

Italy, Sicily: Etna (New Releases)

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31st Aug 2017 | The Wine Advocate

Vintage	Wines	RP
2014	Pietradolce Etna Rosso Vigna Barbagalli	97

In late April, I joined a group of foreign wine writers to visit the Graci winery just outside the sleepy, one-intersection town of Passopisciaro on Etna. The occasion was Assovini Sicilia's *Sicilia en Primeur*, or the preview tasting event of new vintages from Sicily. I am an adamant Etna habituée, but none of my colleagues on the bus that day had previously visited this side of the volcano. As a result, I happily assumed a de facto role as tour guide. As we pulled up to



2014	Girolamo Russo Etna Rosso San Lorenzo	96
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2014	Tenuta Delle Terre Nere Etna Rosso Santo Spirito	96
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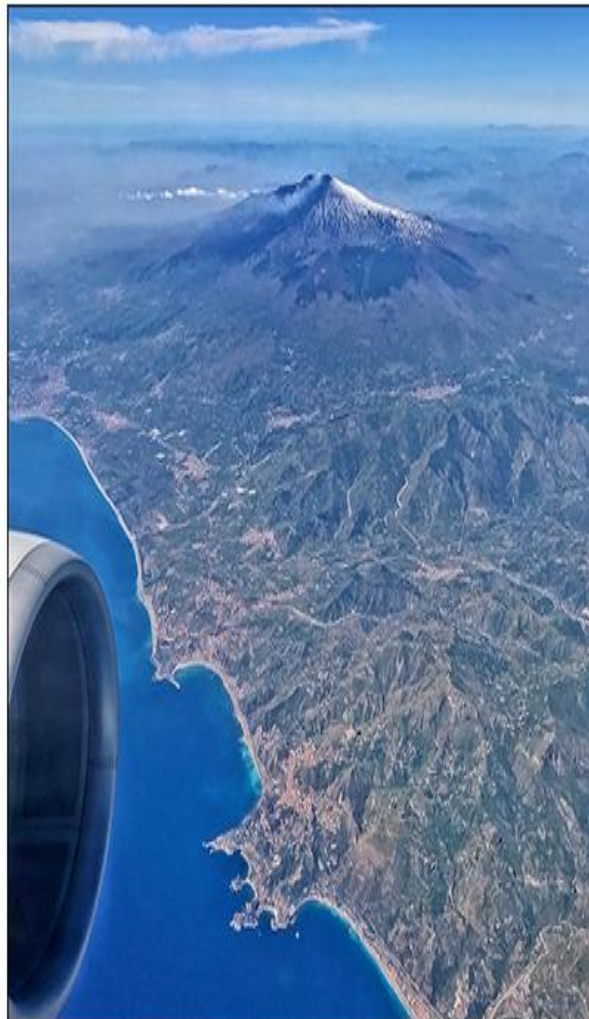
2014	Passopisciaro Franchetti	95+
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2013	Graci Sicilia Quota 1000 Barabecchi	95
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[View All Wines](#)

the winery gates, I remember making my same old refrain regarding estate owner Alberto Aiello Graci. I told them to keep a close eye on this young man because he was poised to become an ever-stronger voice on the Etna winescape.

This is a hunch I have advocated in years past, as you can read [here](#) and [here](#). Alberto greeted us as we descended the bus. I couldn't help but notice that he seemed a little more rushed and distracted on this foggy Etna morning. He was not his usual self, and I would soon learn why.



The north face of Mount Etna as seen en route from Catania to Rome. The northern flank of the volcanic cone is where you will find the greatest concentration of wine producers around Castiglione di Sicilia, Passopisciaro and Randazzo. A minor volcanic eruption was underway when this photo was taken.

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Not even a full 72 hours would pass before the biggest Italian wine news story in 2017 (so far) would break. On April 29th, we learned that Barbaresco's Angelo Gaja had partnered with Alberto Graci to create a new winery and vineyard on Etna. The announcement was interpreted as the ultimate act of Etna legitimization. This tiny wine appellation that straddles the cone of the dangerous volcano at the heart of the Mediterranean has suddenly outgrown its "up-and-coming" status. An Italian wine authority as important and prolific as Angelo Gaja had definitively endorsed the Etna promise. The excited narrative of the day was that Etna had finally earned a permanent spot on Italy's enological map.

On the morning the news broke, Giuseppe Benanti of the eponymous Etna winery confirmed his exhilaration in front of hundreds of Assovini Sicily colleagues and members of the wine press. He declared this a great day for Etna. The online news blog *Cronachedigusto.it* first broke the story and wrote: "Angelo Gaja's arrival will make noise across the entire world of Italian wine and it will sanctify Etna as one of the great leading wine regions." My colleagues at *Wine Spectator* published an article entitled "Piedmont Wine Star Angelo Gaja Invests in Sicily's Mount Etna" with the subhead: "Joint winery venture with Alberto Graci spotlights a new corner of Italy's volcanic terroir." Over at *Decanter*, the sentiment was: "Gaja's move is the latest evidence of growing interest in Etna, and wines from volcanic regions in general."



