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# ITALY

THE TASTE OF LA DOLCE VITA: BRUNELLO, BAROLO, BARBERA, FRIULI, SOAVE & MORE



# Sicily, then and now

The volcanic island's path to international wine success has been somewhat rocky, but has changed course in recent years thanks to a handful of farsighted families and wineries

STORY CARLA CAPALBO

Sicily is recognised today as being one of the world's most exciting wine-producing regions, with wine lovers and tourists flocking to sample its myriad wines and enjoy the island's cultural riches, scenery and delicious food. The once-obscure Nerello Mascalese, star grape of the rediscovery of Mount Etna as a winemaking presence, is drawing comparisons with Burgundy and Barolo. Native Nero d'Avola and indigenous whites – including Carricante, Catarratto, Grillo and Zibibbo – now appear regularly on international wine lists. There are organic and biodynamic wineries to discover, while many estates offer holiday accommodation.

It wasn't always thus. Sicily's wine history stretches back millennia, to the Phoenicians and the Greeks, but its transformation to a modern wine culture was slow, albeit with a burst in the late 19th century. It has accelerated in the past 25-30 years thanks to a handful of pioneering estates.

## LAND REFORM SHAKE-UP

Sicily's transition to modern practices was neither direct nor painless. Strong, often invisible forces often proved resistant to the idea of changing a system that afforded control, riches and power to the few. ►

Vineyards on Tasca d'Almerita's Regaleali estate, in central Sicily



Sicilian agriculture followed a centuries-old feudal model in most areas until the Italian land reform laws of the 1950s and '60s broke up its largest landowner holdings – limiting them to 200ha each – and gave the former sharecroppers their own plots. While this liberated some tenants, it caused problems for others.

Only a handful of families bottled their wines, including Duca di Salaparuta and Tasca d'Almerita. Large cooperative wineries were created to assemble thousands of individual growers, and to pool the costs of vinifying and selling the resulting wine. Much was (and is) sold as bulk wine to northern Italy – including Tuscany and Piedmont – and to France and Germany, where the concentrated colour, alcohol and body of Sicilian sun-ripened grapes bolstered weaker wines. Another large portion was (and is) distilled as alcohol. There was little incentive to change: co-ops enabled access to EU subsidies and offered block votes to those in power, while individual land workers rarely had the opportunities to become independent.

#### FORWARD THINKERS

Luckily, a handful of people had other ideas. From 1973, Diego Planeta, an ambitious Sicilian entrepreneur, was president of the large Settesoli co-op in Menfi, on the island's southwest coast. He helped Settesoli move from producing bulk wine to bottling and selling millions of bottles of better wine – more than half of its output – by the 2010s. Planeta's hunch that overseas markets would accept Sicilian wines if they followed international styles of winemaking led to extensive plantings of what the Italians call *vitigni internazionali* – international grape varieties – including Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. When, in 1985, he became president of the powerful Istituto Regionale della Vite e del Vino, the state-owned institute tasked with improving the island's winemaking abilities, he expanded his ideas and influence. He planted experimental vineyards and brought in outside consultants, including oenologist Giacomo Tachis, whose Bordeaux-influenced style had created some of the 1990s' legendary SuperTuscans.

Planeta's eponymous family winery was established in the late 1980s and is still one of the island's most internationally recognised. Run today by Diego's daughter and nephews, Planeta's wine portfolio from five Sicilian areas includes international and native Sicilian grapes. Both Planeta and another early estate, the Rallo family's Donnafugata, originating in Marsala at the far-western end of the island, understood the importance of marketing their



**'Both Planeta and Donnafugata understood the importance of marketing their wines within the context of the generous hospitality of their beautiful birthplace'**

wines within the context of the generous hospitality of their beautiful birthplace.

Whether Sicily would have accelerated its position on the world stage without relying on international varieties is an open question. Certainly they facilitated acceptance by wine drinkers who had little knowledge of Sicily beyond what they'd seen in the movies.

#### PASSION FOR MARSALA

The Marsala area produced another important wine pioneer, Marco De Bartoli. His passion for Sicily's history and wine culture led to a different approach to renewal. A rebel from the outset, De Bartoli left his family's important Marsala-making winery, Carlo Pellegrino, to become a racing-driver before settling at Samperi, a country farmhouse near the city.

De Bartoli was incensed about the fall from grace of the area's noble wine, [fortified] Marsala. That a wine favoured by Admiral Horatio Nelson, who popularised it within the British Royal Navy at the turn of the 19th century, and with such an important history, should have been reduced to a travesty blended with eggs or chocolate and drunk from thimbles was an outrage he couldn't accept. (His favourite saying was: 'Grande vino, grande bicchiere' – great wines deserve big glasses.)

