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Sicily: Hotbed of Italian Innovation

By Michael Apstein
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Winemakers in Sicily bubble with enthusiasm and a sense of discovery the way Etna bubbles with lava and smoke. Three decades ago, Tuscany was Italy's epicenter of experimentation. It was there that a revolution took place, expelling white grapes from Chianti, demonstrating the stand-alone greatness of Sangiovese, introducing French varieties as fuel for "Super Tuscan" wines, and propelling Brunello into stardom. But today, if you want to see a comparable outburst of imagination and creative energy, you'll need to turn your gaze to the south, especially Sicily.



Look to Southern Italy for Innovation

As recently as three decades ago, vinous Sicily was little more than a source of chunky bulk wines used to beef up blends in Northern Italy or France. Its Mediterranean climate and location, closer to Africa than Rome, made it an ideal spot for achieving super ripe grapes that could easily be translated into dark, alcoholic wines. But now there's a California-like confidence and ambition across the island. As in Tuscany three decades ago, producers believe that the government's rules do not result in the best wine, so many use the less prestigious Indicazione Geografica Protetta (IGP) designation because it gives them greater flexibility. (Under new EU regulations, IGP replaces the IGT designation, but older vintages will still be labeled IGT as IGP labeling is phased in).

That investment funds for Sicily's burgeoning wine industry have been flowing from northern Italy is testimony to the potential of the region. Traditionally, Sicily's island location and the mindset of its inhabitants have kept it isolated from the mainland. Sicilians are notoriously suspicious of foreigners, and indeed "foreigners" is a term Sicilians are nearly as quick to apply to Italians from the mainland as to non-Italians.

In all fairness, mainland Italians are often likely to regard Sicily as foreign too, but there's more to the island-onto-themselves mindset in Sicily than an intramural squabble. Sicily's locale in the middle of the Mediterranean has made it a prized target for invasion throughout the ages. Waves of marauding foreigners flowing over the island century after century go a long way toward explaining the Sicilian perspective. So, against this backdrop, the phenomenon of large mainland Italian wine companies like Zonin and Gruppo Italiani Vini investing in Sicily looks like a very big deal.

On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that investments from the north aren't the true wellspring of Sicily's transformation, but rather a response to the promise demonstrated by Sicilian vintners themselves. Multiple cases in point could be highlighted, but here are two--one old and one new--that will serve to exemplify the region's potential.

Tenuta di Fessina

Founded in 2007 on the slopes of Mount Etna by Silvia Maestrelli from Tuscany and Federico Curtaz from Piedmont (where he worked for Angelo Gaja for 15 years), Tenuta di Fessina makes an extraordinary range of red and white wines from both indigenous and the so-called international grapes.



Curtaz, a humble, self-effacing man, sums up their philosophy succinctly when he says, "We want to make fine, elegant wines to drink, not just to taste." And they do.

On Mt. Etna, Fessina has 25 acres of vines divided between the indigenous Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Cappuccio from which they make a blend, a DOC Etna

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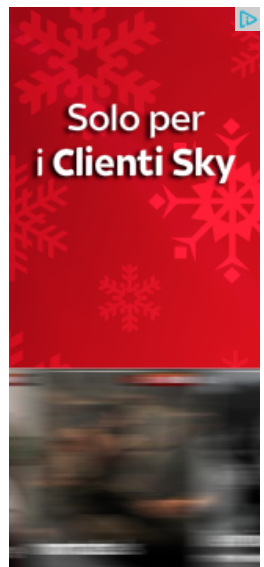
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which they make a blend, a DOC Etna Rosso labeled "Erse," and mono-varietals from Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Cappuccio, labeled, "Musmeci" (DOC Etna Rosso), and Laeneo (IGT Sicilia), respectively. The 2008 Musmeci is a

marvelous Nebbiolo-like combination of tar and violets, with an underlying volcanic minerality. Firm, but not hard, it has a Burgundian sensibility of flavor without weight. The 2010 Laeneo, floral, fruity and fleshy, is a charming low tannin wine.

They also produce a stylish Nero d'Avola, "Ero" (IGT Sicilia), which Curtaz describes as Sicily's Barbera because of its high acidity and low tannins, from a property in Noto in the southeast corner of the island.

Fessina's first year's production of "A'Puddara," a 2009 DOC Etna Bianco made exclusively from Carricante grown 3,000 feet above sea level on the volcanic slopes of Etna, was awarded the top award, tre bicchieri by the prestigious Italian wine guide, Gambero Rosso. Wood-aged and barrel fermented, it nonetheless retains green apple-like acidity and a Riesling-like vivacity that buttresses its ripeness and extraordinary length.

