

WINE TRAVELLER

TEXT TIM ATKIN MW

RUSTIC AND REMOTE
The fertile vines at
Cottonera, the largest
winery on Etna.

ISOLA DEL VINO

The volcanic Mediterranean island of Sicily is one of the most combination of abundant sunshine, varied terroirs, good indigenous

exciting wine regions in Europe, blessed with a unique grapes and the ability to grow most other varieties.

Sicily is a paradox. The largest island in the Mediterranean is the most familiar of Italy's 20 regions, thanks to the film *Cinema Paradiso*, and horses' heads, Marlon Brando and the Corleone clan from *The Godfather*. But it is also its least typical. To people who know the fashion houses of Milan, the frenetic bustle of Rome or the undulating, cypress-dotted hills of Tuscany, Sicily feels like another country: hotter, wilder, slower and a little more dangerous.

This isn't a region, the locals will tell you: it's a continent with its own history, language and customs, a sense of difference that is proudly, even willfully, maintained. Trapani is closer to Tunis than it is to Naples. So close, in fact, that you can see Africa on a clear day and feel the dry heat of whispering Saharan winds. Sicily is Italy's Andalusia, a region on the fringe of Europe, looking south as much as north, physically and culturally detached from the rest of the country.

It has been heavily influenced by other cultures over the centuries – from the Sicilians (from whom the island takes its name) to the Phoenicians, the Greeks to the Romans, the Arabs to the Normans, the Germans to the Spanish. Its wine culture is ancient, too. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus gets the cyclops, Polyphemus, drunk on wine before blinding him in his single eye and escaping. In Roman times, the Sicilian wines of Mamertinum, Tauromenitanum and Populatum were all celebrated for their quality, as was Marsala in the late 18th century by the British admiral Horatio Nelson.

Those glory days are long past, however. Today, Sicily is one of the bulk wine centres of Italy, a significant contributor to Europe's wine lake, bottling less than 20 per cent of what it makes. It shares with Puglia, the so-called boot-heel of Italy, the distinction of producing the largest percentage of Italy's basic wines: mostly white and what the Italians call "bianco carta" or white paper, with little or nothing in the way of flavour or aroma. If Sicily is known as the "isola del vino", it is mostly for all the wrong reasons.

When Franco Giacosa, an oenologist from Piedmont, arrived to work at Corvo in 1968, he was shocked by the poor quality of the local wines. "Rustic, heavy and oxidised," is



VOLCANIC SOILS
The gentle slopes above Benanti.

bumpy, potholed roads – that is much more complex than its bulk wine image would suggest. One of the many remarkable things about Sicily is that its harvest lasts for over three months, beginning in the August heat of Trapani and ending on the snow-peaked slopes of Etna in mid-November. As the author Nicolas Belfrage says in his book *Brunello to Zibibbo*, Sicily has the potential to be “California, Australia, Chile, southern France, Jerez and middle Italy all rolled into one”.

Enlightenment can take one of three paths, all of which lead to the same rewarding destination. The first is to gen-up on Sicily’s five best “indigenous” grapes. Sicily, as I’ve mentioned, can grow a wide variety of French varieties, but you will be familiar with those already. As zibibbo is a synonym for muscat I have excluded that from my list, too.

Despite the fact that Sicily makes much more white than red, most of it in the north-west corner of the island, its whites are far less exciting. There are two exceptions: grillo (mostly used to make high-end Marsala, in preference to catarratto) can also produce superb dry whites: flinty, yet savoury like a good grenache blanc, while caricante (almost entirely grown on the slopes of Mount Etna) is crisp and tangy with a lemon zesty bite. The latter can be almost Chablis like if it’s given lees contact and allowed to go through malolactic fermentation, and may also develop toasty, riesling-style notes as it ages.

Of the three interesting red grapes (nero d’Avola, nerello mascalese and frappato), the most significant in terms of plantings (16 per cent of the island’s vineyards) and, at the top end, quality is nero d’Avola. The grape may have originated in Avola in the southeastern corner of Sicily near Syracuse, the area which still grows more than half of the island’s production, but is made by the majority of Sicilian wineries today. Not having one is a bit like an Aussie producer choosing to exclude shiraz from their portfolio.

