

Sicily

A Wine Continent on its own

by Pedro Ballesteros MW

On the continent we have the tendency to classify Sicily as one of the warm Mediterranean regions, where the beauty of virgin beaches is only outdone by historical buildings and smoky volcanoes. When we think of Sicily, we do not immediately think of wine. And if we might think of wine, it would rather relate to the lower shelves of the supermarkets or at a bottle of Marsala to blaze dishes in the kitchen. On a vacation in Sicily this perception does not change necessarily. A lot of hotels and little pensions serve only entry-level Sicilian wine. Sure, famous brands as Planeta or Corvo meanwhile have improved the imago of Sicilian wine, but these are big brands. When drinking these wines, the consumer often is not aware that he is drinking Sicilian wines. Nevertheless, Sicily deserves a place among the biggest and most famous wine regions of the world. And we should not forget the factor of the 'volume': Sicily produces about 6 million hectoliters a year: that is more than New-Zealand and Austria together!

In Sicily there is a wine for every taste: from bulk wines to icon wines. We find red, rosé, white, sweet and fortified wines. But what really intrigues is the originality of the wines that are being produced in Sicily, incomparable and really the top in their styles. In continental Europe the diversity of the wines depends on factors like latitude, orography and climate. On a 'small continent' like Sicily with its limited distances we find diversity thanks to the big differences in altitude, to the many micro-climates and the richly varied soil. King **Etna**, with its 3350 meter high peak and its volcanic soil, is the key to the diversity of the land. A lot of people only think of the many dangers of a life 'under the volcano' but they are not aware of the richness of the volcanic subsoil. Volcanoes symbolize the cycle of life of soils that die at the bottom of the ocean and rise again millions of years later as lava. In the valleys the volcanic soil is very fertile, but on the slopes of the hills these

soils contain a high acidity that is perfect for viticulture. The association of calcareous soils with quality, that is a little bit colored by chauvinistic (French) myths, is only true with certain climatic circumstances. It's not the calcareous soil and the argyle, but the altitude, the drainage, the light and the **indigenous varieties** that make the miracle complete on the slopes of the Etna.

Aiming at the Very Top

De **Nerello Mascalese** prospers like no other varietal on the northern side of the volcano. Good Nerello Mascalese has a light color, pipfruit- and floral aromas, a touch of balsamico, a unique structure in the mouth, a remarkable acidity, a high alcohol degree and a subtle but long finish. Tannins and color are often obtained by blending with **Nerello Capuccio** and/or ripening on barriques. Personally I have a preference for pure Nerello Mascalese, because of its strong identity.

Federico Curtaz, whose origins are in the mountains of Piemonte, has settled very quickly on his new mountain. His **Il Musmeci de Fessina** (90% mascalese, 10% capuccio) is very convincing with a wonderful volume, sensuality and an original style. The Belgian **Frank Cornelissen**, double émigré (the first time from Northern Europe to the South and the second time from the countryside to the mountains), has undertaken a kind of philosophical enquiry into the ultimate expression of the Nerello Mascalese. He is a natural winemaker and viticulturist, working with very low yields, old vines planted in terraces, vendanges tardives, no barriques, no sulphites, and he is practicing no clearing or filtering. And sometimes, as with his **Munjebel SVA Vigne Alte'11**, he finds the Holy Grail of the divine complexity. The other range of his wines give a very extreme impression to me. Nevertheless, he deserves to be mentioned for his endeavor to reach the very top.

The Etna is the home of another remarkable varietal: the white **Carricante**. One could call it a kind of southern riesling with an exceptional minerality, subtle fruit and a lot of complexity with a fine acidity and a nice, open finish. My favorite wines are coming from the cellars of **Benanti**. The **Pietramarina** is a wonderful deep and delicate wine with a beautiful length and a high aging potential. The classical **Rovitello '05** (80% Nerello Mascalese) of the same house is intense and persistent, and shows us another side of the same varietal. **Firriato** is also worth to mention, because he produces a nice Carricante, called **Cavanera**: delicate, with a touch of anise. Delicious.

In the South-East of the Island the Volcanic soil makes way for a more classical one, rich in lime and argyle. The desert-like and very dry environment makes it hard to believe that viticulture is even possible here. But it is the cradle of beautiful terroir wines. Once you tasted a glass of **Nero d'Avola de Gulfi** you'll be convinced, like for instance in **Pachino at Val di Noto**. This wine is of an organic signature and is produced without any irrigation. In Gulfi four quality wines are being produced and each of them has a different character. The **Nero Buffaleffj** is nothing less than gorgeous, with a magic balance. The **Nero Baronj** is less expressive but has a great aging potential. The **Nero Maccarj** is richer and more fruity, the **Nero San Loré** more discrete and refined. The four together were unforgettable.

Further to the West, in the neighbourhood of Vittoria, we arrive in Frappato-country. The **Frappato** is a very original grape variety with an intense aromatic expression with impressions of kirsch, violet and spices. Wonderful as a varietal wine (try to taste the **Il Frappato d'Occhipinti** whenever you have the occasion), but it is also very tasteful in combination with the **Nero d'Avola**, which results in a **Cerasuolo di Vittoria**. The **Valle dell'Acate 2006** is a beautiful example of this, full of freshness. We may not forget to mention the **Tanè**, a blend of Nero d'Avola and **Syrah**, great with its bouquet of liquorice and ink, nicely concentrated, silky, strong and muscled at the same time.

In the centre of Sicily, Nero d'Avola is the king. After this grape varietal conquered the world with affordable wines, we got icon wines from the same grape who convinced the connoisseurs and professionals. The **Rosso del Conte de Tasca d'Almerita** is a must for every winelover with some self-respect. This wine seduces at every level: elegance, structure, tannine texture, length, aging potential. At a recent vertical tasting, the millésimes 1989, 2001, 2004 en 2007 presented strikingly good. In a more opulent style there is the **Santa Cecilia** of **Planeta**: intense fruit and wood, but the absolute top as well. **Mille e una Notte** of **Donnafugata** is another unpolished diamond: more earthy, spicy and very rich in tannins. Last but not least is our personal favorite: the **Vrucara** of **Montoni** with its nose of fruit confit and its open and never ending finish. As a fantail.

There are still more indigenous varietals on the Island. Some of them were only 'understood' very recently. The **Grillo**, the most planted grape in Sicily, was less appreciated so far because of its neutral character. But Marsala

producer **Marco de Bartoli** succeeded to show the possibilities of the grape with his **Grappoli del Grillo**, a real delicatessen in the style of the Jura. **Ansonica** is another varietal that is misunderstood. **Donnafugata** relaunched the interest in the grape with his **Vigna di Gabri**. At a recent tasting the 1998 still had a lot of refinement after 14 years, with a lot of expression and a remarkable persistent freshness.

Yes, we might love to tell you even about the other big Sicilian wines, made from other local, Italian and international grapes. I'm thinking of the sweet wines of **Favignana** or **Lipari**, and of the **Marsala** of course. However, for me it's clear, the Sicilian mini-continent deserves more attention and appreciation from the genuine winelover.