

Etna 2019 and 2018 – the search for identity



2018 and 2019, Nebbiolo and Pinot Noir, Burgundy and Barolo: comparisons abound but identity eludes Walter in his latest survey of wines from the 'magic mountain'. Above, Planeta's winery, sited on a fifteenth-century lava flow in the Feudo di Mezzo contrada on the northern slopes of Mount Etna. See [this map](#).

My COVID-induced virtual tour of Etna reviewing the latest releases this June focused on two vintages, 2019 and 2018, each with quite different weather patterns but, in spite of this, not always leading to distinctly different wine styles.

2019 is considered a late-ripening year due to a cold April and May, which delayed flowering until mid June. From that time on temperatures rose, with several extreme heat peaks, which helped the vines to catch up the time that was lost during the cold spring. From September onwards cooler weather with occasional rain guaranteed regular ripening until harvest well into October.

2018, on the other hand, was characterised by rain. Patricia Tóth (pictured below), senior winemaker at Planeta overseeing their operation on Etna in the commune of Passopisciaro, called 2018 'quite bipolar', with wines that are soft and meaty and more fleshy than usual. While the winter preceding 2018 was wet, from February to April hardly any rain fell. In August the rain returned but in a very unusual pattern of two hours of drizzle and then cool winds that helped to dry the vines. This meant a stop-go harvest. 'We did a very long, drawn-out harvest during which we had dinner every evening', Tóth recalled, 'which is rare because normally we simply don't have the time for that.'

Tóth pointed out that because of the weather in 2018 the wines are less consistent across the board than in 2019 and with modest alcohol levels, which she prefers because, according to her, late harvests and high alcohol do not make for ageworthy wines.

While 2019 is more consistent, both vintages illustrate the ongoing search for identity, which still seems to centre on the idea of Etna as 'the Burgundy of the south'. This idea is encouraged by Etna's contrade, or districts, which are widely understood to be single vineyards that, analogous to Burgundy, suggest stylistic differences between them. Generally, contrade are rather large in the first place, but more importantly a single contrada can go from an elevation of 600 m (1,970 ft) to well over 1,000 m (3,280 ft) and therefore a distinctive single contrada style is still hard to pinpoint.

Instead, a much more common stylistic denominator across many wines, at least for the moment, is colour, with many wines being pale red, a shade commonly associated with Pinot Noir and burgundy, almost regardless of either vintage or contrada. These wines seem to imply that Nerello Mascalese's skin is low in pigment (although its name, which comes from *nero*, or black, indicates the very opposite).

Except for a few glorious examples, these pale wines, especially in 2018, lack a little in concentration and depth, which is probably a vintage characteristic. But that can't be the whole story as the same is true of the 2019s from an allegedly superior vintage. On the basis of these two vintages roughly two contrasting styles can be distinguished: pale Pinot Noir look-alikes (whatever that is) and properly concentrated wines in need of ageing. In the majority of cases I preferred the latter style because it was these wines that overall showed the most personality.

But Tóth begged to differ, pointing out that Nerello Mascalese is very site-sensitive, and in some contrade, Feudo di Mezzo for instance, delivers light-skinned grapes only. 'I compare Nerello Mascalese to Nebbiolo rather than Pinot Noir because of its pigment and tannic content. People always like to compare so if we do that, then for me it is Nebbiolo', she told me. But knowledge, or lack thereof, plays a role too. 'At the beginning people accused us of making a simple Nerello Mascalese, but at that time I still didn't know everything I needed to know about extraction. Nerello Mascalese releases a lot of tannins right at the first moment of the alcoholic fermentation. What I noticed is that static extraction [by which the wine is barely moved] helps.' What Nerello Mascalese and Pinot Noir have in common, is that each is a bit of a prima donna. 'Nerello doesn't need a lot of oxygen, it doesn't like it', Tóth continued, 'it becomes more fragile and ages fast.'

'So perhaps the wines I felt were lacking in concentration and/or ageing capacity were the result of a lack of winemaking knowledge rather than an inherent pigment deficit of the variety. But then there is 'old vine factor': 'Giuseppe [of Girolamo Russo] has very old vines and the grapes have much better concentration, and hence he is light years ahead.' It sounds as though the stylistic convergence I notice may also be caused by vine age.

The lack of depth might also be caused by short maceration times. Tóth already explained that Nerello Mascalese reacts badly to movement during vinification and sheds its tannic load during the initial phase of the alcoholic fermentation. This may make producers wary of keeping the wine longer on the skins. For Planeta's top wine, Eruzione 1614, the total maceration time is a formidable 35 days, but it is static – the cap submerged with a grid and no pumpovers or punchdowns. This long maceration time helps to stabilise the wine's colour, Tóth explained.