Nero d’Avola is also deeply coloured and flavoursome, with some spice and good structure. There are lots of different styles, from soft, juicy and immediate to dense and serious. Salvo Foti, one of the island’s top consultants as well as a producer on Etna in his own right, says that the grape needs very

PREVIOUS SPREAD: PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF COTTANERA. THIS SPREAD PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF BENANTI, TIM ATKIN MW, FEUDO MONTONI, REGALEALI, PASSOPISCIARO, PLANETA, DE BARTOLI AND FRANK CORNELISSEN.

how he describes them. There was little temperature control, next to no investment in technology and even less interest in changing the status quo. More than three quarters of Sicilian wine was made by cooperatives, mostly from bland white grapes such as catarratto and trebbiano, and the climate was considered too hot to make good-quality wines.

If anything, things got worse after that: higher yields, more planting of ill-suited grapes, lazy winemaking. So bad, according to Giacosa, that “we would avoid saying our wines came from Sicily because the image of the place was so awful”. But then, it began to look up. Marco de Bartoli started to revitalise Marsala, campaigning to ban Marsala “speciale” (a euphemism for a wine pre-mixed with coffee, strawberries or almonds), Corvo made its super premium Duca Enrico from nero d’Avola, and Tasca d’Almerita (Regaleali) released its first really promising wines.

Just as significantly, Diego Planeta set up his own eponymous winery, while continuing

to work as chairman of Settesoli, a huge cooperative whose 2300 members own five per cent of Sicily’s vineyards. Planeta persuaded them to plant new grape varieties, both from Italy and France, to show the growers that “there was a world beyond catarratto and inzolia”. To date, the man has put 150 different varieties in the ground – everything from aglianico to vermentino, fiano to merlot – some of which have been extremely successful.

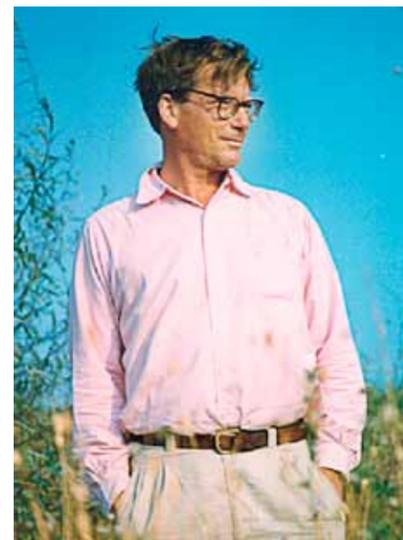
Sicily’s wine revolution really got underway in the 1980s, inspiring fresh plantings on Etna, the active volcano in the island’s north-east corner, as well as in Siracusa, Cerasuolo di Vittoria, Menfi, Palermo and elsewhere. Significantly, new or revitalised properties like COS, Donnafugata, Planeta and Benanti made their first modern wines, inspiring others to believe in quality.

Twenty-five years later, no one would argue that Sicily has put all of its problems behind it, but it is now one of the most exciting wine regions in Europe, blessed with a combination of abundant sunshine, varied terroirs, good indigenous grapes (and has the ability to grow just about anything well), investment in technology, two dozen or so dynamic estates and even celebrity endorsement in the shape of singer Mick Hucknall, who makes a wine called Il Cantante on Etna, and the actress Carole Bouquet, whose Sanguè d’Oro is a suitably expensive sweet wine from Pantelleria.

What’s the best way to approach Sicily? The first thing to understand is that it’s a big place – if you choose to drive across the island, be prepared to spend a lot of time on



LOCAL LADS
Vineyard workers take a moment at Feudo Montoni.



HANDS ON
Fabio Sereci, owner of Feudo Montoni. Left: Regaleali. Far left: Andrea Franchetti of Passopisciaro.



SICILIAN SUNSHINE
Above: Alberto Tasca of Regaleali. Right: the palms at Planeta in Menfi. Far right: barrels lie in wait at De Bartoli in Marsala.



One of the many remarkable things about Sicily

is that its harvests last for over three months.

