

Etna. Or, why I'm a Lava Lout

So this is how the Earth was made – at 3,343 metres (10,968 feet), Mount Etna (or Mongibello) spits and snarls and smokes. High up in summer there is no snow left, all around is ash, black as death. Above us the final peak is occupied by *four* active craters, caked in yellow sulphur. The last eruption occurred just last month and, as we reach 3,050 metres, it's considered too dangerous for us to ascend further. But oh, the views; the Ionian Sea is just a few kilometres to the east, while 1,500 metres below and to the north is base camp: *Piano Provenzana*. There you can see the wreckage of old ski tows and buildings engulfed by the remorseless lava flows of 2002. In the middle distance is the tree line and below that lay the vineyards that garland her lower slopes.

A little vulcanology is in order. Etna is a *Stratovolcano*. This means that the full range of pyromania is at her disposal, from explosions and unstoppable lava effusions to incandescent pyroclastic flows. Now half a million years old she has grown from nothing to become Italy's largest mountain south of the Alps.

Her constant shapeshifting is easy to see; there are over 300 easily visible craters, rips and vents, while the eastern sea-facing flank (the *Valle de Bove*) is a huge chasm created from a collapsed caldera. Earthquakes and tremors are frequent and her height changes with each new eruption.

And those eruptions are not confined to the top. Vents open up frequently on the lower flanks and it is these that pose the most danger. Already in this short century eruptions have threatened entire communities and there are plenty of examples of her ferocity destroying towns and villages throughout history. Packed full of volcanicity, Etna is classified by the UN as one of the 16 volcanoes posing most risk to life and property around the world.

Nevertheless, as well as a destroyer, Etna gives life: incredibly fertile soils form quickly from the primeval lava and ash. Only the very top of Etna is desert; below 2,000 metres, there are thick stands of chestnut, larch, beech and oak. There has been no logging or hunting allowed since this vast area was designated as a protected National Park in 1987. Meanwhile, the oldest tree in Europe, a sweet chestnut nearly 4,000 years old, still thrives at Sant' Alfio – *Il Castagno dei Cento Cavalli*. It has witnessed huge destruction and yet it endures.

Etna is also blessed with produce. Nuts (almonds, hazelnuts, walnuts and sweet chestnut) are abundant, while red pistachios are grown extensively on the western flanks at Bronte. Then there are fig trees, apple and pear orchards, groves of citrus, olive and the ubiquitous prickly pear cacti. The most succulent peaches are from Mojo Alcantara, while honey is a specialty of Zefferana. Tap water, naturally filtered by the lava, is delicious; it comes laden with minerality. And finally, there are the *vines*.

Etna wine history

There is evidence that wine was made on Etna by the Greeks in the 5th century BC, though probably wine-making dates back much further. Certainly by the 3rd century BC there was a large area of vineyard, celebrated by the Romans and subsequent invaders. So it goes.

By 1890, Etna had become largest area under vine in Sicily and was capitalising on the devastation wreaked in France by *Phylloxera*. Etna wines were a major export around the Mediterranean from the port of Riposto via the *Ferrovia Circumetnea* railway. But then it was Etna's turn to suffer– the spread of *Phylloxera* was inexorable and it reached Etna at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the ensuing crisis export markets were lost and vineyards abandoned. More catastrophes followed; Etna's major eruptions in 1928, 1949 and 1971, World Wars and mass emigration. Etna's vineyard area and reputation declined.

Abandoned and sometimes burnt-blackened terraces and engulfed buildings are still easily visible. These alternate with ancient terraces and the glinting wires that denote modern vineyards. A closer inspection reveals simple farm buildings, heroically built stone walls and the occasional Villa created by prosperous gentry in the nineteenth century. Between neighbouring fields are *turritti* – conical heaps of volcanic stones removed from the fields by hand to allow the passage of a plough.