Above: Giacomo, José, Gabriella and Antonio Rallo of Donnafugata  
Right: harvest at Planeta's Etna Castiglione vineyard



He amassed a collection of barrels of original Marsala, gathered painstakingly from local houses and containing wines that dated back more than 100 years, and blended them with his own to produce extraordinary, complex wines that were true to his ideals (Marsala uses a process similar to Sherry's solera blending method). He bottled several versions, including the unfortified Vecchio Samperi, which became one of Italy's most recognised wines.

On the island of Pantelleria he relaunched the local dessert wine, Passito di Pantelleria, made from sun-dried raisins of the local Zibibbo grape (Muscat of Alexandria): Bukkuram is a wine of extreme opulence and energy.

De Bartoli also saw the potential in the native grapes Catarratto, Grillo and Zibibbo. He was the first to make memorable dry wines from them, setting a trend that has endured. Today his three children continue his legacy, producing both his wines and some new ones, including the organic Integer line.

#### LOFTY AMBITIONS

Change was afoot elsewhere, too. From Regaleali, an imposing villa in the heart of Sicily, the noble Tasca d'Almerita family continued to innovate despite losing swathes of holdings under land reform. Count Giuseppe

Tasca had travelled to France and drunk great Bordeaux and Burgundy. His Rosso del Conte, first produced in 1970, is claimed as the first single-vineyard wine of native varieties Nero d'Avola and Perricone, and proved that well-made Sicilian wines could age successfully. With the family's younger generation now at the helm, Tasca has expanded its vineyards to include estates on Etna and Salina, and has taken over the winemaking of Grillo on the fascinating Phoenician island of Mozia.

Sicily's new wave owes a debt, too, to Giambattista Cilia and Giusto Occhipinti at COS (the third of the original founding trio, Cirino Strano, has since left). In the 1980s, young, full of ideas and inspired by the work De Bartoli had been doing in Marsala and Pantelleria, they set up their business on a shoestring in a little-known area of the island's southeast, near Vittoria. They wanted to retrace the origins of winemaking and began by crushing their grapes by foot. They were keen on both international and native grape varieties.

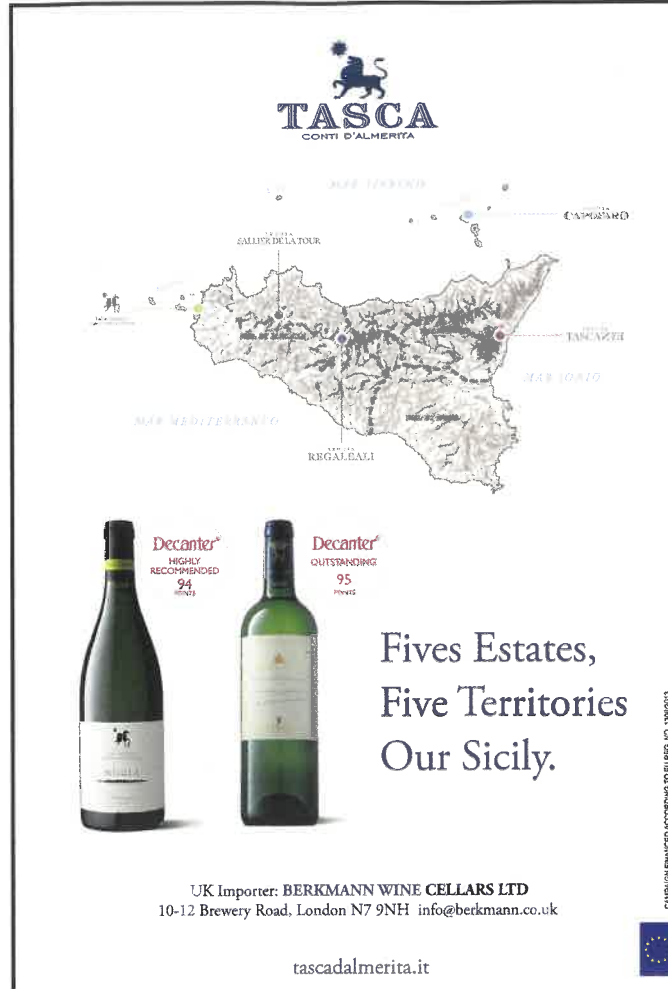
Over time, their methods evolved to include clay jars (anfore) for much of the winemaking, and they introduced a biodynamic approach to the certified organic vineyards. COS is known for its fine Cerasuolo di Vittoria (made from Frappato and Nero d'Avola) and a range of ►





**ASSULI**  
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www.assuli.it | Assuli Srl Via Archi, 9 - 91100 - Trapani (TP) Italy  
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wines that reflect its ongoing commitment to low-interference principles.

