

For wine lovers around the world who enjoy
wine and the good life

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Sicily

in the Spotlight!

Marisa D'Vari explains how a new focus on quality over quantity has turned Sicilian wines into Sommelier favourites



Ancient pre-phyloxera Nerello Mascalese grapevine



While the classic regions of Burgundy and Bordeaux will always have their place at the top of wine lists in fine restaurants, sommeliers enjoy introducing their customers to new, upcoming regions around the world.

Right now, wines from Sicily are quickly becoming sommelier favourites. The reason is Sicily's unique terroir, and also because there is a "new wave" of quality minded winemakers who have a story to tell and high-scoring wines to back it up.

Sicily is the largest island in Italy as well as the largest island in the Mediterranean. Though it salutes the Italian flag, it is very

much an island with its own unique culture. Phoenicians and Carthaginians left their mark in the form of ancient temples that still stand today. The Greeks and later the Romans brought the arts, architecture, and the study of mathematics to Sicily.

While all Sicilians speak the same language, the traditions and culture of the various towns and villages can be quite different. The style and preparation of cuisine varies greatly as does the wine. And even though most of the wines in Sicily are made from the same native grape varieties, they take on different expressions, depending on the altitude of the vineyard where they are grown, the proximity to the sea, and the winemaking tradition of the region.

Vineyards stretch as far as the eye can see with Mt Etna in the background

WINE IN CAESAR'S TIME

In the days of Julius Caesar, Sicilian wine was among the most coveted in the Roman Empire. Yet, sadly, over the centuries, the reputation of Sicilian wine fell. It hit rock bottom after World War II when growers were paid to grow as many grapes as possible and make wine without concern for quality. This trend began to reverse – slowly – only in the 1980s. It was at this time that many university-educated, highly paid professionals discovered the neglected treasure of their family's heritage vineyards and made it their mission to hire agronomists and revitalize the vineyards. Though some say that the trend of rehabilitating old vineyards first started in the foothills of Mount Etna, it is now taking place all over Sicily.



Lilly Ferro Fazio, owner of Casa Vinicola Fazio



Raj Vaidya, Head Sommelier at Michelin-starred restaurant, Daniel



Raj Parr, three-time James Beard award-winning author, sommelier and winemaker



José Rallo from the Donnafugata family

CASA VINICOLA FAZIO

Owners of Casa Vinicola Fazio, Lilly Ferro Fazio and her in-laws have their own story to tell. “My husband is a law professor, but his family grew grapes in Erice, a hilly medieval city near Trapani. For 60 years they sold to the bulk wine market,” says Lilly. “Then in the 1980s, my husband and his brother decided to focus on quality instead of quantity. This meant improving the land to grow high quality grapes. And it also meant matching the terroir to suit the grape variety. For example, for cultivating the native grape Inzolia, we needed to find the terroir most suited to its cultivation.

“We have 100 hectares of farmland on the slopes of the mountain. All of the vineyards are cultivated on the hill, from 300 metres above sea level up to 700 metres. The high altitude gives better aromatics and more complexity. And because of the influence from the sea, we can find salty minerality in the white wines.”

The grapes are dry-farmed, Lilly explains, because there is enough water from the rain. The soil, called *kairos*, is very stony, allowing the roots to dig deep in search of water. The biggest challenge is finding the optimum time to pick, as the warm weather puts the grapes at the risk of becoming too ripe. In terms of maturation, the Fazio family likes to use two- and three-year-old oak barrels to keep the oak influence to a minimum. More than 20 years ago the Fazos began to experiment with some international grape varieties. But they were not the usual suspects such as Chardonnay or Cabernet Sauvignon. Instead they planted Muller-Thurgau. The grape adapted well to the soil, but because it was so vigorous, they had to remove excess bunches and pick very early. Today its production is successful.

DONNAFUGATA WINERY

In 1983, Giacomo and Gabriella Rallo created Donnafugata, one of the first of the new wave of quality-oriented Sicilian wine brands. According to their daughter José, the 1980s were a time



Carricante white wine grapes grown near Mt Etna

“My husband and his brother decided to focus on quality instead of quantity. This meant improving the land to grow high quality grapes and matching the terroir to suit the grape variety.” Lilly Fazio

of change for Sicilian wines. “It was due in large part to modernization of equipment and new techniques to keep the wines fresh and aromatic,” José explains.