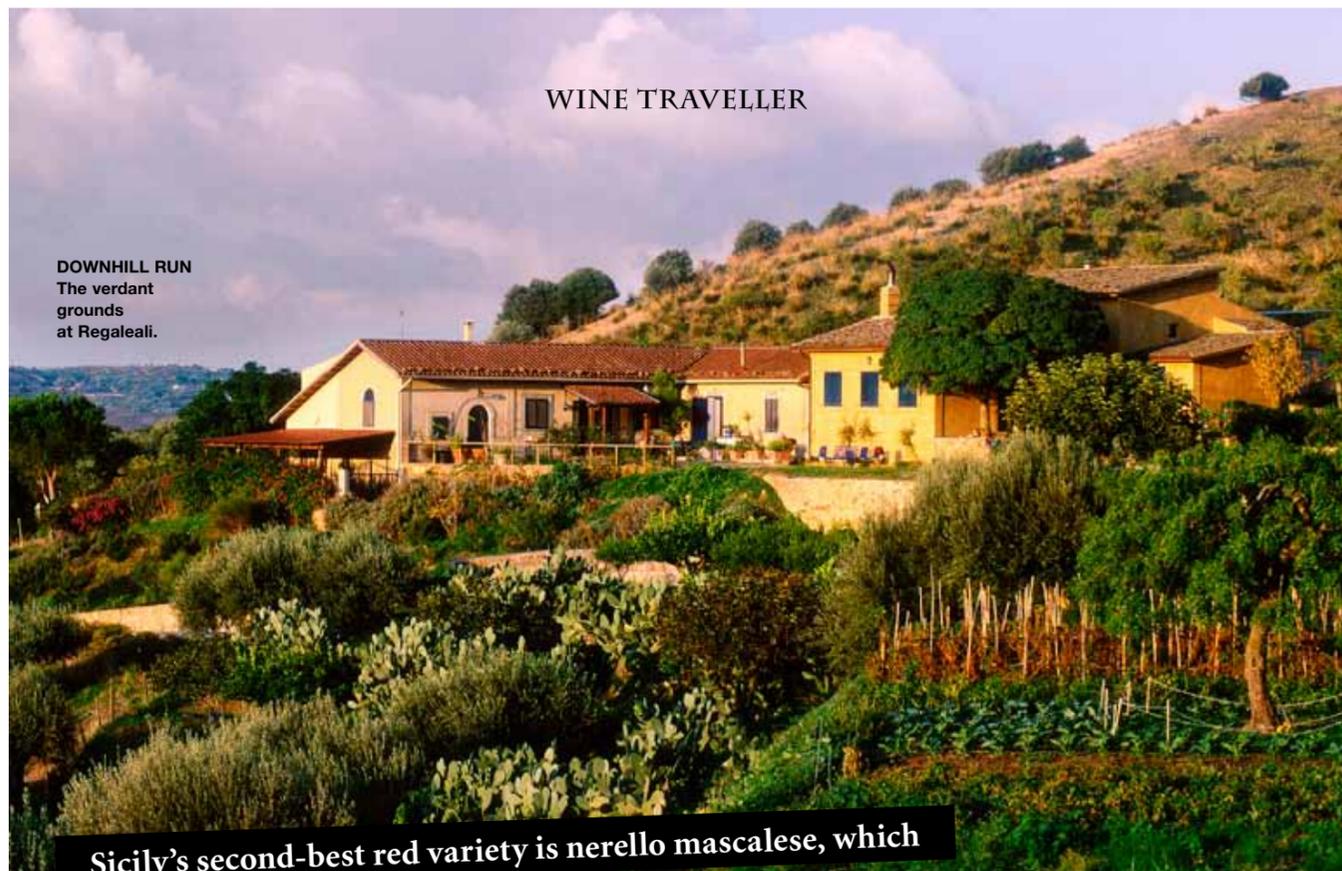


CHILLY CLIMES
Frank Cornelissen tending his vines. Right: Alessio Planeta.



WINE TRAVELLER

DOWNHILL RUN
The verdant grounds at Regaleali.



