



# SICILY

WHERE TERROIR MAKES SENSE AGAIN

BY DELPHINE VEISSIÈRE

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**L**ong before the Greek settlers founded their magnificent cities in Sicily, wine culture yet dates back thousands of years, but while ancient Sicilian wines earned prestige around the world, modern wine growing has focused on high production and dessert wines such as the well-known Moscato di Pantelleria. The territory wine production of Sicily is broad and Marsala, yet an oenological reference and a legend on the Island, is not the unique wine produced there. Into the ocean of wine produced at the end of the 1990s, Sicily competed with Puglia for the title of Italy's most productive wine region. For decades, Sicily's wine prices were extremely competitive and successful abroad, notably the Corvo wines of Duca di Salaparuta, Sicily's largest winery; and those of the Settesoli di Menfi cooperative. Between Etna, the Northeast and western Sicily it exists a large diversity of grape varieties which are dedicated both to whites and reds.

At the beginning of the 20th century Messina and Etna were responsible for a significant percentage of total Sicilian wine production. Then the arrival of phylloxera plunged the area into a deep crisis from which it never recovered, and which gradually led to the abandonment

of many vineyards. The DOCs in these territories, Faro and Etna are more an homage to the past. Western Sicily is today the principal place where the majority of wine are produced and especially around Trapani and Palermo. Tasca d'Almerita represents one of the few prestigious wineries situated outside these areas. Sicily is largest Mediterranean island (including the island chain of Eolie, Lipari, Egadi, Pelagie, Pantelleria and Ustica) with 25707 mq and 122750 hectares of vineyards. Sicilia's annual production average has fallen at 5 millions hl vs. its old volume production of 10 millions hl.

From the beginning of the new century, demand felt for the Sicilian blending wines, deep-coloured and high-strength and generally used to bolster feebler efforts for more northerly climates, not only in Italy. Today, western Sicily represents 80% of of the island's fine wine production, with Trapani, Contessa Entellina and the west-central part of Palermo. A number of Italian and foreign wine estates are now investing there, at reasonable price in old vineyards with red local grapes varieties trained in Alberello system. Expanded systems and irrigated vineyards created for blending wines seems to be today in decline.



THE SICILIAN RURAL COUNTRYSIDE





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GIUSEPPE AND ALBERTO TASCA D'ALMERITA

## SICILIAN LAND: A YET UNEXPLORED TERRITORY FOR OUTSTANDING WINE PRODUCTION

On the western side of Sicily many wineries still produce “vini da tavola” and many producers still ignore the DOC system recently set up, preferring to produce wine in bulk and “moscato concentrato rettificato” destined to the wine enrichment process in other regions or dosage for Italian sparkling wines. Also in the southern coast, there are many vineyards but no DOC wines. The only DOC areas to be found beyond Agrigento are Menfi, Sambuca di Sicilia and Santa Margherita di Belice, where the vineyards are dominated by white varieties such as Catarratto and Inzolia, with Nero d’Avola and Perricone leading the reds. Between these zones and the province of Palermo, it exists two new and interesting DOC’s, Contessa Entellina and Contea di Sclafani, which were created to provide a regular legal framework for the wines of two producers: Tenuta di Donnafugata and Tasca d’Almerita, mainly known as Regaleali. In both cases, besides traditional varieties such as Inzolia and Grecanico, they also produce highly innovative wines from international grapes such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Syrah, Pinot Noir and

Chardonnay, bringing great financial reward and international credit to their producers.

Hopefully, excellence exists in Sicily and it regards not only these wineries but also the others which have kept a significative wine production based on local grape varieties. Rapitalà estate, which name comes from the Arabic (Rabidh-Allah “river of Allah” from the stream which flows through the vineyards) distinguish itself from the common producers taking advantage of a land where vines have been cultivated since antiquity. Generations of farmers have shaped there its current form and the identity of the estate, cultivating historical grape varieties. Sicilian outstanding wines are usually whites but the recent introduction of new technologies in the cellars has allowed to the wineries to also produce well-balanced and fruity reds such as Nero d’Avola with an interesting potential of ageing. The white grape, Catarratto, is the Island’s most widely planted grape variety, accounting for about 38% of total planting while Nero d’Avola accounts for only 13% of total planting.

Sicily enjoys a series of natural advantages which have not yet been fully exploited: hillside vineyards with excellent exposures, abundant



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sunlight and high temperatures to ripen the grapes, excellent elevation up to 900 meters above sea level, good diurnal temperature variability and a range of native vine varieties with a real territorial personality. Sicily has a Mediterranean climate, hot and quite dry in the coastal regions. The deforestation of the past and the strong warm winds from the South result in an arid climate, which is exacerbated by very low rainfall, except around Etna. It seems that Sicilian sun doesn't stress the vines and promotes perfect ripening.

Things started to change in the late 1990s. Investment by producers in Northern Italy such as Zonin, Girelli and GIV has shown the promises that exist. Production of impressive wines from Sicilian owned wines have been issued by wine producers such as Baglio Curratolo, Morgante, DonnaFugata and Planeta, the recent most important co-operative winery in Sicily. Despite all this DOC production is still low and it represents no more than 2% of total wine production as many producers prefer to use the IGT Sicilian appellation, as it allows greater flexibility in the management of viticulture and wine-making.

