

## Ancient Vines and High Altitudes: Meet the Rising Winemaking Stars of Etna



MARCO DE GRAZIA OF TENUTA DELLE TERRE NERE / PHOTO BY GIUSEPPE GERBASI

The Etna growing zone produces some of the most focused, fascinating wines in Italy, thanks to its ancient vines, high-altitude vineyards, volcanic soils, proximity to the sea and Continental climate. They're loaded with finesse and energy.

Made predominantly with native grape Nerello Mascalese, Etna Rossos range from lithe and accessible offerings to more complex versions. The finest examples are fragrant, elegant, vibrant and precise, with taut, glossy tannins and mineral sensations.

Top expressions are delicious and distinguished, even when young. They also age well eight to 10 years after the vintage, while a few of the most structured can age a little longer.

Reds get most of the spotlight, but Etna's whites are equally beguiling. Made primarily with native grape Carricante, these racy, mineral-driven wines are savory and pristine. Often with whiffs of petrol even in their youth, the best promise surprising aging potential. Top bottlings age well for five to 15 years or more.

Winemaking on Etna goes back thousands of years, but it peaked in the late 1800s before being largely abandoned in the mid-1900s. From the 1980s to the early 2000s, Barone Villagrande and, later, pioneering estates Benanti and Murgo, both of which revived family properties in the east and southeast, were among the very few producer-bottlers.

This stagnant situation changed in the early 2000s, when trailblazers arrived on the largely deserted northern slopes, long considered the spiritual home of Nerello Mascalese. The last decade proves Carricante also thrives here.

The winemaking revival on the northern slopes spurred a rebirth across Etna. Over the last 20 years, investors big and small have descended on the area, but not all turn out stellar wines. Quality across the smoking mountain is a rollercoaster.

To further complicate things, there are exceptional bottlings that hail from the volcano's slopes but aren't labeled as Etna Denominazione di Origine Controllata (DOC).

The 1968 production code stipulates a bewildering hodgepodge of minimum and maximum altitudes across the denomination that exclude some notable vineyard sites. This is especially true on the northern slopes, where maximum vineyard altitude is 2,624 feet above sea level, but some producers make outstanding wines at up to 3,280 feet.

On Etna, as in Barolo and in Montalcino, the name of the producer is the only real guarantee.

Read on to discover some of today's most exciting estates.

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ANDREA FRANCHETTI OF FRANCHETTI-PASSOPISCIARO / PHOTO BY GIUSEPPE GERBASI

## **Franchetti-Passopisciario**

When Andrea Franchetti arrived on Mount Etna in 2000, he found desolation and abandoned vineyards. He also saw untapped potential, thanks to unique growing conditions including intense sunlight, extremely high altitudes, marked day-night temperature swings and extremely old, free-standing bush vines known as *albarello*. Many of these vines survived phylloxera and weren't grafted on American rootstocks.

Franchetti, who already had a successful winery in Tuscany, Tenuta Trinoro, was one of the first of the modern trailblazers to arrive on the volcano. He realized he had to change his winemaking approach on Etna. At Passopisciario, on Etna's northern slopes, he strives for elegance and pristine expressions of the wine's unique terroir, rather than concentration and power.



ANDREA FRANCHETTI / PHOTO BY GIUSEPPE GERBASI

“Unlike wines I make in Tuscany with Cabernet Franc and small amounts of Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon, Nerello Mascalese doesn’t need lengthy skin contact during vinification,” says Franchetti. “On Etna, I basically make wine from the juice. And instead of aging in barriques, we age in large neutral casks.”

The results are vibrant wines with balance and intensity. They also have inimitable identities and savory flavor profiles thanks to the varied terroir of Etna’s 133 defined contrade.

“Soil composition on Etna depends on the specific lava formations from individual eruptions,” says Franchetti. “Etna has multiple active craters, so every lava flow has a different makeup. Each contrada is unique because they were formed by different lava flows, creating wines with distinct aromas and personalities.”

The estate’s Etna Rosso and five contrada-specific bottlings are made with 100% Nerello Mascalese. The dazzling contrada offerings, like the radiant, firmly structured, ethereal Contrada R made from 100-year-old vines, are labeled Terre Siciliane, since most are situated at altitudes that aren’t sanctioned by the Etna DOC regulations.