#### ETNA EVOLVES

Mount Etna, mainland Europe's largest active volcano, dominates eastern Sicily and its modern wine scene. Here, wine was also once produced in bulk, sent directly into the holds of waiting ships by canals dug down the mountainside. While a few estates did bottle some wines there, including Barone di Villagrande and Murgo, it was the efforts of pharmacist Giuseppe Benanti and his then winemaker Salvo Foti who brought attention to the potential of the volcano's native grapes: reds Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Cappuccio, and white Carricante.

Their bottlings of the red Rovittello and the white Pietra Marina – first produced in 1990 – proved to be the catalysts for a new wave of winemaking on the flanks of the volcano. The complexity and ageing potential of the Carricante was a revelation, while the reds drew comparisons with the finesse of Pinot Noir and austerity of Nebbiolo. Foti has dedicated his work to Etna's wines and now runs his own project, I Vigneri (see 'Italy at altitude', p20).

In the early 2000s, three outsiders who invested in vineyards on Etna helped focus the international spotlight on its unique terroirs.

**'COS is known for its fine Cerasuolo di Vittoria and a range of wines that reflect its ongoing commitment to low-interference principles'**

When Andrea Franchetti, a producer of niche wine in Tuscany, bought abandoned vineyards on the northern slopes in 2000, it caused a stir in the wine world. Soon afterwards, Marco de Grazia, a Tuscan-American and longtime champion and importer of Italian artisan wines, settled nearby at Tenuta delle Terre Nere. De Grazia, an expert on Burgundy, understood Etna's potential for creating elegant, long-ageing wines, especially whites. He encouraged other local producers to improve and bottle their wines, including Giuseppe Russo of Girolamo Russo. Belgian Frank Cornelissen also settled in the area in 2001 and ignited the passion for natural and experimental wines on its slopes.

Thanks to this great cast of dedicated winemakers – and many more – today Sicily and its islands offer an incredibly exciting diversity of grape varieties, terroirs and wines to explore and, of course, to drink. ►



SICILY, THEN AND NOW

## Capalbo's pick: the soul of Sicily in 10 delicious wines

### ① Benanti, Pietra Marina Bianco Superiore, Etna 2016 97

£87.25 Field & Fawcett, Sociovino

This definitive wine of pure Carricante is given extensive contact on the lees, without wood, taking its structure from the grapes and terroir. Pale with golden highlights, it offers iodised notes on the expressive nose and an almost shy (still very young) palate that builds slowly in the mouth to a finale of energy and length. **Drink** 2022-2030 **Alcohol** 12%

### Marco De Bartoli, Integer Grillo, Terre Siciliane 2018 97

£34.50 Les Caves de Pyrene

Light burnished gold. The nose is rich, with aromatic and salty notes leading to an energised, complex, clean palate with a very long, salivating finish. A now and future wine showing a different aspect of Grillo. Organic. **Drink** 2021-2025 **Alc** 13%

### ② Tasca d'Almerita, Nozze d'Oro 2018 95

£25.58 Berkman, Christopher Keiller

A blend of two-thirds Inzolia with Sauvignon Tasca (a varietal selection cultivated at the Regaleali estate), this charming classic is light bright gold, with hints of lychees and citrus to the nose. The well-constructed palate offers saltiness and fine acidity, and the elegant bitterness of grapefruit on a long finish. **Drink** 2021-2024 **Alc** 13.5%

### Tasca d'Almerita, Mozia Grillo 2019 94

£26 Tannico

Pale with yellow-gold highlights. Sappy and saline, with aromatic notes, this is crisp, clean and salty, displaying fine acidity and lots of character. Made on the island once home to the Phoenicians. **Drink** 2021-2023 **Alc** 13.5%

### ③ I Vigneri, Aurora 2019 93

£26-£31.15 Good Wine x Good People,

Les Caves de Pyrene, Noble Fine Liquor  
This pale gold, linear Carricante from Etna has bright citrus notes with hints of pear, bruised apples and broom blossom. On the palate it's fine-textured, fluid and refreshing, with bright acidity and good length. Organic. **Drink** 2021-2026 **Alc** 11%



### ④ COS, Cerasuolo di Vittoria delle Fontane 2014 97

£33.50-£37.49 Les Caves de Pyrene, Exel, Vin Cognito

Frappato and Nero d'Avola aged in large Slavonian barrels. Cherry-red colour with a floral nose of raspberries and fragrant red fruits. It has lovely acidity and freshness, a dynamic palate and a juicy finish. Elegant, ethereal and very drinkable. **Drink** 2021-2029 **Alc** 13%

