

# Sicily: An Island of Value and Innovation

Sicilian wine producers are investing and focusing on quality

by **Liza B. Zimmerman**

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While Southern Italy has long been attracting attention for its food-friendly and often very affordable wines, Sicily is leading the pack. The island's unique growing conditions, 900 miles of coastline and dozens of stunning native grape varieties are working together to produce stellar wines across all styles and price points.

"Sicily's greatest strength is its indigenous varieties. Etna may be Italy's most unique growing region. The combination of soil, altitude, old-vines and varieties gives it diversity, complexity and something that no other region in the world can copy," said Craig Perman, owner of the Chicago-based, one-location Perman Wine Selections. The store generally carries a rotating selection of approximately five Sicilian wines priced from \$18 to \$60 a bottle.

"Interest in Sicily has increased a lot in general," agreed Jamie Wolff, a partner in the one-location Chambers Street Wines retail shop in New York City. He carries 36 different Sicilian wines that range from a half-bottle of dry Marsala to the Cornelissen 12 Magna, which sells for \$449.

An increase in consumer interest in Sicily largely has to do with the wines increased visibility in restaurants. "Sicilian wines provide great quality for the price and they are great food wines," said Wolff.

## The Bigger Picture

Two decades ago Sicily was dominated by scores of mediocre cooperatives and plagued by antiquated viticulture and vinification. A combination of investment—both by local families and Northern Italian wineries such as Mezzacorona—has been successfully coupled with viticultural research and a renewed focus on terroir.

"Temperature control during pressing and fermentation was the first big revolution in the 1980s. Then producers focused more on the vineyards, reducing the yield per plant; the aim was to improve quality and to obtain unique and recognizable productions with a greater personality," said Antonio Rallo, an owner and CEO of Donnafugata Winery and the president of the Wines of Sicilia DOC wine organization.

The island is home to 23 DOCs and one DOCG: Cerasuolo di Vittoria. The bulk of the island is hilly with altitudes going up to 3,500 feet over sea level in Mt. Etna. These vast growing conditions result in harvests that last from August to October each year.

Vineyards planted with indigenous grapes take up 68 percent of the island, according to Sicilia DOC. Most of the major producers have been running experimental grape trials to see what grows best in each area for a while, and almost every producer is currently producing at least nine different grape varieties, according to Assovini Sicilia, the Palermo-based wine association to which 79 Sicilian producers belong.

Approximately 25 million bottles were produced under DOC Sicilia in 2015 and 14 million under other DOCs, according to DOC Sicilia, and 28 million are forecast for this year. As of December 15, 2015, there are approximately 90 wineries in the Wines of Sicily DOC association covering 100,080 hectares. The wines are exported to 78 countries.

As wineries revitalize past practices—such as the use of traditional gravity-flow wineries called palmenti [ed: Italian plural of palmento singular]—they are also looking to more "green" winemaking measures. According to Assovini, 75 percent of members produce clean energy, while 69 percent are taking steps to reduce waste.

## **The Grape that Put Sicily on the Map**

Nero d'Avola has long been the island's key sales vehicle. Southern Italian-savvy importers like Winebow and Vias began bringing in dozens of brands made from the varietal two decades ago. Many were fruit-forward and easy-to-drink, and at \$12.99 retail they occupied the \$8 by-the-glass pour category that Argentine Malbecs would take over a decade later.

While many of the previous Nero d'Avolas weren't particularly elegant, those produced today have been retail game changers. Barbara Insel, president and CEO of the Napa-based Stonebridge Research Group, says that Nero d'Avola is one of the top-selling grapes coming out of Italy. Producers have honed in on multiple sub-regions where the grape excels, including the southeastern region around Noto.

Alessio Planeta, an owner and founder of the winery, compares Nero d'Avolas produced near Noto to intense Priorats being made in Spain today. The area is often equated to Montalcino. It is therefore no surprise that a handful of Tuscan-owned producers, such as Mazzei's Zisola, are making spicy, black pepper-infused Nero d'Avolas that are reminiscent of Sangiovese.

## **Big Boys in the Game**

Major investments by Northern Italian producers are changing the face of Sicilian winemaking. Local families, such as the Planetas and Rallos, have invested in multiple estates across the island to focus on producing the right grapes in each terroir.

The island has long been a mix of the Old World legacy of centuries of winemaking blended with abundant New World experimentation which is finally coming together to produce the best of both worlds. "Tradition and innovation are meeting each other in the Sicilian cellars of the new millennium," said Planeta about the current winemaking situation.

### **The Merchandising Game**

Interest in Sicilian wines has grown so much that they often have their own sections within wine shops. At Chambers, Wolff displays them together, arranged geographically and by varietal. The bulk of his top grapes are native, and include Nero d'Avola, Frappato, Carricante, Grillo and Zibibbo.

"There is an ocean of dull and anonymous wine made in Sicily from international grapes like Chardonnay and Syrah," he said. "Those made from indigenous Sicilian grapes are made in a manner to allow the wine to express the grapes and its place of origin." The bulk of his Sicilian wines are priced in the \$11.99 to \$44.99 range. He added that they are excellent wines at very reasonable prices.

If Sicily continues its current rate of investment and innovation, we are only likely to see more high-quality wines from this diverse island.