

Wines of Italy

THE VOLCANIC FLAVOURS OF ETNA

Etna has its own particular identity, distinct from other parts of Sicily, writes **Rosemary George, MW**. The wines are unique, with a volcanic originality that combines minerality, strength and elegance

A dramatic view of Sicily's volcano, Mt Etna spewing volcanic fumes into the blue sky

It was a landing with a view at Catania airport in eastern Sicily. The skyline is dominated by Mount Etna, with just a puff of smoke escaping intermittently from the sleeping volcano. The next morning it was more energetic. A column of fumes was blasting into the air, looking very dramatic against the blue sky and snow-capped mountain. An old man in the village wandered past. "It was doing that last Sunday," he observed. And by the afternoon the volcano was dormant again. Obviously, if you live in one of the villages on the lower slopes of a volcano, you are used to the vagaries of its moods, and you hold it in esteem, and even affection.

Alberto Graci from the eponymous estate, came to collect me from my hotel to take me to his vineyard that lies 1,000 metres up; Etna boasts of some of the highest vineyards in Europe. Along the way, we had dramatic views of the erupting volcano and then we took a narrow dirt track up to the vineyard. It was a beautiful spot in the spring sunshine, with wild flowers and bird song, and church bells chiming in the distance. These were old vines, some of them a hundred years old, and ungrafted, because they had been untouched by phylloxera. They were planted on old terraces; the dry stone walls were built 200 or 300 years ago. Everything was done by hand; each vine was supported by a post. The grape varieties were Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Cappuccio, with some white vines, all mixed up together. And then we went back to Alberto's cellar for my introduction to the flavours of Etna.

His white wine, from a lower vineyard, is a blend of Carricante and Catarratto. The first is peculiar to Etna, the second is to be found all over Sicily. Carricante provides a refreshing minerality, with more acidity, to which Catarratto adds weight and density, which is at its most elegant on Etna. The wine had a salty minerality with a refreshing sapidity and certainly did not taste like a wine from the southern Mediterranean. Among the reds was Etna Rosso from Nerello Mascalese. The flavours were stony and mineral with some cherry perfume and refreshing acidity, balanced with a streak of tannin and a wonderful elegance. Again, they contrast dramatically with the red wines from the rest of Sicily.

It became increasingly apparent that Etna has its own particular identity. Rocco Trefiletti from the tiny estate of Aitala summed it up most aptly when he said that Etna "is an island within an island". The rest of Sicily is arid and the wines, based on Nero d'Avola (which is grown all over the rest of the island) are rich and alcoholic. On Etna, water is provided by the winter snow, and the wines have a character and flavour that is unique. You can definitely talk of an Etna style, with the volcanic soil making a marked impact

on flavour.

The DOC of Etna is shaped like the letter C, covering about a 1,000 hectares. There are few vineyards in the south as conditions are too hot and on the eastern slopes there are problems with humidity as the vineyards face the sea. The best are those on the north side of the volcano around the villages of Passopisciaro, Randazzo and Solichchiata. Andrea Franchetti from the estate of Passopisciaro explained that the area is being mapped, with the recognition of specific *contrade* (district) or *crus*. The lava spills determine the character of each *contrada*, because, interestingly, the mineral mix of each lava spill is quite different, and so the composition of the soil can be very varied – powdery and sandy, or more stony and gravelly. Altitude plays a part too, with vines between 500 and 1,000 metres. The slopes of the volcano are covered with hidden and long abandoned terraces, many of which are now being restored.

The originality of Etna wines has encouraged outsiders to the region. Andrea Franchetti had already successfully created the estate of Trinoro in Tuscany's Orcia Valley, when he came on holiday to Syracuse. He was captivated by the terraced vineyards, and found a cellar to renovate. 2005 was his first serious vintage in Etna. As well as the traditional Etna varieties, he has also planted Chardonnay, Petit Verdot and an unusual variety from Lazio, Cesanese d'Affile. I wondered why he chose Chardonnay. He admitted that he was not impressed by the local white varieties, and wanted to plant a variety with an international reputation.

