



Vini Siciliani

Sicily has been gripped by a revolution, writes Max Allen, and it's now producing more interesting wines.

Sicily might just be the hottest wine region in Italy

right now. And I'm not talking about the climate – although obviously summer on this starkly beautiful southern Mediterranean island can be scorching.

From large volumes of exceptionally good-value, flavour-packed, sleekly labelled wines made from ancient grape varieties, to hatfuls of some of the most mind-blowing, profoundly challenging natural wines, Sicily is pulsating with vinous excitement. And the good news for Australian drinkers is that a surprisingly large number of the island's best wines are available here.

Sicily's hot summers and volcanic soil make grape-growing a relative doddle, and for centuries the vine-carpeted island has produced oceans of wine, from the Sherry-like fortifieds of Marsala to bulk-plonk drunk locally or surreptitiously trucked north to bolster the lighter local drops.

Over the last few decades, though, a revolution has gripped Sicily, as it has elsewhere in Italy. At the volume end of the market, large wineries and co-ops initially planted international varieties such as cabernet sauvignon and chardonnay to supply cheap booze to UK supermarkets, but then, thankfully, swung their

attention back to the island's indigenous grapes and are now producing much more interesting, distinctive wines.

The recently imported range of Mandoletto varieties, for example, offers an excellent glimpse of this new direction for Sicilian producers: a white that shows off the refreshing lemony characters of the local catarratto grape in a clean, modern way, and a red that nicely captures the dark, plump richness of the nero d'Avola grape. And they're both around \$15 a bottle. Another terrific modern example of the nero d'Avola grape's warm black fruit and deep earthiness is the 2009 Morgante, which retails for under \$30.

The intriguing, unique flavours of these indigenous grapes have also inspired some seriously impressive, more upmarket producers both locally and from further afield. For me, two of the leading locals are Planeta and Donnafugata, both established by growers determined to overturn the island's image as a producer of fortified and bulk wines.

Planeta's must-try wine is the Cerasuolo di Vittoria, a blend of fleshy nero d'Avola and the spicy local frappato grape, from Sicily's only region to have been awarded top DOCG classification. And two wines that have done more than most to boost the island's reputation are Donnafugata's seriously impressive (and seriously priced) sumptuously oaked nero d'Avola evocatively called Mille e Una Notte, and an incredible, try-before-you-die sweet passito wine called Ben Ryé, made from sun-dried moscato

grapes grown on the satellite island of Pantelleria.

Among the outsiders to have fallen under Sicily's spell are Tuscany's prestigious Mazzei family (best-known for their Fonterutoli Chianti). They produce one of the best examples of barrique-matured nero d'Avola at Noto in south-eastern Sicily, in a wine called Zisola: brooding black fruit and layers of coffee, toast and damp soil.

While the wines of Planeta, Donnafugata and Zisola are very much in the modern mould, produced in a style that wows international wine critics and labelled to appeal to affluent, savvy wine markets, there is also a more recent and possibly more exciting trend in Sicily towards smaller-scale – sometimes more traditional, sometimes radically experimental – natural winemaking.

On the grumbling slopes of Mt Etna, new, certified-organic vineyards such as Terre Nere are making a compelling case for the local red grapes nerello Mascalese and nerello cappuccio. Terre Nere's Etna Rosso, a blend of the two varieties, has the ethereal perfume, the transparency and the fine, fine tannins you'd expect to find in a top nebbiolo from Piedmont, not the hot island of Sicily.

In Vittoria, the COS winery takes indigenous, organically grown grape varieties and ferments them in terracotta amphorae – or flat-bottomed "pithoi" as they're known locally – in much the same way as wine would have been made here 2000 years ago. The red Pithos, a blend of frappato and nero d'Avola that spends no less than seven months macerating in these amphorae before

being bottled unfiltered and with the barest minimum of sulphur dioxide, is a truly wonderful, deeply savoury wine.

Arianna Occhipinti, the niece of one of the founders of COS, takes this natural approach further, growing her grapes organically and sometimes adding no sulphur when she bottles wines such as the SP68, a red which shows the frappato grape off in all its unadorned, undergrowthy, mouthful-of-prickly-berries beauty.

And the Porta del Vento estate in Palermo pushes the natural boundary further again with a wine called Saharay: made from white catarratto grapes but in a fashion far removed from the Mandoletto I mentioned earlier, this cloudy orange wine with tart and wild flavours is made by fermenting the fruit on its skins in open vats without cooling, with no added yeast, no sulphur, and no filtration.

But the ultimate example of natural winemaking in Sicily – and perhaps the world – comes from Frank Cornelissen, a curious Belgian wine professional who bought an old, ungrafted vineyard on Etna a decade ago and embarked on a visionary attempt to work as closely with nature as possible.