Today prosperity is returning to Etna, driven by tourism. Summer beaches and winter skiing have been the principal attractions. The local towns are benefiting, their streets paved by smooth lava and flanked by baroque architecture. Ornatly filigreed balconies overlook bustling piazzas piled high with produce. But in this region medieval buildings are a rarity – a more subtle reminder of Etna's destructive power. Meanwhile, there is now another reason to visit; the Etna wine revolution that is gathering momentum.

Etna wine - DOC and IGT

It was Etna that received Sicily's first DOC (*Denominazione di Origine Controllata*) in 1968. While this wine classification restored some credibility to the region, as is often the case the criteria used tended to enshrine historical practice and administrative convenience rather than encourage excellence. The grapes allowed are indigenous to the Etna region.

At roughly between 450 and 1,250 metres altitude, Etna DOC follows a broad crescent clockwise around the contours of Etna, from inland Randazzo in the northwest, through Milo in the east around to Biancavilla in the southwest. 85% of production is rosso (red) or rosato (rosé), with 15% bianco (white). Total DOC production is still huge, at around 8,300 hectolitres annually – the area under vine despite the deprivations of the past is still considerable, while the maximum yields allowed are set high at 90 hl/ha.

Fortunately, the main local varieties, Nerello Mascalese, Nerello Cappucio (*aka* Nerello Mantellato) and Carricante (*aka* Cabanese Bianco) are Etna's glory. They make high quality wines with ageing ability when care is taken. A lower yield of around 50 hl/ha is a commonly quoted figure for a good DOC wine and many of the very best have yields far lower than that.

The quality of the DOC wines can be traduced by the allowance of other local but inferior grape varieties. For example, the DOC Rosso still allows white Trebbiano in the blend, an echo of a situation once found in Chianti. Meanwhile the DOC Bianco Superiore has a higher stipulated Carricante content (all to the good) and is restricted to just a small area around the town of Milo.

Old vineyards may be also planted to field blends, in other words different varieties may coexist together in the same field – an ancient practice. Plots that predate the arrival of *phylloxera* are also found – there are surviving remnants of these gnarled vines on black ash soils and some are recently rediscovered – perhaps the evil insect cannot move as easily through these pockets of loose soils.

Modern vineyards train their vines in rows along wires and are big enough to accommodate small tractors, but there is no doubt that *ad alberello*, (high density bush vines) produce the best quality grapes, though this is labour intensive and costly.

A great deal of excellent vineyard is not included in the DOC at all. In fact the DOC boundaries sometimes look drawn at random, following roads and even bisecting single vineyards. As a result, there are good vineyards that are classified as the theoretically more humble IGT, though in fairness labelling any Italian wine as IGT is not exactly a major sales hurdle since the rise of the Super-Tuscans.

As for these IGT's, their proliferation has good reason. The grapes may be from vines grown outside the DOC Zone as mentioned above. Alternatively, production methods may not adhere to the DOC rules – maturing wines in new French oak barriques rather than employing the traditional large chestnut casks is a common indicator of ambitious winemaking and experimentation. There are also single variety bottles of unblended Nerello Mascalese (and some unblended Nerello Cappuccio). Nerello Mascalese is even vinified white, with some ending up as *Spumante* - excellent *Metodo Classico* Fizz!

However the biggest reason for IGT is probably the use of grape varieties not allowed in under the DOC rules that may appear as single-variety wines or blending partners. Lower down where it is warmer, e.g. at Linguaglossa, Alicante (Grenache) is grown. It is indigenous to Etna, though no-one knows when it first reached Sicily or who brought it. Then there are other Sicilian natives: red Nero d'Avola and Cesanese; white, Zibibbo (Muscat Alexandria), Inzolia, Grecanico and Malvasia.

But inevitably, International varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Syrah, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay have been introduced, as has the less well known but equally foreign Petit Verdot, Mondeuse and Riesling. These of course are capable of making good and interesting wines – but many could come from *anywhere*.