## RAPITALÀ ESTATE: THE FRENCH TOUCH OF EXCELLENCE IN SICILY

Gruppo Italiano Vini (GIV) has a major presence there, having bought up part of the Rapitalà estate in 1999, the most important winery in the region spread over 225 hectares in the area which slopes down from Camporeale towards Alcamo, on gentle hills between 300 and 600 high, where soil is alternate between clay and sand. As Laurent Bernard de la Gatinais, Rapitalà's president, told me wine stories and tradition are yet linked with women. There is no corner of the Sicilian wine industry untouched by the creative



RAPITALÀ ESTATE



LAURENT BERNARD DE LA GATINAIS,  
RAPITALÀ ESTATE'S PRESIDENT

leadership of women who offer an intuitive and vibrant touch in the Sicilian wines. In 1968, the Laurent's grandfather, Hugues Bernard Comte de la Gatinais, born in St Malo in 1940 married Gigi Guarrasi, descendant of a great family of Palermo. With her he engaged the reconstruction of the cellar destroyed by an earthquake in the Belice valley. Great talent is there and allowed to Rapitalà to offer a broad range of whites and reds produced either with local grapes (Catarratto, Grillo and Nero d'Avola) either French varieties (Pinot noir, Chardonnay, Syrah and Viognier) with an excellent value for money ratio. The high quality of grapes growing with an excellent exposure (south-west) and a soil composition enabling the vines to be grown in the ideal way, copes with the Laurent's highest standards and the straightness of its wines.

Recently rebuilt, the cellar benefits from innovative vinification techniques: cooling equipment for the musts and grapes, steel fermenters with computerized systems for the temperature control and remontage. Separate vinifications in small tanks of individual parcels are run to keep the characteristics of *terroir*. White wines are cold stabilized whether red wines are highly controlled during the extractive process of polyphenols and tannins. Rapitalà allows a minimum use of filtration in its wines. Reds are aged in French oak barriques. The philosophy of Rapitalà requires wines which retain flavours and scents of the Sicilian *terroir*, without neglecting the



## Sicilian flagship CATARRATTO wine by RAPITALÀ

This wine is the fusion between the wonderful climate of Sicily, the catarratto, the island's great traditional grape variety and the chardonnay, prince of the international grape varieties, and the result of this union is truly delightful. An atypical and modern wine, fresh, fruity and elegant with an attractive touch of acidity.



### CATARRATTO LOCAL GRAPPE BEFORE HARVESTING

elegance of the taste. Following my last tastings including the Rapitalà one, two recurring elements comes up: the 2011 vintage has generally given a dry and thin fruit in the palate and a relative lack of freshness both on whites and reds; on another hand, Rapitalà's wine style demonstrate the supremacy of Sicilian *terroir* on grape varietal characteristics and I can't hide it was an uncovering fact.

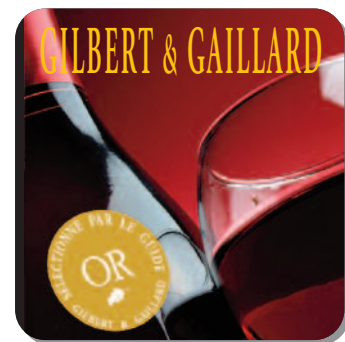
If I consider the Rapitalà's Chardonnay Grand Cru 2010, the wine which represents for the estate a synthesis of its philosophy, I can assess that it express a strong personality closer to the uniqueness of the Western Sicily area than the Burgundy style that it assumes with its 9-month ageing in French oak barrels. Grapes are grown on selected parcels of vines, situated on the middle slopes, at about 450 metres above sea level on a clayey-sandy soil. Bright with a deep gold colour, nose is clean and intense and focused on oaky aromas, caramel, cinnamon, honey and fresh cream, but not only. Palate is smooth and develops a taste of ripen exotic fruit alongside with a pleasant and discrete bitter finish such as the South African Chardonnay and conversely to Chablis style Chardonnay. In Sicily, Chardonnay is soft, structured and creamy and it is usually used in blending to soften the stubborn native grape varieties such as Catarratto.

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At Rapitalà, vines are irrigated when the critical point of the plant stress curve is reached, allowing the correct level of humidity to the plant and helping it not stopping its growth cycle. The 2011 vintage has been a complex year for the overall Italian wine production area. As highlighted by Domenico Zonin, Vice-President of Zonin Estate: "A few scattered rain in July in the north Adriatic from Friuli to Puglia and Sicily has allowed the plants to work well during the hottest weeks of summer." But he also points out that the opportunity to practice emergency irrigation help to guarantee the good quality of grapes. While Rapitalà estate began harvesting the white grapes (Chardonnay) from the 10th of August, the Zonin estate's Feudo Principi di Butera located in the southwest Sicily has started last August 23 the harvest operations of Chardonnay that were ended in a couple of days later. Red grapes have been harvested at the beginning of September and white grapes dedicated to the production of sweet wines are generally gathered at the beginning of November.