Curtaz found a vineyard on the northern aspect of Sicily in Segesta when he was consulting for a Piedmontese winery looking for a source for Chardonnay for its sparkling wine. He notes that Chardonnay ripens late in this vineyard because of the limestone soil, the northern exposure and the proximity to the sea, which makes it, according to him, a "nervous wine and less Sicilian." Fessina's Chardonnay, "Nakone" (IGT Sicilia), is still a work in progress, according to Curtaz, because he plans to let a small proportion of it go through malolactic fermentation and undergo barrel aging to soften the bracing acidity. To my mind, the 2010 was show stopping so I anxiously await his "improvements."

Regaleali

Despite his aristocratic background and title (Count of Almerita), Giuseppe Tasca is down to earth, thinks outside the box and knows how to make wonderful wine. He and his brother are the 7th generation of the Tasca family to take the reins at Regaleali. The estate was founded in 1830 as a traditional Sicilian farm with the usual mixture of agriculture--sheep, cows, tomatoes, wheat and vines. Giuseppe's grandfather, also named Giuseppe, (the Sicilian tradition is skip a generation in naming) was an early advocate of moving away from the Sicilian tradition of quantity over quality and started bottling the estate's wine in 1959.



The innovations have just kept coming ever since.

In 1988 they started a sparkling wine made from Inzolia, an indigenous grape. But it wasn't quite right, according to Tasca so the following year they used Chardonnay exclusively, which turned out to be very right, and have been doing so ever since.

The 2008 Tasca d'Almerita Brut (DOC Contea di Sclafani) is creamy and suave with no sharp edges and a lovely match for the little fried fish ever present on the Sicilian table.

In 2002, they purchased an estate, Tenuta Capofaro, on Salina, one of the Aeolian Islands, where they make a sweet, but not cloying, wine with invigorating acidity simply labeled "Malvasia" (IGP Salina). The same year Regaleali produced the first vintage of Leone d'Almerita (IGP Sicilia), a distinctive and lively white made mainly from Catarrato, another indigenous variety. The 2010 is fresh and floral with a touch of melon-like ripeness. Tasca attributes the wine's vivacity to the elevation of the vineyards (over 2,500 feet above sea level), which keeps the grapes cool and allows them to retain acidity.

Tasca is very bullish on Nero d'Avola--twenty percent of their vineyards are planted to it--and vehemently disagrees that the best comes from Noto. He believes the elevation of their vineyards allows the grape to express itself. Their flagship wine, "Rosso del Conte," initially was a blend of Nero d'Avola and another indigenous variety, Perricone, but recently they've included Cabernet Sauvignon in the blend. And over the years, they've adjusted the aging regimen, extending the time in barrel and in bottle before release. The 2007 Rosso del Conte, which contains some Cabernet, shows the value of constantly reevaluating what you do. It's a beautifully structured young wine conveying ripe cherry-like flavors and minerality. It needs a few more years of bottle age, but its gorgeous length and balance indicates it will be a great wine. They also make an early drinking wine entirely from Nero d'Avola, called "Lamuri d'Almerita," (IGP Sicilia), which is a terrific choice for pasta with a meat sauce.



In 2008, Tasca purchased what Domenico d'Antoni, their vineyard manager, called a young vineyard—the vines were “only” 40-45 years old—planted with Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Cappuccio on Mount Etna. It's another work in progress. They plan a blend of the two because they believe a bit of Nerello Cappuccio softens the tannins of Nerello Mascalese. Nonetheless, their first vintage, the 2008, of “Tascantò” (IGP Sicilia, with the E printed backwards so it spells Tasca Etna), made entirely from Nerello Mascalese, shows a splendid mixture of floral notes and a volcanic earthiness that demonstrates the potential of the vineyard.

Regaleali maintains tradition when they find it works. Tasca is most proud of Regaleali Bianco, an IGP Sicilia wine they've been producing since 1959, because it shows the value of Sicilian wine. Blended from three indigenous grapes, Inzolia, Grecanico and Catarrato and released six months after the harvest, they make roughly one million bottles annually. The 2010, fresh and vibrant with a slightly flinty finish, is the ideal go-to wine for seafood. And at about \$14 a bottle, it's no wonder he's proud of it.

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Email your thoughts on Sicilian wines to Michael.apstein1@gmail.com and follow Michael on Twitter [@MichaelApstein](https://twitter.com/MichaelApstein)