Cappuccio plays a minor role; some examples are pure Mascalese, while others have 3-10% Cappuccio in the blend. As Mascalese delivers more fruit as well as intensity, it is the preferred varietal (a somewhat rare version of 100% Cappuccio labeled as "Laeneo" is produced by Tenuta di Fessina.)

One of the most respected and critically praised producers of red wines from Etna is **Passopisciaro**; the proprietor is Andrea Franchetti. "At Passopisciaro, we work only with Nerello Mascalese, an ancient grape, rare except on this volcano, where it is from and is still splendidly cultivated like a mountain grape in old and ancient bush vines," he says.

Franchetti notes the importance of this grape as a late-ripeners. "Here, the vines are planted at relatively high altitudes, even up to 1000 meters (3280 feet) above sea level. Temperatures during the day on the northern side, where most of the vineyards are, is over 15°C lower than on the coast, and that cool weather prepares for elegant, full wines. The temperature at night is truly cold during the grape's most important months, September and October, when it delays the grape's ripening and adds resilience and sturdiness to the wines."

What has made the red wines of Etna so appealing is their similarity in some ways to Pinot Noir and Burgundy. This is especially evident in the wines of Passopisciaro, as the tannins are quite silky and aromas of strawberry and cherry call to mind Pinot Noir.

Recently however, more and more versions resemble a red wine from Piedmont in northern Italy, especially a Barolo or Barbaresco, produced exclusively from the Nebbiolo variety ;this is an extremely tannic grape, which partially explains its longevity. The style of any red wine from Etna

can be more perfumed and graceful like the wines from Passopisciaro or **Girolamo Russo**, or they can resemble Piemontese reds, as with Tenuta delle Terre Nere. There are other factors of course, such as vine age and soil, but the differences are often dramatic.

Regarding vine age, many estates here were planted 70, 80 or even more than 100 years ago; in fact there are even a few pre-phylloxera vines that are still producing (phylloxera is a louse that causes vine damage, with the most famous outbreak being in the late 1800s in many wine zones of Europe). At Terre Nere, de Grazia produces approximately 5000 bottles per year of a wine labeled as "Prephylloxera - La Vigna di Don Peppino" from a tiny vineyard of one-half hectare (about 1.2 acres). Although the exact planting date is not known, de Grazia estimates these vines are between 130-140 years old! While some of his vines are 80-90 years old, the prephylloxera vines are rare and produce intensely favored and deeply structured wines, albeit in tiny yields. This wine and a handful of others are symbols of the history and uniqueness of the Etna district, a wine production zone with soils of volcanic ash and pumice. To even produce wines from such earth is a challenge. To make them great is a reward.

Finally there are examples of *rosato* and sparkling wine made in Etna. For *rosato*, seek examples from Tenuta di Fessina, Tenuta delle Terre Nere and Pietradolce. as for sparkling wines, look for **Terrazze dell'Etna**, which uses Chardonnay and Pinot Nero (Pinot Noir), along with Nerello Mascalese, and **Murgo**, the home of the finest bubbly from Etna (their vintage-dated reserve offerings are excellent).

Reviews of current Etna releases:

Sparkling

Murgo Brut 2014 - 100% Nerello Mascalese. Aromas of orange zest and red plum. Medium-bodied, this has good acidity and is dry, and offers good harmony and should pair with a wide variety of foods. **Excellent**

White

Alta Mora Etna Bianco 2017 - Aromas of lemon zest, mango and daffodil. Medium-full with very good depth of fruit. Good acidity, impressive persistence, excellent harmony and varietal purity. Beautifully made, this has notable complexity. Enjoy now and over the next 4 or 5 years. **Outstanding**

Tenuta di Fessina "A'Puddara" Etna Bianco 2016 - Expressive aromas of squash and quince. Medium-full, this has excellent richness on the palate and a lengthy finish. There is good acidity and impressive complexity. 3-5 years. **Outstanding**

Pietradolce "Archineri" Etna Bianco 2017 - Aromas of green apple, lemon peel and a hint of almond; the aromas are closed at first, but do open after 10 minutes or so in the glass. Medium-bodied, very good persistence, good acidity and a nicely balanced finish with notes of chalkiness, somewhat Chablis-like. An unusual style of Etna Bianco that is not overly ripe, but offering excellent complexity. Very stylish and subdued. Best in 5-7 years. **Outstanding**

Tenuta delle Terre Nere Etna Bianco 2016 - A blend of 60% Carricante, 25% Cataratto, 10% Grecanico, 5% Minella. Brilliant light yellow with golden tints. Aromas of golden apple, lemon zest and magnolia. Medium-full with rich texture, very good acidity, impressive persistence and beautiful complexity. Rich and slightly lush – quite appealing for its flavors and freshness! 3-5 years. **Excellent**