Sicily's second-best red variety is nerello mascalese, which tastes like a cross between pinot noir and nebbiolo.

careful handling. "It has some of the highest acidity levels in Italy," he says, "and it's very reductive, so it needs a lot of air during fermentation and ageing. That's why it works well in barriques."

It's also the main grape in Cerasuolo di Vittoria (where it has to constitute at least 50 per cent of the blend with frappato but no more than 70 per cent), where its colour brings depth and backbone to its softer, more fragrant partner. Frappato is also made on its own, producing gentle, easy-drinking wines with supple tannins and a floral perfume that wouldn't be out of place in a white wine.

Sicily's second-best red variety is nerello mascalese, which tastes like a cross between pinot noir and nebbiolo, but is probably related to sangiovese, according to Professor Attilio Scienza of the University of Milan. Frank Cornelissen, one of the leading Etna producers, underlines the illegal link with nebbiolo. "Before this place started to get famous, the main buyers of nerello mascalese were the Barolo producers."

Today the grape is mainly grown on the volcanic soils of Mount Etna, where it is often blended with nerello cappuccio, a grape that is more rustic and may well be the same thing as carignan. Some producers choose to make IGT Sicilia wines, subject to less

strict rules than Etna Rosso, to enable them to make pure nerello mascalese. And quite right too, because this is a grape with great potential, yielding delicate wines that have the ability to age and, at their best, a delicious minerality and freshness.

The second route to vinous enlightenment is to study Sicily's 23 DOCs (Denominazioni di Origine Controllata) and one DOCG (Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita), but this is arguably less useful. The main reason is that they account for only five per cent of the island's overall production, most of which is Marsala. Some of these DOCs are little known, even within Sicily. Anyone heard of Salaparuta or Alcamo?

The DOC(G)s that are famous are few: Etna, Marsala, Pantelleria and Cerasuolo di Vittoria. This may explain why many producers prefer to use the catch-all IGT Sicilia (25 per cent of the island's production), although this could change with the introduction of the new DOC Sicilia from the 2012 vintage. According to the Conzorzio Vini Sicilia, requests have already been received to register 33,000 hectares. Move over IGT? Possibly, although



the new DOC is more likely to affect bulk sales as the wines will be bottled at source. Whatever happens, IGT Sicilia will change its name (to IGT Terre Siciliane) later this year.

Even with these changes in prospect, it makes more sense to consider Sicily as a series of zones (the third pathway to understanding) than DOCs. Geographically, Sicily can be divided into four macro areas: east, central, west and, finally, the islands of Pantelleria and Favignana.

The east consists of Etna (the coolest and greenest part of Sicily with vineyards at altitudes of up to 1100 metres), the southeast corner (the province of Siracusa, which is mostly hot and windy) and the province of Ragusa to the west, producing the more elegant wines of Cerasuolo di Vittoria. All told, the east accounts for a mere 7374 out of 120,000 hectares and is generally speaking a high-quality zone.

The centre of Sicily is made up of the provinces of Enna, Caltanissetta, Agrigento and Palermo. The last two are by far the largest of the quartet, with 20,973 hectares and 16,625 hectares respectively. There are some very good wines made here by Planeta, Settesoli, Regaleali, Abazia Santa Anastasia, Donnafugata, Cusumano, Morgante and Feudo Montoni, but the majority of what is produced is fairly unmemorable.



CHARM OFFENSIVE
Left: The Benanti winery. Above: the Benanti family.

vineyards are immaculate, especially his Vigna Alta, and the wines can be elegant and almost Burgundian when young.

BENANTI

Via Garibaldi 361, 95029 Catania, +39 095 789 3438, www.vinicolabenanti.it
Located on the tamer, more touristic south side of Etna, Benanti sources grapes from three of the volcano's slopes. Regarded as being the family that revitalised the area and its indigenous grapes since 1988, the Benantis have lived in the area since the 1820s. The focus here is on caricante (under the Pietramarina label) and two red "crus": Serra dell Contessa and the lighter Rovitello, both of which are made from mostly nerello mascalese with 20-per-cent nerello cappuccio. The wines are comparatively light bodied, but age remarkably well.