The Etna whites from the north side have a similar identity problem: without exception they are well made and delicious, but very few reach the complexity and ageworthiness of the wines such as Benanti's from the volcano's east flank. I always put this down to the fact that the east side is cloudier and hence the grapes get less intense sunlight. On the north side the intensity of light and absence of clouds would promote rapid ripening and hence an early, sometimes too early, harvest in order to avoid sunburn and loss of acidity.

Again, Tóth points out an alternative explanation I hadn't come across before: a lot of Carricante comes from traditional, mixed vineyards where it is grown alongside Nerello Mascalese. Vineyards dedicated exclusively to Carricante are a recent phenomenon, and can be managed much better than in a traditional vineyard. This is one reason why Tóth expects Carricante's profile to change over the next few years.

Another factor is the timing of the harvest. Carricante is typically picked too early because according to local tradition a fixed date, which ties in with a local festivity, must be adhered to. Breaking the tradition will take time while, additionally, many grape growers are risk-averse and do not want to leave the crop on the vines until well into October. But it is during the very last days of maturation that the proper Carricante aromas develop. 'It is a bit like Riesling or Furmint. You need to push and try to pick it just right, when the acidity starts to drop, and then it goes fast', Tóth explained. 'But it is exactly that moment when things become interesting.'

You would think that by now anything with the Etna name on it sells like hot cakes, but apparently this is not the case. Carricante is still not a household name because according to Tóth the market is not yet used to the idea of long-ageing whites from the south. Carricante has this capacity, but as a category needs to be properly understood and mastered by producers. 'Etna Bianco is a relatively easy sell, but the real cru [such as their Eruzione 1614 Bianco] isn't', Tóth confessed.

It is surprising, to say the least, how Etna has become a household name in such a very short time. One reason is the generally high quality of the wines and, a new development altogether, much less use of new oak. Some producers have gone from one extreme, of very oaky, dark wines, to the other, very

pale and with hardly any oak if at all. Also this points to an ongoing search for the most appropriate style – a process which will take years. The aim, in my opinion, should be to capture a sense of place in order to arrive at more original wines. That would require an intimate knowledge of the terroir and the varieties, which will take time, particularly because the majority of the producers are newcomers who are still coming to terms with this magic mountain.

The 91 wines below are grouped by style, with the whites and reds in vintage subgroups. Within those groups wines are listed alphabetically by producer (sur)name but you can reorder them.

(...)

Passopisciaro, Passobianco 2019 IGT Terre Siciliane

17

100% Chardonnay from a 15-year-old vineyard planted at a density of 12,300 vines/ha at between 800 and 1,000 m above sea level. Fermented in stainless steel and aged for 18 months in concrete tanks and large oak barrels.

Straw yellow. Concentrated, deep and alluring white- and citrus-fruit nose with hints of kumquat and papaya. Orange and lemon palate with bitter-almond notes on the finish. Long and a little linear and with plenty of substance. (WS) 13%

Drink 2021 – 2026

Passopisciaro, Contrada PC 2019 IGT Terre Siciliane

17 +

100% Chardonnay from a 19-year-old vineyard at between 870 and 950 m above sea level planted at a density of 12,300 vines/ha. Pre-fermentation cold soak of 12 hours. Fermented in large old oak casks of up to 20 hl in which it was also aged for 18 months.

Intense straw yellow. Like the Passobianco but amplified and fortified with elegant oak notes. Peach and orange on the palate with the oak supporting the fruit. Concentrated and, at the same time, displaying a certain coolness. (WS) 13%

Drink 2021 – 2026

Passopisciaro, Passobianco 2018 IGT Terre Siciliane

17.5

100% Chardonnay from an 18-year-old vineyard at between 800 and 1,000 m above sea level planted at a density of 12,300 vines/ha. Fermented in stainless steel and aged for 10 months in concrete tanks and large oak casks followed by six months in bottle.

Deep straw yellow. Savoury and minerally and a little iodine, with more than a peppery tingle on the nose, like smelling lava, but it might be my imagination now running away with me. Certainly intriguing. Opens up very slowly so I would have no qualms about decanting this. Garden herbs. Same slowness on the palate. More orange than lemon and with a long bitter, salty sensation. Stones and orange fruit on the finish. Captivating. (WS) 13.5%

Drink 2021 – 2028

Passopisciaro, Contrada C 2019 Etna

17

100% Nerello Mascalese from a 90-year-old vineyard in Contrada Chiappemacine at 550 m above sea level. Fermentation in stainless steel and aged for 18 months in large oak casks.

Just mid ruby. Peppery nose of red fruit, cherry, rhubarb and raspberry with a spicy undertow and a hint of oak and tobacco leaf. Gorgeous depth and concentration on the palate and with a layer of fine-grained tannins. Real intensity on the finish. Cool-climate spirit in spite of its 15% alcohol. (WS) 15%
Drink 2021 – 2026

Passopisciaro, Contrada G 2019 Etna

17.5

Made from a selection of Nerello Mascalese from 100-year-old vines grown in Contrada Guardiola at between 800 and 1,000 m above sea level. Fermentation in stainless steel and aged for 18 months in large oak casks.

