



OSSET'S SICILIAN DON

Christine Austin April 14, 2018 Drink, Wine

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A Yorkshireman once made fortunes from Marsala wine in Sicily. It fell out of favour, but Sicilian wines are gaining new fans.

There is a saying in the wine trade that the best way to make a small fortune from wine is to start with a large one. But it wasn't always like this. Some people really have made billions.

At the age of 22 Benjamin Ingham was sent by his family from Ossett in West Yorkshire to Sicily. His aim was to sell cloth from the family firm, but he swiftly moved into the wine business and by developing, making and selling Marsala wine, became the richest man in Sicily. When he died at the age of 77 he left a fortune that today would be valued in billions.

The reason Ingham was sent to western Sicily in 1806 was because the Napoleonic wars with France prevented the sale of cloth to France. With a large garrison of British troops in Sicily, this looked like a lucrative market as well as a good staging post for other markets. But Ingham was distracted by the local wine. There was already an Englishman, John Woodhouse, making Marsala wine. Undeterred, Ingham set up in competition just a mile down the road.



He realized that, like Madeira and Port, Marsala needed to be fortified to withstand a long sea voyage, so he set about creating his own style of Marsala and was particularly successful selling to America. He eventually owned ships so he could transport his own wine, and invested heavily in the developing young America. Eventually married to a Sicilian Duchess, Ingham had no children so the business was left to his nephews by the name of Whitaker and there are still streets in Marsala named after this family.

Since then Marsala's popularity has declined dramatically which is a shame because it has a style all of its own. Made essentially from the Grillo grape it is fortified and aged in oak casks for years becoming rich with dried fruit and figgy flavours. It is the perfect match for a cold winter's evening with a slice of fruitcake. Try Curatolo Marsala Superiore Dolce at Waitrose, £11.99 or the lighter style of Florio's Targa 2004 at £11.20 for 50cl from Field and Fawcett. These are wines for drinking, not for cooking. There was once a fashion for flavoured Marsala but these should be avoided completely.

There is one producer who is still making the original style of wine, which cannot be called Marsala since it is made without fortification but for me it gives a far more elegant, complex style of wine that can be matched with food.



Vecchio Samperi from Marco de Bartoli is made using the 'perpetuo' method where Grillo grapes are fermented and then aged in a solera system of casks, gradually concentrating and gaining alcohol until it naturally reaches 16.5%. The result is a wine that has nuts, honey, the taste of orange zest and a long, savoury finish. I drank it with artichokes, a dish that normally antagonizes any wine, but here the match was perfect. Vecchio Samperi is a specialist wine, at around £46.20 available by mail order from Tannico.co.uk. If you see a bottle on a shelf in a bar you should try it, just for the taste of how things were in Sicily before the Brits got there.



The company Donnafugata was launched to signify a change in direction in the Rallo family's wine business. They stopped producing fortified wines and now concentrate on making some excellent quality still table wines. Still located close to the old docks in Marsala they occupy a grand 'baglio' which is the traditional courtyard and buildings, surrounded by a protecting wall. This gives an idea of just how valuable the Marsala business used to be.

Donnafugata now produce grapes at various locations across Sicily, in particular in the eastern part of the island on the slopes of Etna and in the south in Vittoria. They also have extensive vineyards on the island of Pantelleria.

Of their range, head to Sherazade 2016 (£13.70 Field and Fawcett) for the lively, cherry and plum flavours of Nero d'Avola. This goes perfectly well with good pasta and pizza. I also enjoyed SurSur Grillo 2017, (Harrogate Wine, £14.99) which has crisp lemon and herbaceous notes, quite like Sauvignon Blanc, but with a deeper midpalate and a rounder finish.



The star of the tasting was Ben Ryé 2015 made from Zibbibo grapes, grown on the island of Pantelleria which have been partially dried before fermentation. The result is a fabulous wine, balancing sweetness with acidity and showing notes of oranges, jasmine and almond. It goes perfectly with salty cheeses.



Planeta is another family that has taken the switch to table wines in its stride. With vineyards and wineries dotted around the island they now produce a range of wines, making the most of the individual characters of each part of Sicily. They led the way in discovering which grape varieties did well in each location, matching them to the soils and specific climate. The winemaker for all the Planeta wineries is Hungarian-born Patricia Tóth who arrived several years ago for a season and somehow forgot to go home. She seems to live in her car as she travels across Sicily to look after her wines.



A favourite from this range is Cerasuolo di Vittoria 2016 (£12.99 Roberts and Speight) from the south of the island, made from a blend of Nero d'Avola and Frappato grapes. It is full of cherry fruit, with a soft, rounded, juicy style. As the spring weather begins to warm up, serve this slightly chilled. Also good is La Segreta Rosso 2016 (£10.70 Field and Fawcett) which has the depth and bramble flavours of Nero d'Avola boosted by a splash of Merlot, Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon. Perfect with grilled lamb.

Planeta has also established vineyards and a winery among the lava flows at around 800 metres altitude on the slopes of Mount Etna. Despite the threat of eruption and the clouds of steam from the summit, this is a relatively cool area for viticulture and the wines develop lively aromas and precise acidity. Head to Etna Blanco (£15.50 at Hic! Wines, in Ledston) for its vibrant, yellow plums and peach notes with clean, palate-cleansing freshness.

Salvo's Restaurant in Headingley has a close relationship with Planeta and you are likely to find a full range of wines to enjoy with your dinner. Check out the estate-grown olive oil too.



Ancient Sicilian drinking cups

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Christine Austin

Christine is a wine writer, broadcaster and a wine judge for several international wine competitions. She has a technical background and spent five years as a buyer for a major supermarket before moving to wine writing. She writes for The Yorkshire Post Magazine and organises the York Festival of Food and Drink. She has won both the Lanson and the Roederer prizes for wine writing.