PASSOPISCIARO

Via Val d'Orcia, 15, 53047 Sarteano (Siena), +39 0578 267 110, www.passopisciario.com
Passopisciario is the Sicilian outpost of Andrea Franchetti, better known for his Tuscan property, Tenuta di Trinoro. He owns some of the highest vineyards on the north slope of Etna (up to 1000 metres) and sometimes picks as late as mid November. He grows chardonnay, petit verdot and cesanese d'Affile, but his real love is nerello mascalese. The "basic" wine is an excellent introduction to the four red "contrade" (crus): Porcaria, Chiappemacine, Sciaranuova and Rampante.

COS

SP 3 Acate-Chiamonte, Km. 14,500, 97019 Vittoria, +39 0932 876145, www.cosvittoria.it
COS is one of the leading producers in the Cerasuolo di Vittoria DOCG in southeast Sicily. Created in the 1980s, it produces some of the best natural

The west is also a mix of the good, the bad and the indifferent. The province of Trapani grows more than half of the island's grapes (68,780 hectares) and is the source of a lot of very bland white wines, although there are some decent wines made in Erice, particularly from chardonnay, sauvignon blanc, merlot and müller-thurgau.

By far the best wines in the west are produced in the port of Marsala, even if this historic DOC has had as many downs as ups in the last 50 years. Today, Marsala has reclaimed some of its former lustre. The best producers only use grillo and do not add caramel or concentrated must. The top wines are made, like sherry, in a form of solera system, using fractional blending to make a consistent style over a period of decades. As Renato de Bartoli puts it: "The key to great Marsala is patience."

The fourth Sicilian zone is the islands of Favignana (a brief ferry ride from Trapani) and the more celebrated and semi-detached Pantelleria (93 kilometres from Sicily). The former has only one producer (Firriato planted grapes here five years ago, but have yet to make a wine because of bird damage and the effect of sea breezes), while the latter produces some of the best sweet wines in Italy, made from dried grapes. What the two have in common is muscat of Alexandria, or zibibbo as it is known locally.

Pantelleria, like Marsala, is Sicily's link with the best of its past: muscat was brought here by the Arabs in the ninth century, probably to make raisins, as the names of two of the best local wines, Donnafugata's Ben Ryé and De Bartoli's Bukkuram, confirm. It's an appropriate place to end our

tour of Sicily. Not so long ago, Pantelleria and Marsala were its only outstanding wine styles, but that is no longer true. Today, there are very good wines in almost every region of Sicily. The transformation has barely begun, but not before time the "isola del vino" is starting to live up to its name.

Wineries to Visit

COTTANERA

Strada Provinciale, 89 – Contrada Iannazzo, 95030 Castiglione di Sicilia, +39 0942 963 601, www.cottanera.it
This is the largest winery on Etna – which is not saying a lot – but it still owns 55 hectares of vines. It's a family-run affair which started out in 1999, specialising in rather oaky, high-alcohol wines made in a ponderous, international style, but has switched to finer things in recent years. The reds are the stars here, especially Fatagione, which uses French grapes to add a little gloss to nerello mascalese. Also try the L'Ardenza, a spicy, varietal mondeuse that is delicious.

FRANK CORNELISSEN

Via Nazionale, 281/299, 95012 Solicchiata, www.frankcornelissen.it
Even by the standards of the natural wine movement, Frank Cornelissen is a controversial figure, producing small quantities of Etna reds that divide critics and consumers alike. Cornelissen works without sulfur or cultured yeasts and it has to be said that his high-alcohol wines do not always age consistently. But the silver-haired Flemish expat is an engaging winemaker: talented and self-taught. His



PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF REGALEALI AND BENANTI.

WINE TRAVELLER



PRIDE OF PLACE

Above: Renato De Bartoli. Far right: José and Antonio Rallo of Donnafugata. Below: Giuseppe Tasca.



estate in the middle of the island is home to a cookery school as well as a modern winery. Brothers Giuseppe and Alberto Tasca run the property, growing everything from sauvignon blanc and inzolia to cabernet sauvignon and nero d'Avola, depending on the altitude and aspect of the vineyards. The best wines are Nozzo d'Oro (a blend of inzolia and sauvignon blanc), a majestic cabernet sauvignon and Rosso del Conte (a blend of nero d'Avola, syrah and perricone).