“Though both my parents inherited vineyards, it took them ten years to really get the brand off the ground. The name Donnafugata refers to a popular, very literary Italian novel by Tomasi di Lampedusa, titled “The Leopard” and set in 19th century Italy. The story revolves around a queen who found refuge in the part of Sicily where the company’s vineyards are located today.”

EDUCATORS, SOMMELIERS, AND INFLUENCERS

Jean K Reilly, a wine expert holding the title of Master of Wine, is also a journalist and educator. When asked about her thoughts on Sicilian wine, she responds, “Sicily is the most dynamic region in Italy at the moment. The energy and passion of the latest generation of winemakers is obvious in the quality of the wines. My underdog favourite white variety



Sicily is an island full of history, diversity, flavours, culture and amazing wines.... It is one of those places with indigenous grapes and incredible terroir and elevation. It's like the Garden of Eden.

Left: Alberello Nero d'Avola. The vines grow like a small tree or "alberello". Right: Nero d'Avola, the most widely planted red grape

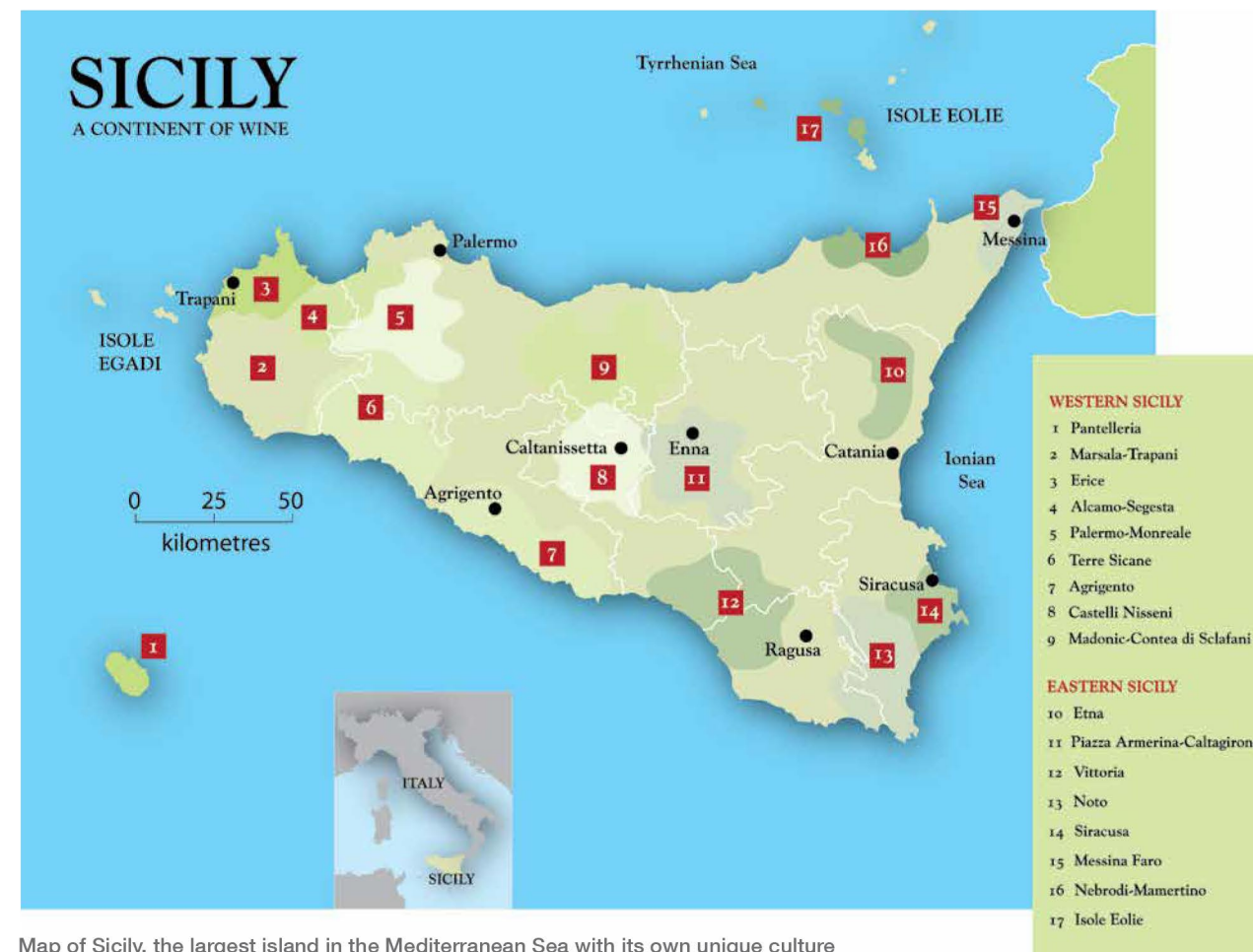
on Etna is Carricante. Grapes like Sauvignon Blanc can't hold a candle to it."

