

WINE News

Italy: beyond the boot.



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It's Summertime for Sicilian Wine

By Greg St. Clair

As I write this, the weather is finally warming up around the Bay Area. And it reminds me that San Francisco, if we were to place it at the same latitude in Italy, would be in Sicily, just a minute or two south of Corleone—yes, that Corleone. Sicily has always fascinated me, from a historical perspective that is dazzling, to a viticultural and gastronomical one that blends a mix of so many cultures into a seamless expression of its cultural evolution. The wine side of the story really blooms in the mid-1990s, after Italy decided to take some bold action against the Mafia stranglehold on the island. Since then, a boom in outside investment has helped to plant new vineyards and modernize winemaking. Although modernization always sounds good at first, it was the second wave of

development—one of passionate people restoring old vineyards, older methods, and indigenous varieties—that has really shown the way for the current Rinascimento (Renaissance) in Sicily. Although Sicily covers just about 10,000 square miles (the size of Vermont), the variety of growing areas—from the tiny islands on the north and south coast, to the towering presence of 10,000-foot-high Mount Etna—not to mention myriad soil types, winemaking styles, local microclimates, and varietals, allows Sicily to produce an incredible array of wine. Dive into Sicily this summer. Cook up some Sicilian specialties and experience the incredible food and wine this stunning island offers.

2017 Caravaglio Malvasia Secca Isola di Salina Occhio di Terra Salina (\$25.99)

The nose is incredible. Full of a briny, salty, floral character, it's spicy, inviting, and seems sweet... But no, the wine is *bone dry!* On the palate the wine has a supple richness, a weight that shows presence but not heaviness or fat. It begs for a plate of spaghetti con vongole (clams). This wine is sourced from 20 small vineyards all over Salina, a volcanic island off the north coast.



2016 Donnafugata "Ben Ryè" Passito di Pantelleria (375ml \$44.99) Even if you don't normally drink dessert wine, this wine is so incredible, you'll make time for it! Ben Ryè comes from an island off the south coast of Sicily. The nose is a blend of Middle Eastern spices, with lime peel, grapefruit, dried mango, ginger, honey—it's got everything. Although sweet, it doesn't come across as sticky. It's just superbly balanced with a finish that goes on and on. **98 DC**



2015 Gulfi "Nerojbleo" Nero d'Avola Sicilia (\$17.99) I used to not like Nero d'Avola, but it was just because of too many mass-produced versions. This is different! Nerojbleo's nose is full of wild plum touched with a salty brine, while the palate shows a full, richly textured body, yet still with superb balance. The flavors are deep and complex, with lots of dark fruit and a salty edge, and it finishes very clean. Try this next time you are grilling a New York steak! **93 JS**



Sicilian Recipe: Nero d'Avola, Frappato, and Alla that Good Stuff

I have always liked the wines from Vittoria. The southeastern corner of Sicily offers wine with more open fruit, deeper body, and a richer palate presence. But one wine in particular has always caught my attention: the Cerasuolo di Vittoria. OK, it's a mouthful for many folks, but let's try it: Chair-uh-swolo. See, not that hard. The DOCG requires the blending of two grapes, Nero d'Avola and Frappato. The Nero d'Avola can get fairly full-bodied sometimes, but its weight and density is offset by the vibrant freshness of the Frappato. Frappato is the same grape that in Tuscany they call Cilieggiolo, which takes its name from the Italian word for cherry. And for me, that fruit character is what gives the balance and center to this wine.

The **2014 Valle dell'Acate Cerasuolo di Vittoria (\$24.99)** is a superb wine. The subtle richness on the palate coupled with the aromatic lift make it a sensational wine to drink.

Now, I would like to propose a little homework assignment for you — OK, it involves drinking, so it's not like real homework. But here it goes: You should invite some friends over. Six people in total would work perfect. So here's the plan: Get yourself a bottle of the Cerasuolo, a bottle of **2014 Gulfi "Nerojbleo" Nero d'Avola Sicilia (\$17.99)**, and also a bottle of the **2016 Valle dell'Acate "Il Frappato"**

Vittoria (\$19.99), so you can have all the Cerasuolo ingredients. Now, the most important part of this homework is trying these wines with the classic Sicilian pasta dish, pasta alla Norma. Pasta alla Norma is eggplant and plum tomatoes; some oregano, garlic, dried red chili; a large bunch of fresh basil, finely torn (don't chop); and six ounces of salted ricotta—or you can use Parmigiano like I do; I like the taste more. Cook your sauce, blend with your choice of pasta (I like rigatoni for this dish but spaghetti will work fine), and enjoy the classic dish with the local wines.