So here's a challenge. Can Etna avoid the black hole of Internationalism and its dead-end future? Given Nerello, Carricante and Mount Etna itself, I believe so. The key, as always, is *terroir* and the willingness of winemakers to discover it.

The Etna Terroir

Etna's terroir has several unique natural features that can combine to create a multitude of subtly different microclimates. Her volcanic soils are free draining, highly fertile, low in humus and packed with minerals, especially iron and potassium. New ash and lava fields decompose quickly into *sciara* that is quickly reclaimed by nature. The ash is particularly prone to erosion by rainwater, (the resultant mud is a notable clogger of tractor engines), while the rocky lava can quickly break machinery.

By old world standards, the vines grow at very high altitude. Nerello will ripen up to about 1,000 metres and Carricante to about 1,250 metres – these are cool climate varieties with long and slow ripening seasons. Consequently the harvests are late – October is commonplace and early November is not unusual – but such extended hang time risks inclement weather and vintage variation.

High altitude also means considerable diurnal variation. In summer, scorching daytime temperatures give way to cool nights under clear skies, the vines warmed after dark by heat re-radiated from the black soils. This balances the ripe grapes because they retain fresh acidity and develop complexity with moderate sugar (and therefore alcohol) content.

At these southerly latitudes, rain mostly falls in winter, arriving on the prevailing westerly winds. But Etna is so massive it creates its own weather: Thunderheads bubble up in summer and violent storms ensue, while heat differentials create cooling breezes. The western flanks around Bronte and Adriano are the dampest – here vines are prone to rot, so this is the land of the pistachio. The east, around Milo and Vilagrande, is also more humid given the maritime proximity, and here the vineyards are slowly being engulfed – not by lava but by suburbia.

Arguably the best Etna terroir lies inland to the north, where the grapes are even slower to ripen given their aspect. It is also much drier and breezier, with a low incidence of pests and fungal diseases the result. In fact the biggest pest that the vines face might be the free-roaming sheep – no wonder there are so many wire fences! The best vineyards follow the SS120 (an old Roman road) from Randazzo through Passopisciaro to Linguaglossa. If there was ever a Classico zone I'd say this should be it. The area is also

the most spectacular, with Etna's powerfully spiritual presence rivalled views of the Alcantara valley to the north.

The Ferrovia Circumetnea- Randazzo to Riposto

The Circumetnea railway is a gem, literally encircling Mount Etna. It was built between 1889 and 1898, using steam trains on a narrow gauge to move produce and people south to the city of Catania (part of the line is now the modern Catania Metro). The Randazzo to Catania anticlockwise route takes about 2 hours, but better by far is to travel the other way; from Randazzo clockwise down to the old seaport of Riposto. This is the wine train, built to move grapes to wineries and finished wines to Riposto for export. The railway has been broken by lava on several occasions, most recently in 1981 – the repaired sections are easily visible amidst the lava flows.

The line snakes right through the vineyards from Randazzo, leisurely following the contours until it descends sharply towards the sea after the town of Piedimonte Etneo. There are plenty of stops throughout, including the *Città del Vino* of Solicchiata, Passopisciaro and Linguaglossa, though the locals alight whenever the train intersects a road (a frequent occurrence).

Steam locos ran until 1963 while the FIAT diesel cars running today were introduced in 1938; they sport green, red or orange livery and have comfortable red leather seats.

There are half a dozen trains per day, Monday-Saturday, with the one-way trip taking an hour and 15 minutes - for the princely sum of €5 return. There is no better way of seeing the terraced vineyards, citrus groves, lava fields, towns and villas – all set against stunning backdrops of Mount Etna, the Alcantara valley, Taormina and the Ionian sea.

Etna wine producers - an intriguing blend of ancient and modern

The drive to improve the quality standards of Etna wines is manifesting itself at all price levels. Refreshingly, the long established producers are just as important to this as the small coterie of the *avant-garde* that naturally seem to attract the limelight. Hence quality wines are not restricted to a handful of no-expense spared "trophy wines". While inevitably it is these that will drive Etna's credibility and international recognition, the everyday wine-drinker will find great value and much to enjoy.