International wine influencer Georgia Panagopoulou is the founder of Wine Gini and has a Master of Science in Wine Management from the OIV (The International Organisation of Vine and Wine). Georgia, who specialises in digital communication strategies for wineries, feels the time is right for Sicilian wine.

"Sicily is an island full of history, diversity, flavours, culture and amazing wines. Before visiting Sicily, most of my experience of tasting Sicilian wines had to do with wines from Mount Etna. But Sicily has so many different regions and varieties! Grillo, Catarratto, Inzolia, Nerello Cappuccio, Perricone, Nerello Mascalese to name only a few. Let's not forget

it's the biggest island in the Mediterranean."

Michael Madrigale, partner in the wine app Grande Cuvée and former sommelier at Bar Boulud in Manhattan, is also a fan of Sicilian wine. "I went to Italy in 2013 to discover what these wines were all about. Sicily is one of those places with indigenous grapes, and incredible terroir and elevation. It's like the Garden of Eden. And the wines are delicious." When asked why he thinks Sicilian wines are becoming so popular today, he says, "People are now looking for authenticity more than for a famous wine region. It took the Sicilians a long time to establish their new reputation for quality wines. Now the market is telling them that people are willing to spend more money for quality."



Map of Sicily, the largest island in the Mediterranean Sea with its own unique culture

SICILIAN WINES IN THE BEST RESTAURANTS

Today Sicilian wines are finding their way to the best restaurants in the world. Raj Vaidya, Head Sommelier at Michelin-starred, Restaurant Daniel, is accustomed to opening rare bottles of wine valued at \$1000 – and more – each night for discriminating guests.

He is an advocate of Sicilian wine. "My favourite producer in Sicily is probably producer Arianna Occhipinti, especially for her juicy and fruit forward reds from the Vittoria region. The Frappato is utterly delicious," he says.

Frappato is an indigenous grape of Italy. Like Nero d'Avola and Nerello Mascalese, this native variety, along with the white grapes Grillo and Catarratta, form the success stories of the export market. Frappato is a light skinned grape that makes an aromatic red wine scented with sweet red berries and intense spice. While this is not a wine to age in the

cellar, it is fresh, vibrant and great to pair with salads.

Raj Parr, three-time James Beard Award-winning author, sommelier, and winemaker, has visited Sicily and praises the courage of Sicilian winemakers. "Sicily is a very extreme place to grow grapes. Producers face eruptions from Mount Etna, snow as late as April, very dry conditions, and heat that can reach 100°F in summer." A fan of Sicily's native varieties, he singles out producers Frank Cornelissen and Salvo Foti among his favourites.

Sommeliers agree that Sicily represents some of the most exciting and delicious wine on the market today. Though a few Sicilian producers make high-priced "trophy wines" from single vineyards, the majority of good quality Sicilian wine is moderately priced, delicious, and very food friendly. And given its volcanic origin, there is always a good story to tell with every glass. ❖