The new joint venture between Alberto Aiello Graci (top left) and Angelo Gaja (pictured here with his daughter Gaia Gaja) to make wine together on Etna is a win-win for the North and South of Italy.

My interpretation of the news is a little different. Yes, Gaja brings a lot to Etna, most especially the experience of crafting cellar-worthy wines that should survive the test of time. But, this is by no means a one-sided exchange. In my estimation, Etna brings as much—possibly more—to Gaja, an already established brand looking for new ways of reinventing itself. The historic Piedmont-based winery already owns property in Bolgheri (Ca' Marcanda) and in Montalcino (Pieve Santa Restituta). An Etna winery is another very prestigious feather in its cap.

No matter how you measure the exchange, one thing is clear: Two of the people I admire most in Italian wine (with shared initials no less) have joined forces in a show of symbolic unity between North versus South, old versus new and known versus unknown. These are indeed exciting times to be Italy Reviewer for *Robert Parker Wine Advocate*.

“Tradition is not the worship of ashes, but the preservation of fire.” –
Gustav Mahler



This map of Etna shows the main crater at the center and dozens of dangerous lateral craters on the flanks (seen here as white circles). New lateral openings can occur at any time. You get a sense of the complexity of the soils on Etna. The dark red flows represent the newest eruptions (with hardened black stones and pumice rock). The lighter yellow areas represent the oldest lava flows that have now been eroded by time into a fine dust of volcanic ash.

Elegance & Electricity

Angelo Gaja visited Etna in 2015 and paid a visit to Alberto Graci's winery during that maiden voyage to the volcano. That's how the two men met. They kept in touch over the years "talking about wine, life and our common curiosities," Alberto later told me of his growing friendship with Angelo Gaja. "I noticed the humility with which this important man engaged with Etna. I noticed his deep curiosity for this territory to him unknown."

I spoke to Gaia Gaja, Angelo's daughter, who explained that her family was absolutely not in the market for new wine ventures at the time: "We had no intention of investing in Etna or anywhere else," she said. "We just knew that we instinctively liked Alberto and we were struck by his open mind and his constant yearning for new knowledge. I'm not sure if Angelo asked Alberto or if Alberto asked Angelo. I guess the idea just came spontaneously."

That spontaneous idea would translate into a 50-50 joint venture between Angelo Gaja and Alberto Graci. Together, they purchased 21 hectares in Biancavilla, which is on the southwestern side of Etna's cone. This is an area with a long winemaking past that has been in large part forgotten these past decades, especially as the northern side of the volcano (from Randazzo to Castiglione di Sicilia) emerged in winemaking prominence. Previously owned by a local lawyer (who also makes wine), the vineyards are located from 630 to 820 meters above sea level. Some six hectares are home to old vine Nerello Mascalese planted in 1975. A second parcel has vines planted in 2006. A third, four-hectare parcel is just entering production and is planted to the white grape Carricante. The estate has 15 hectares of organically farmed vines and a small abandoned structure that is not big enough to become a winery. Alberto Graci will make the wine in his facility in Passopisciaro this first year as he and Angelo explore the possibility of buying or building a new winery. Indeed, a whole new winemaking and vineyard management team will be hired just for this project. The team will borrow from both Angelo and Alberto's know-how, but it will not overlap with either existing winery. They plan on making wine with traditional tools such as 50-hectoliter casks and cement vats. Alberto explained, "Angelo and I share the same interpretation of Etna, and we will work hard to realize that interpretation. We are looking for elegance and electricity. Very few places can make wines with those qualities, and Etna is one of them."



An ancient vine of Nerello Mascalese in the Contrada Feudo di Mezzo, one of the most celebrated single-vineyards on the volcano.

Etna is Stronger

Gaia Gaja told me that her family has always been fascinated by Etna wines: "We find them interesting for so many reasons, including the fact they remind us of Barbaresco and Barolo because they are not immediate, and they share similar characteristics of elegance and finesse that you get with Nebbiolo."

In terms of marketing, nothing has been decided yet. I wrote Alberto just a few days before going to press, and he told me that they had not yet decided on a name for the new venture. "We still have a lot of questions and we will work towards the answers day by day," he said. "Like Mahler said, 'tradition is safeguarding the fire, not the ashes.'" He told me that he wants to see what the vineyards and the upcoming vintage will bring before making further plans.

"Working with Angelo is like getting a dose of positive energy," said Alberto: "He is a volcano on the volcano." He told me that this joint venture represents a new learning opportunity for both men. Angelo Gaja has never farmed on Etna, and Alberto Graci has never farmed on the southern side of the volcano. Alberto told me: "Etna is much stronger than me and him. We approached this venture with humility because we recognize that Etna is stronger than everything else. Etna will dictate the identity of the wine we make and we will follow. We will follow the volcano."