PLANETA

Contrada Dispensa, 92013 – Menfi, +39 092 580 009, www.planeta.it
Planeta is the most dynamic producer in Sicily. The winery's home is in Menfi, close to the south coast, but it sources grapes from five different zones, making a sizeable range of stylishly packaged wines at facilities all over the island. Alessio Planeta is one of Sicily's best winemakers, equally adept at working with indigenous and international varieties. My favourites Planeta wines are the Cerasuolo di Vittoria, the syrah (Maroccoli) and their entry-point white, La Segreta, but quality is consistently high.

DE BARTOLI

Contrada Fornai Samperi, 292, 91025 Marsala, +39 0923 962 093, www.marcodebartoli.com

Marco de Bartoli, one of the giants of the post-war Italian wine scene, died last year, but the fourth generation, his son, Renato, carries on the tradition in Marsala. Almost alone, this 20-hectare estate has long championed the cause of great wine in Sicily. De Bartoli is best known for its sweet and fortified wines – the 2007 Bukkuram Pantelleria, Marsala Superiore 10 Anni and 1987 Marsala Superiore Riserva – are won-



derful wines, but don't miss out on the dry whites made from zibibbo (2010 Pietra Nera) and grillo (2009 Grappoli del Grillo).

DONNAFUGATA

Via S.Lipari 18, 91025 Marsala, +39 0923 724 200, www.donnafugata.it
This historic family-owned estate, based in Marsala, but with vineyards an hour's drive away in western Sicily (the Contessa Entellina estate has its own DOC) and closer to Tunisia on the island of Pantelleria, is run by the brother and sister team of Antonio and José Rallo. The average quality of the wines is high here, but my favourites are Tancredi (a blend of cabernet sauvignon, nero d'Avola and tannat), Mille e Una Notte (mostly nero d'Avola with a little petit verdot) and Ben Ryé Passito di Pantelleria, made from dried muscat grapes.

Wines to Try

WHITES

2008 Benanti Pietramarina Etna Bianco, A\$87

There's a saline, almost oyster shell character to the white wines from this top Etna estate, best drunk after a year or more in bottle to allow their flavours to open out. Lime and citrus fruit notes are underpinned by refreshing minerality, with no oak influence.

2010 Tasca d'Almerita Nozze d'Oro IGT Sicilia

A blend of mostly inzolia with 25-per-cent sauvignon blanc, this comes from a vineyard that was planted in the early 1970s for a golden wedding present (hence the name). Grapefruity and complex with a tangy, bright finish, it's a wine that resembles a top Pessac-Léognan with age.

2009 Donnafugata Ben Ryé Passito di Pantelleria, A\$60

Like drinking liquid baklava, this has notes of raisins, spices and honey. It's



BRIGHT FUTURE
The Cambria family at Cottanera on Etna. The cellar at Regaleali.



very concentrated and unctuously sweet, but it's balanced by acidity and sea breeze freshness. Concentrated, intense, yet very drinkable, you can almost taste the flavours of North Africa in the glass.

1987 De Bartoli Marsala Superiore Riserva

1987 was the year of fortification, not production, as this is a blend of vintages, aged in old wooden casks in a rancio-like style. It's quite sweet, with 50 grams of residual sugar, but the sugar is balanced by savoury, mature notes of old churches and incense. It tastes even better in the cellar.

REDS

2010 Cottanera Fatagione IGT Sicilia, A\$40

A stylish blend of mainly nerello mascalese with 15-per-cent merlot and syrah, this is perfumed and finely crafted with aromas of orange peel and spicy red fruits, a touch of oak, grainy tannins and a fine tapering finish. Makes you wonder if international grapes are better partners than nerello cappuccio.

2009 Passopisciaro IGT Sicilia

Grown on Etna but labeled as a Sicilian IGT because it is made entirely from nerello mascalese (rather than blended), this is a quintessential example of the grape in its lighter, more Burgundian guise: delicate and floral, with supple red fruits and suave, mouth-coating tannins.

