

Fine Sicilian Wine

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I'm in Southern Italy this week with a group of Canadian wine journalists visiting several wineries with an interest in our market.



Photo: Courtesy Tasca d'Almerita

We started with a day and a half in Palermo, to recover from jet lag and enjoy a wonderful, historic city. Palermo is a decent size (one million people) coastal town with impressive architecture, loads of restaurants, and very interesting markets to visit. We enjoyed local cuisine - including fresh seafood - at Piccolo Napoli, a friendly traditional restaurant. Then, the next evening we went through several bottles of very good wine alongside wood oven pizza and local cheeses, for ridiculously good value, at Enoteca Cibus, a wine store/grocery/pizza place and deli. I love Italy's relaxed and progressive (yet old-fashioned) view toward liquor sales.

The Sicilian wines of most interest to our group were those made from historic local varieties. Whites include Grillo, Catarratto, Ansonica, Gregranico, Inzolia and Zibibbo (Muscat of Alexandria). The main red is Nero D'Avola, which is closely related to Syrah/Shiraz. The other local red of note is Nerello Mascalese, which is not unlike Pinot Noir. Most of these grapes used to be known more for inexpensive bulk wines, but times have changed, and leading producers are making excellent dinner wines from these varieties, and dessert wines from Zibibbo. This is in addition to international varieties that have become increasingly popular, some of which have been around quite a while, such as Syrah, but also others such as Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Merlot, Viognier and Cabernet Sauvignon. In some cases these are blended with the local varieties.

We started with a visit to central Sicily, to Tasca d'Almerita on the Regaleali Estate. Although their wines are available in other parts of Canada, we do not yet have them in New Brunswick, which is a shame. They straddle perfectly the gap between traditional Old World wines and modern fresh wines that appeal to a wide range of consumers. We tasted a good cross section of their wines, and the ones that really grabbed me were:

* Regaleali Bianco, a fresh, minerally blend of Inzolia, Cataratto, and Gregranico, not household names but this would be a perfect house wine

* Grillo Mozia, a rich, honeyed, complex and balanced white from the island of Mothia

* L'Amuri, a terrifically structured, fruity red with good acidity made from Nero D'Avola

The estate is gorgeous and worth a visit if you get to Sicily. We stayed at their resort, and served amazing traditional cuisine and wine. Go to tascadalmerita.it for more information.

The next day we drove to Donnafugata's Contessa Entellina Estate, not far south of Palermo. New Brunswick wine drinkers should know Donnafugata, as we've had some of their brands for a few years, and I have written about them before. Antonio Rallo of Donnafugata has made regular visits to our Atlantic region. After a chat with Rollo in the vineyard, where he went over the history of the winery, we were treated to two vertical tastings, and a lovely estate lunch.

Rallo told a story about when he was a young keen wine guy, with some knowledge of modern techniques, and started to change the way the grape selection was done with the local varieties, going for quality instead of quantity. The older workers saw this as wasting good grapes, and said to him, "Does your grandfather know what you are doing, Antonio?" He must have stuck with it, because Donnafugata makes great wine.

Our first vertical was four vintages (1999, 2003, 2004, 2006) of their premium red, Mille e una Notte, which is mostly Nero D'Avola, but also has some Cabernet. The 1999 was fantastic, nicely developed but with peppery spice and some leathery tannins. The '03 was herbal and savoury, with raisin, tobacco, leather and medium tannins. The '04 was still pretty tough and tannic, with black olive, smoke, pepper and astringent tannins. 2006 marked the year they changed winemaking technique to go for smoother tannins, and it shows. It is quite drinkable now, but Rallo feels it will still age and will end up tasting much like the 1999.

The other vertical was of Ben Ryé, their wonderful dessert wine made from Zibibbo grown on the island of Pantelleria. Made from dried grapes, this is a special treat. Young (2008), it smells of fresh apricot and tastes of orange marmalade. The 2005 has more complexity, with some caramel/nut and a silkier texture, but still with the orange preserve on the palate. The 1999 is a different animal, with spice, wood, nut and quite a bit darker, but still sporting candied orange on the finish. Delicious wines.

We also had several of their wines with lunch, and at dinner that evening in their older winery - and barrel storage facility - in Marsala. All wines were really good, but there are too many to review here. I was quite impressed by their 100 per cent Chardonnay wine called Chiaranda Del Merlo. We compared a 2000 and a 2007 - both were fantastic, with the elegance of good Burgundy. Another exciting wine is their Tancredi, which I have written glowing reviews of before when it has been released in New Brunswick. It is a blend of Nero D'Avola and Cabernet Sauvignon, and brings forward the best of both in a balanced package, showing that Donnafugata knows how to handle both old traditional varieties and the new wave of international favourites.

Go to donnafugata.it for more information on this progressive Sicilian leader.

WINE OF THE WEEK

One of our lunch wines was a 2010 Anthilia made from a blend of mainly Cataratto and Ansonica. This wine has been one of my fave brands available at NB Liquor, but we are still on old vintages (2006, 2007). It ages nicely, and I love the richness of the ones we have on the NB Liquor shelves, but it is really meant to drink fresh. It was exciting to taste a new vintage of the wine, to see how it

tastes young - minerally, fresh fruit, floral, and refreshing acidity. I understand that we should be getting some 2009 soon.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Tuesday - Premium Canadian Wines at happinez wine bar in Saint John. I'm leading a tasting of some of my favourite Canadian wines from Nova Scotia to British Columbia. Go to happinezwinebar.com for more information.

Wednesday - EU Dinner at Opera Bistro in Saint John. Axel and Margret present some of their favourite dishes from the EU countries. I'll pair them with regional wines. Go to operabistro.com for information.

Feb. 26 - The annual Saint John Red Cross Wine Fair is back again. I'll do a pre-show tasting for the charity. Find out more at www.redcross.ca/winefair.

Cheers!

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