Andrea Franchetti is behind the annual tasting of the Contrade dell'Etna where the growing number of producers in Etna meet to show their wines. I spent a morning there and was overwhelmed by the popularity of the event. The large room was so crowded that any serious tasting was well nigh impossible. However, I did enjoy the wines of Girolamo Russo, as well as those of Federico Curtaz at Tenuta di Fessina, who was Angelo Gaja's oenologist for 18 years.

Then I admit to escaping with relief, eagerly accepting an invitation to lunch from Marco de Grazia, who was treating his guests to a whole suckling pig. It had been in the oven since early that morning and was succulently delicious. But first we tasted his wines. Marco de Grazia was also seduced by the charms of Etna. He was initially looking for a holiday home with a vineyard, but the project grew and now he owns the estate, Terre Nere. His Etna Bianco, which represents 4% of the DOC, is a field blend of old vines – Carricante, but also Minella, Inzolia, Catarratto and Grecanico – with some sappy mineral fruit. And he makes a pure Carricante, which is partly aged in oak.



Alberto Graci in his vineyard, untouched by phylloxera and planted with very old wines

Best of all were Marco's red wines. He has 25 hectares of vines, in nine different plots in four different *contrade*. Marco talked about the effect of the lava flow and how you can get considerable soil variations even within the same vineyard. His entry-level wine is a blend from several vineyards, with some perfumed fruit. Feudo di Mezzo is volcanic ash; the wines are quite structured and tight-knit. Guardiolo is the highest in altitude, between 800 and 1,000 metres, with volcanic sand and basaltic pebbles. The flavours are very intense. Neighbouring Santo Spirito is lower, at about 700 to 770 metres, with fresh perfume and firm tannins. Calderara Sottano is at Randazzo adjoining his cellar, and so at a lower altitude. It is ripe with structured flavours and a certain warmth, and finally, there was a wine from 140-year-

old pre-phylloxera vines – Le Vigne de Don Peppino. It was wonderfully elegant, with length and depth.

Frank Cornelissen comes from Belgium. I asked him: "Why Etna?" "It is one of the few places that has all the ingredients, a relatively new unique soil; ungrafted vines; a great climate with intense light and an ancient culture," he said. One of the most original and talented winemakers on the island, Cornelissen's aim is to "show the soil, and the grape variety is the vehicle that goes with the soil". I spent a highly educational and thought-provoking morning with him, first looking at his vineyards and then tasting in his cellar. His wines are fermented in plastic tubs and then stored in glazed amphora as he is resolute that he does not

want a receptacle that will alter the taste of the wine. He finds that a larger quantity of grapes will result in the extraction of harsh tannins. He does not like tannins and he wants a longer maceration and extraction, with lower temperatures, in small batches. He talked of the need to manage the oxygen exchange. And he dislikes stainless steel.

Cornelissen is adamant that he does not make the wine; he raises it, in the sense of educating it. He will make a separate *contrada* if the character is sufficiently different, but otherwise he prefers to blend his various vineyards. And then we tasted his wines. His white wine comes mainly from Grecanico Dorato with Carricante, Catarratto and Coda di Volpe; it is amber-orange in colour, with firm acidity and dry, honeyed fruit – very intriguing and characterful. Rosso del Contadino is mainly Nerello Mascalese, and some other varieties, with some cherry spice. Vigna Alta is a blend of three *contrade*, lying between 800 and 1,000 metres with vines aged between 70 and 90 years old.

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Frank Cornelissen, who comes from Belgium, is one of the most original and talented winemakers on the island

The flavours were delicate and subtle, with fresh spice, a firm grip of minerality and elegance, and so completely different from the rest of Sicily.

One suggestion is that Etna is the Burgundy of the Mediterranean. Another is that the wines from the lower vineyards resemble Nebbiolo and those from the higher vineyards, Pinot Noir. However, to my mind comparisons with other places are inappropriate. The wines are unique with a volcanic originality, portraying a fabulous combination of minerality, strength and elegance. ♦

GRAPES OF SICILY

WHITE

Carricante

The Carricante grape, particular to the Etna region of Eastern Sicily, grows primarily in areas of higher elevation to the east and south of the volcano, at 950 to 1,050 metres above sea level. Somewhat contradictorily, this white grape is noted for both its high acidity content and a low pH level, contributing to a remarkable longevity.