2010 COS Pithos IGT Sicilia, A\$46

A blend of 60-per-cent nero d'Avola with 40-per-cent frappato, this unfiltered, wild-yeast red was fermented in clay amphorae and partially oak-aged. The result is spicy, light yet very focused with red cherry fruit and a nip of tannins on the finish. If only all natural wines tasted as fresh and appealing as this one.

2010 Occhipinti Il Frappato IGT Sicilia, A\$69

Arianna Occhipinti makes one of the most graceful frappatos in Sicily. But

it's daring, too: unfiltered, wild-yeast fermented and left for 50 days on its skins before ageing in large oak barrels. It is silky and scented, but has more guts and depth than many frappatos, lingering satisfyingly on the palate.

2008 Feudo Montoni Rosso

An unusual interpretation of nero d'Avola (maybe it's those old clones) with some notes of mint and wild herbs on the nose and a touch of smoky reduction. The palate shows flavours of plum skin and subtle oak with firm-ish, well-structured tannins. A wine to cellar for at least another five years.

2008 Planeta Maroccoli Syrah

It might be an international style – you could almost mistake it for a Victorian shiraz – but it's brilliantly done, showing balsamic, savoury aromas, well integrated sweet oak and a hint of black pepper. Like most of Planeta's wines, it's polished, well crafted and beautifully balanced.

Where to Eat

You can eat extremely well, and inexpensively, in Sicily especially if you buy fresh ingredients and cook them yourself. The cuisine is Mediterranean and shows the influence of Spain, Greece and North Africa as well as Italy. The diet here is based on fresh fruit and vegetables, olive oil, pasta and fish, although Sicilians have a sweet tooth and are famous for their desserts.

Many of my favourite restaurants are in Palermo – try **Premiata Enoteca Butticcé** (www.enotecabuttice.com), **Quinto Canto** (www.quintocantohotel.com), **Ai Tetti** (www.astoriapalacehotel-palermo.com) and **Vinoveritas**. Elsewhere on the island, there is **Trattoria San Giorgio Il Drago** in Randazzo (near Etna), **La Madia** (www.ristorantelamadia.it) in Licata near Agrigento, **Ristorante Torre d'Oriente** in Modica near Ragusa (www.ristorantetorred-oriente.it), **Al Duomo** (www.ristoranteduomo.it) in Taormina. 🍷



SICILY AT A GLANCE

Total vineyard area: 112,000 hectares (64 per cent white, 36 per cent red)

Number of producers: 453

Total wine production: 5.6 million hectolitres of wine and must

BOTTLED WINE: Around 19 per cent

CLIMATE: Mediterranean, but large differences between regions and picking times based on altitude and proximity to the sea

NUMBER OF DOCGS: 1 (Cerasuolo di Vittoria)

NUMBER OF DOCS: 23 (Alcamo, Contea di Sclafani, Contesse Entellina, Delia Nivolelli, Etna, Erice, Faro, Malvasia delle Lipari, Mamertino, Marsala, Menfi, Monreale, Moscato di Noto, Moscato di Pantelleria, Moscato di Siracusa, Riesi, Salapurata, Sambuca di Sicilia, Santa Margherita Belice, Sciacca, Vittoria and, from 2012 onwards, Sicilia)

BEST KNOWN DOCS: Etna, Marsala, Moscato di Pantelleria

MAIN WHITE GRAPES: cataratto, trebbiano, inzolia, grecanico, chardonnay, grillo, viognier, caricante, zibibbo

MAIN RED GRAPES: nero d'Avola, syrah, merlot, nerello mascalese, cabernet sauvignon, sangiovese, frappato, nerello cappuccio

LEADING PRODUCERS: Abbazia Sant'Anastasia, Benanti, Ceuso, COS, Corvo (Duca di Salaparuta), Cottanera, Cusumano, De Bartoli, Donnafugata, Feudo Montoni, Firriato, Florio, Frank Cornelissen, Gulfi, Il Cantante, Morgante, Occhipinti, Palari, Passopisciaro, Planeta, Sanguè d'Oro, Regaleali, Tenuta di Fessina, Valle dell'Acate.

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