### Tenuta delle Terre Nere, Calderara Sottana Rosso, Etna 2017 97

£30 (lb)-£63.33 Christopher Keiller, Cru, Crump Richmond Shaw, Hedonism, Justerini & Brooks, Just in Cases, Millésima, Starling Wines, Vin Cognito, Wine Direct, Wineye

This single-vineyard wine is made with fruit from old Nerello Mascalese vines on Etna's north face. It displays Burgundian hues and typical Nebbiolo elegance, and its enticing red-fruit nose and volcanic undertones lead to an uplifting palate with light grip and a long finish. Still very young. **Drink** 2022-2029 **Alc** 14.5%

### Planeta, Santa Cecilia, Noto 2017 93

£25.25-£32.50 Exel, Field & Fawcett, The Fine Wine Co, The Great Wine Co, The Secret Cellar, Vintriloquy, Vinvm, Wine Direct

This pure Nero d'Avola is quintessentially Sicilian: rich in colour and full of ripe blackberry fruits, it has a silky texture

and finely balanced wood that make it harmonious and pleasurable to drink. A true food wine that captures the sun. **Drink** 2021-2026 **Alc** 14.5%

### ⑤ Donnafugata, Ben Ryé, Passito di Pantelleria 2018 93

£62.75-£84.99 Exel, Hedonism, Petersham Cellar, Prezzemolo e Vitale, Vinvm

Caramel-gold in hue, this elegant passito (grapes concentrated by drying) speaks of the sweet Zibibbo grapes it's made from, and their volcanic island. Exotic perfumes of oranges and lemons, acacia and gardenia in an unctuous yet refreshing wine that marries beautifully with desserts. **Drink** 2021-2029 **Alc** 14.5%

### ⑥ Marco De Bartoli, Vigna La Miccia Superiore Oro, Marsala 2016 98

£30-£33.60/50cl Buon Vino, Forest Wines, Les Caves de Pyrene, Natural Vine, Sip Wines, Terra Wines, Vin Cognito

Groundbreaking when it first appeared in 1985, this elegant young Marsala made from 100% Grillo is a rich amber-caramel colour, with a nose of toasted caramel and dried apricots, and an explosive development on the palate that is fresh, energised and juicy. A compelling wine poised between rich and light, sweet and dry. Serve lightly chilled. **Drink** 2021-2027 **Alc** 18%



PROMOTIONAL FEATURE

## CANTINA KURTATSCH

Alpine terroir wines from Italy's Alto Adige

190 vigneroni successfully working together to produce high quality wines that are the faithful expression of the territory in Italy's Alto Adige region. What's the secret?

Look around you to understand. There's an amazing contemporary winery perfectly integrated into the landscape. Vertiginous vineyards everywhere, providing sites with special characteristics, and wines that reflect their origins. And a young team led by President Andreas Kofler, looking after all aspects of the enterprise.

The location is very special. The vineyards are located 220-900m a.s.l., giving a difference in altitude of 700m, which is unique in Europe in a single municipality. The lower vineyards are among the warmest in Alto Adige - ideal for red wines. And in the high vineyards, located above the town of Kurtatsch, white wines find perfect Alpine conditions. The climate is gentle, Alpine-continental with Mediterranean influences.

15 different grape varieties are cultivated to make authentic, characterful wines that reflect their place of origin. Each wine and each vintage are the product of a symbiosis between climate, soil, exposure and grape variety.



The "TERROIR" range is top: wines that have a strong bond with their vineyards and are mostly named after their place of origin. Freienfeld is the name for Kurtatsch's icon wines, so-called after the place where the co-operative was founded in 1900.



### CUVÉE AMOS - THE MOUNTAIN WINE

A blend of the best white grapes (mostly Pinot Bianco, Pinot Grigio and Chardonnay) from the coolest vineyards at 600-900m asl, this wine showcases the potential of the higher vineyards.

Long ageing on the fine lees in large wooden barrels adds complexity. Additions of Kerner and Sauvignon give the wine its seductive white flowers and citrus fruit bouquet. Multi-layered and unique.

### KOFL - ALTO ADIGE SAUVIGNON DOC - THE IMPULSIVE ONE

The name "Kofl" describes a rounded peak. Coming from steep vineyards just below the mountains, the evening breezes help produce healthy grapes. A high percentage of lime in the soil means the area is ideal for Sauvignon with good ageing potential.

Tropical fruit, gooseberries, kiwis, sage and elderflower on the nose. An impressive combination of dynamism and strength. Minerality gives further complexity and length. As a Sauvignon, elegant rather than loud.

### FREIENFELD ALTO ADIGE CHARDONNAY RISERVA DOC - THE CHARMING ONE

An opulent and elegant wine with characteristic freshness and longevity. The grapes grow on gravelly soil rich in dolomite that endows the wine with a particularly saline aftertaste. Great ageing potential.

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