Just mid ruby and youthful. Captivating, stony, minerally raspberry nose. Brooding depth, sweetly perfumed. Racy cherry and raspberry with coating tannins sticking to the fruit. Still tight, a little embryonic and super-elegant. (WS) 14.5%
Drink 2022 – 2028

Passopisciaro, Contrada P 2019 Etna

17 ++

100% Nerello Mascalese grown in Contrada Porcaria at 650 m above sea level. Fermented in stainless steel and aged for 18 months in large oak casks.

Lustrous and just mid ruby. Deeper nose than the Contrada C with perfumed concentrated raspberry and hints of crushed black pepper and stones. Racy acidity cleaves through savoury-sweet raspberry fruit. Very firm but polished tannic spine ending in a chewy raspberry fruit finish. Firm structure. (WS) 14.5%
Drink 2022 – 2028

Passopisciaro, Contrada R 2019 Etna

17 +

100% Nerello Mascalese from 100-year-old vines grown in Contrada Rampante at 1,000 m above sea level. Fermentation in stainless steel with a total skin-contact time of 15 days. MLF and ageing for 18 months in large oak casks.

Mid ruby. Brooding and hinting at ripe red fruit with iodine notes, oatmeal and still embryonic. Richly tannic racy raspberry fruit. Very long, juicy and energetic, tannic and perfumed. Great long-lasting tannic bite on the finish. (WS) 14.5%
Drink 2022 – 2030

Passopisciaro, Contrada S 2019 Etna

18

100% Nerello Mascalese grown in Contrada Sciarenuova at 850 m above sea level. Fermentation in stainless steel with a total skin-contact time of 15 days. MLF and ageing for 18 months in large oak casks.

Just mid ruby. Iron and raspberry. A sense of depth and richness on the nose but still a little subdued. A hint of oak. Mouth-watering raspberry fruit palate but not tart. A firm layer of fine-grained tannin. Very elegant, yet gripping and layered. (WS) 14.5%
Drink 2022 – 2028

Passopisciaro, Passorosso 2018 IGT Terre Siciliane 16.5

Nerello Mascalese from several of the estate's vineyards and aged for 10 months in large oak casks and concrete, followed by six months in bottle.

Just mid ruby with the beginning of orange tinges. Lifted fragrant red-fruit nose with a hint of beef stock. Juicy red fruit that is a little racy and with fine chewy tannins. Lots of anima, light and appetising. (WS) 13%

Drink 2021 – 2023

Passopisciaro, Contrada C 2018 IGT Terre Siciliane 17

100% Nerello Mascalese from a 90-year-old vineyard at 550 m above sea level in Contrada Chiappemacine. Fermentation in stainless steel and aged for 18 months in large oak casks.

Palish ruby. Deep brooding and sweetly perfumed with hints of cracked pepper and oatmeal. With aeration, distinct stony mineral notes emerge. Really juicy and yet elegant with a layer of finely grained tannins. A pretty, elegant wine with an attractive tannic bite. (WS) 13%

Drink 2021 – 2026

Passopisciaro, Contrada G 2018 IGT Terre Siciliane 17 +

Made from a selection of Nerello Mascalese from 100-year-old vines grown in Contrada Guardiola at between 800 and 1,000 m above sea level. Fermentation in stainless steel and aged for 18 months in large oak casks.

Just mid ruby with orange tinges. Brooding, sweet, deep and complex nose of raspberry and sour cherry and savoury top notes. On the palate, it has more stuffing than Contrada P but with similar energetic acidity. Fresh and with supporting, tightly knit tannins that make themselves felt without dominating the palate. (WS) 13%

Drink 2021 – 2028

Passopisciaro, Contrada P 2018 IGT Terre Siciliane 17

100% Nerello Mascalese grown in Contrada Porcaria at 650 m above sea level. Fermentation in stainless steel and aged for 18 months in large oak casks.

Mid ruby with the beginning of orange tinges. Deep, sweet, perfumed red fruit spiked with savoury and mineral notes and with a hint of oak. The palate is quite different with elegant, fragrant, almost racy crushed red fruit, succulent acidity and a rich layer of sandy tannins. (WS) 13%

Drink 2021 – 2026

Passopisciaro, Contrada R 2018 IGT Terre Siciliane 17

100% Nerello Mascalese from 100-year-old vines grown in Contrada Rampante at 1,000 m above sea level. Fermentation in stainless steel with a total skin-contact time of 15 days. MLF and ageing for 18 months in large oak casks.

Palish ruby. Exotic spice nose with bags of minerals and iron and with a meaty undertow. Ripe cherry fruit lurking underneath. Sappy, lively and elegant red-berry palate balanced by a layer of powdery tannins. Ends a little racy. Long yet light. (WS) 13%

Drink 2021 – 2026

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