

DAVINE BY GURVINDER BHATIA



BEING INFLUENCED

Historically, Sicily has always held a strategic position in the Mediterranean. As a result, this island sitting adjacent to the toe of Italy's boot seems to have been occupied by almost everyone, from the Greeks to the Romans to the Spanish to the Moors. These varying influences are reflected in the architecture, cuisine and even in how different municipalities were planned and built throughout the region.

Sicily also has a long history with respect to wine production. It produces more wine than any other region in Italy, but the focus traditionally was on quantity as opposed to quality. Due to the heat and intensity of the sun, there was an abundance of dark and overly alcoholic wines being produced, shipped out and blended in wines throughout Europe to add colour and intensity.

The movement to an emphasis on quality really began in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Around the same time, many producers planted international varieties like Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Syrah, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc. Unfortunately, often these international varieties were blended with native grapes and, although some good wines were

produced, in most instances the true character of the native grapes was overwhelmed. Frequently, the mono-varietal wines made with international grapes were nothing to be excessively proud of.

Better vineyard management and winemaking techniques ultimately directly resulted in better quality and more balanced wines. More recently, a renewed interest in Sicily's native grape varieties combined with improved vineyard and winery practices has transformed what were historically rather lacklustre wines to quality wines that are interesting, distinct, flavourful and in many instances, refreshing.

While there are international grapes that can do well in Sicily, particularly Syrah (of particular note are the excellent

and elegant Syrah wines grown by Peter Vinding-Diers on the southeast part of the island), the most interesting wines are produced using native grape varieties. Recommended wineries are included.

GRILLO

Particularly common on the western part of the island, this white grape is heat- and drought-tolerant and makes wines that tend to be fresh, lemony, crisp and herbal. The grape is a result of a natural crossing of the Catarratto Bianco Lucido and Moscato di Alessandria (Zibibbo) grapes. Tasca d'Almerita, Ceuso, Feudo Disisa and Feudo Arancio are among those that produce good examples. Also, the best-quality Marsala tends to have higher percentages of Grillo.

CARRICANTE

This white grape finds its home on the slopes of Mount Etna, Europe's tallest active volcano (on the northeast part of the island), and forms the main component of the Etna Bianco wines. The grape loves mountainous altitudes and tends towards laser focus, racy and vibrant, citrus, green apple, anise, bright acidity and minerality. The wines can also have a wonderful mouth-watering salinity and tend to age well, akin to good dry Rieslings, developing petrol aromas with time. Producers to look for include Benanti, Graci, Pietradolce, Gulfi and Planeta.

INZOLIA

Referred to as Inzolia in Sicily, the variety's official name is Ansonica (as it is referred to in Tuscany where it also grows). A naturally tannic white grape that has naturally low acidity, it is best picked early to maintain acid for fresher-style wines (which, with better viticultural practices, more producers are doing).

CATARRATTO

The Catarratto Bianco grape and its biotypes (for convenience sake will be just referred to as Catarrattos) are grown over most of Sicily. The best examples tend to show fresh herbs, tropical fruit and citrus. Quality can range significantly as the grape can be an abundant producer. Donnafugata and Fazio make good quality examples.

MOSCATO DI ALESSANDRIA

Also known as Zibibbo, the grape is used to produce both dry and sweet wines. The best known are probably the sweet, air-dried passitos from the island of Pantelleria. The dry wines tend to be weighty with aromas and flavours of golden raisins, apricot, ginger and dried herbs while the sweet wines tend towards burnt orange, fig, caramel, honey and marmalade. The best sweet wines have ample acidity to balance the residual sugar. Look for Donnafugata and Coste Ghirlanda.

NERO D'AVOLA

Sicily's main red grape grows all over the island save the northeast corner, although it appears to have some of its best expressions around Pachino and Noto in the southeast. The grape grows in different conditions and will express its site, resulting in wines that range from fresh and elegant to full and structured. Typical characteristics are red berry, spice, aromatic herbs and a natural acidity. There are many good examples including those from Gulfi, COS, Ceuso, Donnafugata, Planeta and Santa Anastasia. Nero d'Avola and Frappato are the grapes blended in Cerasuolo di Vittoria, Sicily's only DOCG wine.

FRAPPATO

Tends to be fragrant, fresh, floral, juicy, slightly herbal with a vinous liveliness. The grape excels in the southeast corner of Sicily due in large part to the soils, which consist of a top layer of loosely packed red sand that is rich in iron with both hard and soft limestone below. The vines' roots are able to penetrate deep in search of water. The result is highly perfumed, floral wines with elegant tannins. Frappato is blended with Nero d'Avola in Cerasuolo di Vittoria wines, but there are also excellent monovarietal examples produced: COS, Arianna Occhipinti and Valle dell'Acate.

NERELLO MASCALESE

The main red grape grown on Mount Etna loves mountainous altitudes. The wines tend to be light in colour but big in flavour, with sour red cherry, fresh herbs, fresh minerality and quite structured. The perfect example of a wine that doesn't need to be dark and weighty to be delicious. Blended with Nerello Cappuccio in Etna Rosso wines. Nerello Cappuccio tends to be darker in colour and have softer tannins, thus exhibiting characteristics to contrast and complement those of Nerello Mascalese. Seek out Pietradolce, Graci, Cottanera and Benanti. ✖