

Sicilian Wine No One-Trick Pony



© Fabio Gambina | Estates like Donnafugata have seen increased investment and a marked upturn in quality.

Indigenous grapes, foreign investment and modern winemaking have put Sicily on the competitive track, **Liza B. Zimmerman** discovers.

By Wine-Searcher staff | Posted Saturday, 14-May-2016

Sicily has long been a blend of cultures: Greek, Byzantine and Norman culture shows in its architecture and foods as well as its wines. The 25,000 square-kilometer island produces 86 percent of its wine from native grape varieties, according to Assovini, an association that represents 79 producers and 85 percent of Sicilian bottled wine.

While mediocre cooperatives dominated the [Sicilian](#) landscape until the early 1990s, in the past 15 to 20 years major investments and a dedication to native grape varieties have put the island on the international winemaking map.

Many of the region's vineyards are planted at altitudes up to 1000 meters (3300 feet) above sea level, and the majority of the island is hilly. What would otherwise have been suffocating climatic conditions are moderated by the constant wind that Sicilians generally call either the hot Sirocco from the southwest or the colder Tramontana from the north.

While the wines currently made from volcanic soil found on Mount [Etna](#) may be the island's biggest high-end wine attraction, many other regions are producing superb wines. The region is home to 23 DOC growing regions and one DOCG – [Cerasuolo di Vittoria](#).

Given the immense diversity of the island's terroirs, the harvest often lasts from August to October. Producers are striving to find the right region for each grape, with many family-owned houses like Planeta and Donnafugata investing in multiple estates across the island.

"Sicily is like a mosaic of wine production," says Alessio Planeta, co-owner of the Planeta Winery, which has five estates located all over the island. He adds that each region also has its own international stylistic inspiration – from Morgon in Beaujolais for Cerasuolo, to Priorat for Nero d'Avola from [Noto](#).

The revitalization of an ancient form of gravity-flow winery – called a *palmento* – has attracted tourists and triggered a new focus on the island's rich agricultural history. A handful of these – such as Cantine Cos – are producing wine in ancient, clay amphorae.

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Lower production costs and massive corporate investment – Tuscan winemaker Mazzei opened Zisola, near Noto, in 2002, the year after Trentino's Mezzacorona launched their Feudo Arancio estate there – have also made Sicilian wines comparatively very price competitive. Many of the region's easy-drinking reds and crisp whites find their way to the shelves in the US for \$12 or less.

During a recent trip to the Anteprema Siciliana, where all the island's varietals and regions were represented during an annual tasting, I had a chance to revisit some of my favorites and make some new discoveries.

Don't bet everything on black

While [Nero d'Avola](#) is undoubtedly the grape that put the island on the international winemaking map, it may also be its most overplayed grape. When Nero d'Avola entered the US market in high volumes 15-20 years ago – thanks to a handful of savvy, Southern Italian-focused importers – they were simple, fruit juicy, high-alcohol and easy drinking wines.

At around \$12 a bottle it also filled the \$8 by-the-glass pour that Argentinian Malbecs would capitalize on a decade later. Few of the original Nero d'Avolas did the variety much justice, but now many of the best wineries are zeroing in on regions where it shines in an elegant and traditional style, such as the area around Noto, which considered the ideal terroir for the grape.



© Fabio Gambina/Planeta | Antonio Rallo (L) believes in the island's whites, while Alessio Planeta describes the island as a winemaking "mosaic".

The taste profile of Nero d'Avola is also evolving, thanks in part to its blending with Frappato in Ceresuolo di Vittoria, and ever-evolving production methods. Zisola, in an unsurprising Tuscan move, is making Nero d'Avolas that have the black pepper and spice taste profiles of simple Sangiovese. Tuscan parent houses – with decades of marketing experience – are behind some of the best wines in the region. Their presence seems to have helped to polish the overall look and taste of the wines, slightly lower alcohol levels and reduce super-green tannins in some of the reds.

Other reds and the white revolution

Syrah has a long history of cultivation on the island and some Sicilian monovarietals and blends are stunning. Peter Vinding-Diers, a small producer of Danish background who worked in Bordeaux and South Africa, is producing a series of primarily Syrah-based wines that are incredibly complex and show a combination of French structure and New World finesse, presumably inspired by his time spent in South Africa.

Vinding-Diers only makes 30,000 bottles a year of three different types of wine at his Montecarrubo estate, and his top-of-the-line brand Vignanolo sells for €30 (\$34) ex cellars. He's not concerned about the pricing and hopes that the export market won't be either, when operators see what this terroir can produce.

Sadly Petite Sirah, another French favorite, is primarily being used as a simple blending grape and has yet, based on the wines tasted, to show amazing results on its own. Petite Verdot, Merlot and Cabernet Franc are also primarily used as blending grapes on the island.

While Sicily's red wines continue to demand higher prices, the island's whites – particularly those made varietally or from blends of indigenous grapes – are making an important case for how impressive these wines are.

Citrus and stonefruit notes, particularly in grapes such as Grillo, make them food friendly and will hopefully catapult them into the category of back-porch sippers. Stefano Caruso, an owner of the producer Caruso e Minini based in Marsala, said that Grillo as a grape can run "fresh and salty". While other white varietals are also sapid and elegant, the overall climatic condition that affects them the most is the high-altitude growing conditions found in much of the island.

For Antonio Rallo, co-owner and CEO of Donnafugata, the island's whites are "full of scents, very often citrus notes like grapefruit or orange peel, floral notes like orange blossom or yellow flower like acacia. On the palate, they are soft and fresh."

Insolia and Caterrato are two of the island's other most important white players. All three grapes are often blended with Chardonnay, which is easy to identify and sell and helps winemakers change up the mix from season to season. Stylistically, if tasted blind, for me they could resemble the stonefruit richness of great Rhône whites, with the crisp acidity of a Spanish Albariño or perfect Verdejo.

Zibibbo, an aromatic white most notably used to make the sweet [Moscato di Pantelleria](#), is also emerging as what Caruso called "the Müller-Thurgau of Sicily". It may be a hard sell initially, but it's likely to be embraced by consumers who love floral and esoteric white wines.

In the last decade, Sicilian wine producers have made massive investments in both their vineyards and production facilities and it shows in the wines. If the next five years go as well, we are likely to be seeing a lot more wines from the diverse and unique terroir of this complex island.