So, back to the wine. The Gulfi Nerojbleo is stunning all by itself. Gulfi is one of my favorite producers of Nero d'Avola, and where Nero d'Avola in mass-produced versions produces flabby wine, Gulfi's head trained vines give such extraordinary fruit, the wines show extraordinary lift and verve. Valle dell'Acate's Frappato is just a joy to drink—it's fresh, so full of fruit. It puts a smile on your face. Make sure you drink it at cellar temperature—it makes a lot of difference!



Sold on Sicily: Etna Wines of Paolo Caciorgna

In the early 2000s Paolo Caciorgna, a consulting enologist, accompanied the famed Ital-American wine exporter Marc de Grazia to Mount Etna to help him on his quest to find a property.

If you haven't met Marc (or Marco) before, he's incredibly convincing about whatever he chooses to espouse. He's the Mr. Ice Cubes to Eskimos salesman, but with an incredible passion and drive for purity and for things Italian. Paolo is the quintessential opposite of Marco—subtle, ever-smiling, with a Zen-like ability to sense, place, terroir, and most of all, potential. Marco went on to buy property, vineyards, and a winery for his award-winning



Paolo Caciorgna in his vineyard.

Terre Nere winery, yet the ice cube salesman also convinced Paolo to buy a series of small, very old vineyards, so he could make his own wine instead of just being a consultant for someone else. Here was a chance to make his own wines. Like many of us, he succumbed to Marco's passionate sales pitch and he went all in—at least, on a tiny collection of vineyards.

In 2005 Paolo released his first Paolo Caciorgna N*Anticchia Etna Rosso. It was an immediate critical success. However, sales were never Paolo's forte, and he partnered with, well, the wrong sales partner, and so basically, after a few years he had to start over. Although the quality of his wines never wavered, Paolo's presence in the marketplace took a bit of a hit. Over the last four years he's slowly built that reputation back.

His **2014 Paolo Caciorgna N*Anticchia Etna Rosso (\$64.99)** is one of the best wines I've ever tasted from Mount Etna. The nose is sublime, redolent of a compote of wild cherry and wild raspberries. Just heavenly, yet this is no fruit bomb—this is Etna, and the smoky minerality of the wine comes through on the nose. Etna Rosso on the palate always shows earth, leather, and Middle Eastern spice. Texturally, it seems more like Barolo, with a veil of tannin cupping the middle fruit. This is a sensational wine—you must try it. **90 WS**

I get it. It's expensive, and you may want to experience Paolo's wines at a more accessible price point. Try the **2016 Paolo Caciorgna "Guardoilvento" Etna Rosso (\$29.99)**, which is a more supple version, or the **2017 Paolo Caciorgna "Ciauria" Etna Rosso (\$24.99)**, a slightly fruitier version, yet still a child of Etna. Wines of power, grace and soul—you should try them all.



Volcanic Salutations: The Wines of Mount Etna

The wine world began to take Sicily seriously with the emergence of the wines from Mount Etna. The red wines of Etna are predominantly Nerello Mascalese, and the whites are predominantly Carricante. One of the reasons for their meteoric rise was that the region was chock full of old vineyards, which pushed the timeline forward for making quality wines.

Benanti

In the late 1980s there were only a handful of producers on Mount Etna. In my opinion, it was Giuseppe Benanti who created a wave of interest in the region, along with his consulting enologist Salvo Foti. The two created a Carricante-based white that became a sensation in Italy and opened eyes to the potential of this forgotten region. We have the current version, **2015 Benanti “Pietramarina” Etna Bianco Superiore (\$74.99)**. Giuseppe recently passed the baton to his twin sons, Antonio and Salvino. They’ve sold off all the non-Etna vineyards and have decided to make a more specific investment to reflect their Etna heritage. Their range of Etna wines are among some of the best bargains available. We feature their **2017 Benanti Etna Bianco (\$26.99)**, **2016 Benanti Etna Rosso (\$19.99)**, **2013 Benanti “Serra della Contessa” Etna Rosso (\$49.99)**, and **2013 Benanti “Rovittello” Etna Rosso (\$59.99)**.



Biondi

There were many wineries all over Mount Etna in the late 1990s, but most were abandoned, due to the harsh reality of growing at altitude, and a market that didn’t make it easy to sell wines that take so much effort to make. Another set of “pioneers,” **Ciro Biondi** and his wife Stephanie, revitalized **Ciro’s** family winery in 1999 and began producing formidable reds that garnered international attention. I visited the Biondi winery back in 2007, on my first visit to Mount Etna, and was not prepared for how different the region is. **Ciro** brought me to one of his vineyards which was over 2,100 feet in elevation, but was a shocking 35° sloping black sand beach with no trellising or terracing, just head-pruned vines (alberello in Italian). I’d never seen anything like it before. Yet it wasn’t the vineyards that turned my head as much as the wines. They have an exotic and pure nature, showing their volcanic origins. The white are crystalline, salty, and savory like nothing I’d experienced before. The reds are structured and aromatic, a blend of power and savory intrigue. If I could broadly describe them, I’d say they were structurally somewhere between Burgundy and Barolo. The purists will pillory me for that, but I really believe that Nerello Mascalese on Mount Etna is in the same league, just in its infancy.