As well as planting fruit trees and vegetation between the vines, Cornelissen has adopted a totally hands-off approach: the vineyard is not sprayed with anything, not even copper and sulphur (both allowed in organic and biodynamic viticulture), and the top wines are fermented, on skins, in amphorae buried up to their necks in volcanic rubble. No additions of any kind are made at any stage.

The results are, for many people, a little scary: cloudy, sometimes feral liquids that can scare the bejesus out of your average technically minded Aussie winemaker. But for a growing number of devotees, Cornelissen's wines are the real soul of Sicily.*

APRIL WINE NEWS

CHAMPAGNE TASTING NOTES

Just what every Champagne-lover needs: a neat tasting-notes book specifically designed for entering your own impressions of the Champagnes you drink. It includes maps, vintage charts and other information about Champagne and costs \$27 from The Truffle Man. thetruffleman.com.au

MOVEMENT IN THE HILLS #1

After years of successful partnership, the Fowles family has bought the remaining chunk of the old Plunkett family business. The Plunkett Fowles winery and cellar door business in the Strathbogie Ranges, well-known to drivers heading north out of Melbourne on the Hume Highway, is now called simply Fowles Wine. fowleswine.com

MOVEMENT IN THE HILLS #2

Californian company Jackson Family Wines has expanded its presence in McLaren Vale with the purchase of the highly regarded 80-hectare Hickinbotham vineyard in the Clarendon district. The Jackson family already owns the excellent Yangarra Estate. yangarra.com

MASTERS OF THE WINE UNIVERSE

The Australian wine-waiting profession received a boost recently when the international Court of Master Sommeliers awarded 34 local somms Certified status. Australia also now boasts two Master Sommeliers: Franck Moreau from the Merivale group and Michael Engelmann from Rockpool Bar & Grill Sydney.

POP-UP WINERY

Visitors to Adelaide CBD's bustling East End precinct were treated to the sight of grape-stomping and fermentation last month at Vinteloper Wines's pop-up winery. Vinteloper is an exciting name to watch: the Odeon riesling and Adelo red blend are must-try wines. vinteloper.com.au

QUE SYRAH SYRAH

The top wine and a triple trophy winner from this year's Sydney International Wine Competition is the spicy, sinewy 2010 Trinity Hill Gimblett Gravels Syrah. You know the times they are a changin' when a Kiwi shiraz triumphs at a wine show on Australian soil. top100wines.com



Vine by any other name
The renamed Fowles
Wine vineyard in
Victoria's Strathbogie
Ranges (above).

TOP DROPS OF THE MONTH



BARGAIN
2010 Swan Bay Shiraz,
Geelong, Vic, \$15

The 2010 vintage was a kind one in southern Victoria, and produced plenty of lively wines. This is a cracking example – slinky purple fruit and supple tannin – at a very good price. Drink with sausages.



IMPORT
2010 Evesham Wood Pinot Noir,
Willamette Valley, Oregon, USA, \$38

Most Oregon pinots tend to be rare, plush, and on the pricey side. This is more affordable and available – and sensational: subtly spicy, slinky and savoury, with hints of undergrowth and wood smoke. Drink with quail.



WHITE
2009 Box Grove Vineyard Roussanne,
Nagambie Lakes, Vic, \$25

I love the roussanne grape's ability to produce rich, textural wines without sacrificing refreshing acidity and mineral tang. This is a lovely, nutty, white-peachy example from central Victoria. Drink with roast chicken.



CELLAR
2010 Shobbrook Syrah,
Seppeltsfield, SA, \$45

This firm, reserved red wine gets better each time I taste it: seriously sexy black fruit is beginning to emerge from its shell of grippy tannin. Give it another decade at least to blossom further. Drink with wild mushrooms.



RED
Sami-Odi Little Wine 1,
Barossa Valley, SA, \$25

A blend of barrels from 2010 and 2011 that didn't make it into the more expensive Sami-Odi shirazes, this offers a glimpse of why this label is turning heads: black-cherry juiciness meets Siena-cake intensity. Drink with mettwurst.



SPARKLING
1998 Cascabel Composé Sparkling
Shiraz, McLaren Vale, SA, \$32

Another bargain, I reckon, especially if you like your sparkling shiraz to walk on the wild side. Twelve years' lees ageing have bestowed flavour layers of fresh mushroom, damp soil and dark, woody spices. Drink with roast duck.

Stockists p225

Grape island
Donnafugata's
Contessa Entellina
vineyard in hilly
western Sicily (above).
For devotees, the
natural wines made
by Frank Cornelissen
(inset) are the real
soul of Sicily.