Tenuta di Terre Nere "Santo Spirito" Etna Bianco 2017 - Fermented and matured in French barriques. Aromas of mango, golden apples and banana. Medium-full with a rich, beautifully defined mid-palate. Excellent ripeness, good acidity, excellent persistence and outstanding complexity. The wood notes are very subdued; lovely texture; lengthy, fruit-filled finish with a touch of tamarind. A marvelous, highly distinctive Etna Bianco- enjoy now or over the next 5-7 years. **This is the finest example of Etna Bianco I have ever tasted. Superb**

Red

I Custodi Etna Rosso 2016 - Aromas of black cherry, tobacco and charred meat. Medium-bodied, this has plenty of earthy, spicy notes and ripe black fruit with medium-weight tannins. Meant for short term enjoyment (2-3 years), this is nicely balanced and well made. **Very Good**

Tornatore "Pietrarizzo" Etna Rosso 2015 - Aromas of red cherry, nutmeg, brown spice and a hint of raisin. Medium-bodied this has lovely ripeness, good acidity and soft, round tannins. Very good persistence and varietal character, crafted in a Burgundian style. 3-5 years. **Excellent**

Tenuta di Fessina "Musmeci" Etna Rosso Riserva 2012 - Exotic aromas of soy, Asian spice and dried cherry. Medium-full with excellent complexity, refined tannins, and excellent persistence. Nice to taste an Etna Rosso with some age on it. Beautiful sense of place; extremely well made. Peak in 7-10 years. **Outstanding**

Tenuta di Terre Nere "Guardiola" Etna Rosso 2016 - Spiced cherry, china bark and scrub brush aromas. Medium-full with excellent depth of fruit, a layered mid-palate, good acidity and youthful, well balanced tannins. Excellent complexity and varietal character, this offers a nice sense of Etna terroir. Rich, but refined. Best in another 2-4 years, peak in 12-15 years. **Outstanding**

Tenuta delle Terre Nere "Santo Spirito" Etna Rosso 2016 - Aromas of morel cherry, orchid and cranberry. Medium-full, this has beautifully ripe fruit, rich, balanced tannins, good acidity and excellent persistence. While this will offer greater complexities in another 5-7 years, I love the floral aromatics and finesse of this wine now. Peak in 12-15 years. **Outstanding**

Passopisciaro "Passorosso" Etna Rosso 2015 - 100% Nerello Mascalese, as are all the Etna reds at this winery. Beautiful pale garnet; lovely aromas of red roses, carnations and ripe red cherry. Very Burgundian style (Cote de Beaune); very good persistence, good acidity. 3-5 years. **Excellent**

Pietradolce "Barbagalli" Etna Rosso 2015 - Inviting aromas of morel cherry, violet and mint. Medium-full, this has excellent ripeness, round, elegant tannins, impressive persistence and first-rate complexity. Lovely drinkability- enjoy now and over the next 5-7 years. **Excellent**

Pietradolce "Contrada Santo Spirito" 2016 - Lovely young garnet color; red cherry and red currant aromas along with notes of cumin, sage and nutmeg with a touch of charred meat. Medium-full, this has very good acidity, rich, slightly dusty tannins that are Nebbiolo-like, excellent

persistence and distinct spice in the finish. This has beautiful varietal character and a superb sense of place and is a wonderful Etna Rosso that teases right now, as it offers first-rate complexity, but will display greater character and subtleties over time. Peak in 12-15 years. **Superb**

Passopisciaro Contrada "S" Sciaranuova" 2015 (Terre Siciliane IGT) - Although the grapes used for this wine are entirely from the Etna zone, the unusual regulations here mean it cannot be labeled as Etna Rosso; no matter, as this is merely a technicality, as Passopisciaro is one of the area's most accomplished wine estates. 80 year old vines. Sciara is a local word meaning "lava flow." Pale garnet; very perfumed aromas of red roses, marjoram, mace and red poppies. Medium-full, generous mid-palate. Rich tannins, excellent persistence, very good acidity. Morey-Saint Denis style. **Superb**

Alta Mora (Cusumano) "Guardiola" Etna Rosso 2014 - 2014 was an outstanding year in the Etna zone; here is one of the finest wines from that vintage (and one of the few still available in the market). Beautiful bright garnet; aromas of black cherry, menthol and hints of anise and tar. Medium-full with excellent concentration; rich mid-palate. Excellent persistence, very good acidity, beautifully integrated wood notes; medium-weight tannins. This has superb Nerello Mascalese character, as well as a beautiful sense of place and terroir (with its sensation of its lava soil origin in the finish) along with impressive complexity and superb harmony. A gem! Enjoyable now, this is graceful from start to finish and should drink well for another 7-10 years, perhaps longer. **Superb**