The early pioneers in this rejuvenation were producers like Benanti, convinced that Etna's indigenous Nerello and Carricante were capable of making genuinely fine wines capable of bottle age, as their *Pietramarina* bianco superiore and *Rovitello* rosso effortlessly prove. This in turn inspired Sicilians like Alberto Graci and Salvatore Foti, the latter now a consultant winemaker to an increasing number of Etna wine producers (including Mick Hucknall's *Il Cantante*, celebrity wine fans).

Some of the old traditional houses are investing to improve quality – modernising while preserving their tradition and unique heritage. These are sizeable outfits that frequently have a wide range of IGT's and DOC's. Barone de Villagrande (established in 1727), Tenuta Scilio (1815), Etna Wine (1820), Scammacca del Murgò (1850) and Antica Vinai (1877) are all good examples.

A sure sign that this revolution is gathering pace is that quality-conscious and high-profile wine companies from other parts of Sicily are investing in Etna, with the likes of Planeta, Tasca d'Almerita, Gulfi, Firriato and Corvo coming in.

At the top end, respected winemakers with businesses in other parts of Italy are already exploiting Etna's potential. Tuscany's Tenuta de Trinoro is one example, where owner Andrea Franchetti has established the Passopisciaro winery. Another is Marco de Grazia with Tenute della Terre Nere. The Cambria family from Napoli run Cottanera.

They have been joined by Belgians: Frank Cornelissen has established Cornelissen, while Trente Hargrave and Filip Kesteloot own Terre di Trente. Suddenly there are single vineyard wines being made, named after the local *Contrade* (or districts) that are showing their individuality and terroir. One day these could establish *Cru* in a similar fashion to those of Barolo.

What of the future?

Winemaker Marco de Grazia makes a statement on the back labels of his Etna DOC bottles that is both intriguing and audacious. In short, he says that Etna is "*the Burgundy of the Mediterranean*".

At first glance I failed to see any linkage. It's easy to dismiss such an idea as preposterous - I don't recall seeing any volcanoes lowering over Burgundy, where the soils are limestone and the principal varieties are the peerless Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. And where is Etna's clearly defined hierarchy of villages and individual sites?

But perhaps his meaning is more subtle. Etna really can make cool climate wines from single vineyard sites capable of showing *terroir*. Moreover, their makers are patch-of-ground people searching for quality and identity. Substitute Nerello for Pinot Noir and Carricante for Chardonnay; concentrate on making *Cru* wines from *contrade* and focus on the vineyard and the statement gains validity. Could Randazzo, Linguaglossa and Passopisciaro equal Gevrey, Montrachet and Vosne? A lofty ambition.

The Etna wine renaissance is only at the start of a long journey. A little further north of Etna, towards Messina, is the small sister-DOC of Faro, almost single-handedly rescued by Salvatore Geraci and Donato Lanati of Palari within a decade. Faro is also a wine made predominantly with Nerello and now it is considered to be one of Italy's finest reds.

While the best of Etna isn't at that level yet it is catching up fast. The best of Etna could, over time, establish a reputation to rival the greats of Piedmont or Tuscany.

So that's why I've become a Lava Lout - and I hope you'll join me.

Etna DOC – grape varieties

Etna Bianco

Carricante (Min. 60%) and Catarratto (sub-varieties Comune or the better quality Lucido, Max. 40%). Trebbiano and the rare Minnella Bianca are also allowed up to 15%

Etna Bianco Superiore

Carricante (Min. 80%) and Catarratto (Max. 20%)

Etna Rosato

Nerello Mascalese (Min. 80%) and Nerello Cappuccio, aka Nerello Mantellato, (Max. 20%). Other local varieties (including whites) allowed up to 10%

Etna Rosso

Nerello Mascalese (Min. 80%) and Nerello Cappuccio, (Max. 20%). Other local varieties (including whites) allowed up to 10%