## OUR BEST SICILIAN AUTHENTIC WINES: CATARRATTO AND NERO D'AVOLA

In Sicily, Nero d'Avola produces actually the most exciting red wines. Its deep colour and robust tannin structure has long made it a favourite of blenders, but it is now staking a claim as a classical red Sicilian wine. Attention is also turning on the other red native grape varieties such as Perricone and Nerello Mascalese in order to place them as competitors of Nero d'Avola, especially in the Etna wine production area. Thanks to the well-drained volcanic soil and

widely fluctuating day and night temperatures, the wines produced in the Etna slopes are excellent and some of the vines are up to 80 years old. Etna rosso and rosé wines are made from Nerello Mascalese (at least 80% of the blend) and Nerello Cappuccio, while Etna bianco has also assumed an outstanding style and it is made from the native Carricante grape, blended with Catarratto. Benanti's whites (especially Pietramarina), produced by the Salvatore Benanti's estate, considered one of the best winemaker in the Southern Italy gain from a strong personality and a straight style. Its whites develop a unique Mediterranean bouquet of dried fruit and flowers alongside with an intense mineral hint and they are well-structured, fresh and have a good potential of ageing.

Syrah is considered as a variety similar in many respects to Nero d'Avola but it is not really in the right place here, Sicilian territory being too hot for this variety and others such as Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay. Nevertheless, Solinero 2008 produced by the Rapitalà estate with the grapes cropped on a selected parcel of 3 hectares and situated at 350 meters above sea level has retained my attention with its deep ruby colour and intense ripen red fruit with spices at the nose, delivering a well-balanced palate, fresh and long. As a comparison, the red wine Cerasuolo di Vittoria made from a blend of at least 40% of Frappato and no more than 60% of Nero d'Avola cultivated in the southeast of the island, even if it has improved in the last years but it seems to me, served chilled, just adapted to aperitif or ideally match with dark chocolate like the Sicilian one of Modica. Nero d'Avola keeps the pace on international red varieties and allow to the best Sicilian producers to look in a positive way the future but in opposition of what I first thought, Nero d'Avola can't be described as a whole with invariable characteristics. While the Southeast Nero d'Avola grapes produce full-bodied red with an heavy structure, spicy and peppery aromas such as the excellent Gulfi's Neromaccarj, the Western Sicily Nero d'Avola grapes gives easy-drinking wines with a lighter ruby colour, freshness and soft tannins such Rapitalà Nero d'Avola 2011. Tenuta Rapitalà Hugonis 2009, which is a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Nero d'Avola acquires more strength, complexity and balance with a pleasant mineral and mental final hint.

Noteworthy too, the single-variety Nero d'Avola Plumbago 2010 of Planeta produced from old vineyard grapes which provides a soft and fruity version with plum and ripen blackberries, cocoa and sherry pastries. Nevertheless, Nero d'Avola respectively to its French cousin Syrah cultivated in the Northern Rhone seems not to have a great potential for ageing having naturally a medium level of tannins. As a consequence, many Sicilian producers look for the over-extracting of tannins and polyphenols to deal with it producing full-bodied wines with unripe tannins and a strong oaky tone, lacking of elegance and freshness. The elegant and well-



REGALEALI ALTA ESTATE

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Gulfi's Estate

## GULFI's NEROMACCARJ

Is a cru made from Nero d'Avola grapes with complex and full-bodied characteristics typical of the wines from the area of Pachino where the native vines have thrived for centuries in an ideal environment.

Production area:  
Val di Noto, between  
Pachino and Not.



balanced single-variety Nero d'Avola Sense 2006 which is fruity and spicy with a broad mineral hint produced by Icon wines at Palermo demonstrates the opposite. Nero d'Avola is able to provide original *terroir* expressions without adding invasive oaky tones to acquire body and personality. Alongside with it, the crabby white local grapes Catarratto is the second most exciting Sicilian wine I have at the moment tasted, thanks to its complexity, elegance and original salty finish, dominated by a strong Mediterranean personality. I recommend especially the mountain Catarratto Casalj 2010 from Rapitalà estate, characterized by a pale gold colour, a generous bouquet with strong Mediterranean aromas (sage, tomato leaves, caper flowers and anise) and its pleasant citrus aftertaste of grapefruit and cedar fruit.

The other local white grapes such as Insolia (also named Ansonica) mainly cultivated in Western Sicily doesn't match my expectations like Catarratto. It is traditionally known as a relatively aromatic ingredient with Grillo in top Marsala blends and it is today commonly blended with Catarratto in dry white table wines. An original interpretation is given by the Cottanera estate located in the Etna hillsides through the blended Inzolia and Viognier Barbazzele bianco 2011. Conversely, at its best, Grillo gives full-bodied wines of real interest even if it naturally lacks of aromatic intensity making it often blended with Sauvignon, Viognier, Catarratto or Chardonnay. Rapitalà provides two easy-drinking blended Grillo, Bouquet and Piano Maltese 2011 which squeeze well through the rigorous style given by Laurent Bernard de La Gatinais in the Rapitalà's wine range but that deals more with ABC Sicilian white wine drinkers than accurate wine lovers! ■