2016 Biondi “Outis” Etna Bianco (\$29.99)

2015 Biondi “Outis” Etna Rosso (\$36.99) 93 VN



The Sciaranuova vineyard.

Passopisciaro

I met **Andrea Franchetti** on that same trip. He is not Sicilian. He has a winery in southern Tuscan called **Tenuta Trinoro**, but he saw the possibilities of this region and in 2000 invested in **Passopisciaro**. He’s a really interesting guy, more poet than winemaker, and I could feel his sensibilities, his reverence for the place and his ability to interpret the mountain. **Andrea** has experimented with multiple other varieties to see if something else might work. The wine that just amazed was his **Franchetti** (currently out of stock), what he calls his **Super Etnean**. It’s a blend of **Petit Verdot** and **Cesanese d’Affile** that is scintillating, richly textured, and supremely aromatic. His vineyards stretch from 1,800 feet up to over 3,200 feet, where, he told me, “the ground sparkles black like the night.” The terrain is literally a volcano, and in parts becomes a rather moon-like bleakness, and quite cold at night even in the dead of summer. His **2016 Passopisciaro “Passorosso” Etna Rosso Sicilia (\$31.99)** is luscious, has a more intense middle rather than a tannic shell, and is an impressive intro to his much sought-after single-vineyard wines. **93 DC**



Graci

Alberto Graci is a hard-charging go-getter, president of the **Consorzio** and now a business partner with **Angelo Gaja** in another new Etna project. You can feel his energy and enthusiasm while he tries to instill in you his passion for Etna. His vineyards stretch from 2,100 feet to past 3,100 feet. His whites, **2017 Graci Etna Bianco (\$26.99)** and **2016 Graci “Arcuria” Etna Bianco (\$49.99)**, are as good as his reds, **2016 Graci Etna Rosso (\$25.99)** and **2015 Graci “Arcuria” Etna Rosso (\$49.99)**. But it’s his **2018 Graci Etna Rosato (\$21.99)** that has our staff hounding me for more. It’s all **Nerello Mascalese** and shows a vibrant, volcanic crispness encapsulated by a mid-palate richness that makes it a real crowd pleaser.





Planeta: Some Nice Little Wines from the Big Guys on the Island

I must admit that I have a fondness for the small, even tiny producers. Their struggle to survive is a constant battle with nature, a difficult scale of economy, ever-deepening bureaucracy, and an extraordinarily competitive sales market. *Forza*, little guys!

Yet there are some large producers whose presence in their region amplifies the benefit to all. The Planeta family is one of those for me. They have a unique design, with five different wineries strewn across Sicily. As a conglomerate the properties amount to a large winery, but many of the outlying wineries are tiny jewels in their zones. Planeta uses economy of scale not to squeeze pennies, but to give opportunity and resources to the small estates. They are their own ideal partners.

I remember meeting Alessio Planeta. Because my pre-meeting impression of the winery was one of a corporate megalith, at first he looked to me like a banker or an accountant whose Chardonnay, Syrah, and Cabernet Sauvignon were his calling card, not a winemaking man of the soil. Yet he slowly won me over with his expression of love for his region, and the integrity of the grape growing and winemaking. I was impressed. However, it was only when I tasted his wines that I could



put it all together. Yes, he had lots of the international varietal wines—it's hard to compete in the international marketplace without them—but he puts his family's spin on their character.

Just recently Planeta has released the first of their Etna wines, and the wines are sensational. The **2016 Planeta "Eruzione" Carricante (\$36.99)** and the **2016 Planeta Etna Rosso (\$36.99)** are extraordinary representations of their types. I especially love the Carricante's sizzling minerality. **92 JS**



Their wines from the southeast are also splendid. The **2016 Planeta Cerasuolo di Vittoria (\$26.99)** shows exceptional balance and drinkability. The **2014 Planeta Nero d'Avola Santa Cecilia (\$34.99)** is supple and inviting, and the **2012 Planeta Nero d'Avola "Noto" (\$44.99)** shows the power and drive of old-vine Nero d'Avola. **92 WE**

Kudos to the Planeta family for their dedication to the spirit of winemaking.

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