Catarratto

A principal grape indigenous to the province of Trapani on the Western coast of Sicily, the robust Catarratto grape has produced a family of quality clones, including Catarratto Ammantidatu, Catarratto Fimminedda, Catarratto Bagascedda, and Catarratto Mattu, and has been given DOC designation in the wine territories of Marsala, Alcamo, and Monreale, among others.

Chardonnay

One of the most cultivated grapes on the entire island, Sicilian Chardonnay is grown on both the western and eastern coasts, where the hot sun and the oak barrel aging process produce a wine that is golden in colour and buttery in texture, with hints of vanilla.

RED

Nerello Cappuccio

Nerello Cappuccio, aka Nerello Mantellato, is a grape native to the Etna region of Sicily, and produces a spicy, medium-bodied wine with qualities very similar to the Cabernet Sauvignon. Though sometimes produced in its pure form, the Nerello Cappuccio is more often blended with the Nerello Mascalese in the production of DOC Etna Rosso.

Nerello Mascalese

Pleasantly earthy and flowery, with hints of tobacco and notable tannin content, the Nerello Mascalese is the best known of the Nerello varieties and the most versatile. Often a major component of DOC Etna Rosso, the Nerello Mascalese also lends itself well as an addition to aged varietals, adding a spicy, lively element.

Nero d'Avola

Arguably the most characteristic of Sicilian red grapes, the hearty Nero d'Avola variety is thought to have originated in the Syracuse/Ragusa territory in the southeastern part of the island. Over the years, however, it has spread throughout the entire region of Sicily. A smooth, deep, slightly peppery flavour gets better over time, without losing its inherent fruitiness. The grape is also planted in Nashik.

PROMOTION

SULA POWER SOLAR POWER

Sula Vineyards, the largest producer of wine in India, with 20 different wine varieties under its belt, is now focusing on sustainable practices and becoming an example to the industry. Rajeev Samant, founder and CEO of Sula Vineyards, believes that sustainability for its own sake is very desirable. Indeed, it has to be a part of the way that companies work today. Given below are Samant's responses to questions he is frequently asked

Why go eco-friendly?

I believe companies should be eco-friendly. Even if this costs us a bit more but results in our using fewer natural resources, it is the only way we can preserve the environment. In my opinion, it is totally worthwhile.

So what exactly is Sula doing to give back to the planet?

We have a four-point strategy.

1. Using solar water-heating to meet the winery's hot water requirements
2. Insulating wine-chilling tanks through energy-efficient lighting to minimize energy use
3. Greywater recycling and water metering, with targets to cut down on water use across all operations
4. An expanding bottle-recycling programme and a growing suite of water-harvesting and catchment structures across the vineyard, which have a combined storage capacity of more than 30 million litres.

What changed the way you looked at things?

When we began working here in 1999, I was shocked by the way pesticides were being used by farmers in the region, and by the aggressive marketing of these products by chemical companies.

What steps have you taken for generating energy?

We have an erratic power supply in India, resulting in the frequent need to turn to diesel gen-sets to

keep the wines cool. This is not only very costly, but very bad for the environment.

We want to ensure that we are creating as many feedback loops between our energy, waste and water systems as possible. The fact of the matter is that many of these efforts are no-brainers in terms of economics. Solar water heating, for example, gives you a payback on investment within two to three years.

The vineyard's wine-processing waste, as well as food waste goes into a large vermicompost pit. The pit produces 70-80 tonnes of compost a year, which is mixed with cow dung from local farms before going back into the vineyard.

How are you dealing with changing weather conditions, and problems like downy mildew?

The summers are long and dry but humidity during the annual monsoon makes crops more susceptible to certain pests which are rampant in the monsoon thanks to warm, humid conditions. These pests can devastate the vineyards, literally overnight, completely finishing off the crop. Sula has been unable to eradicate mildew completely through organic methods, such as copper application, but it has certainly reduced the need for artificial control. We aim to be as sustainable as possible and source raw materials locally.

Rajeev Samant pictured in the Sula vineyards