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## MENU

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# Wine column

## The joys of Sicily (7/28/2018)

**Summers with almost no rain and good terroir produce grapes in Sicily that have the potential to make great wines. For publication in the week starting 30 July 2018.**

Most of Sicily's wine production – four in five bottles – occurs in the provinces of Trapani, Agrigento and Palermo in the west of the island. Trapani produces about half of the total output there.

Palermo and Trapani make three DOC wines: Alcamo, Contessa Entellina and Marsala. DOC refers to a region of controlled origin, where strict rules apply to production methods, styles and yields. Marsala has traditionally been Sicily's most famous wine and was Italy's first DOC.

Like port and sherry, marsala is a fortified wine. It has an alcohol content of about 20 per cent and is usually made from Grillo, Catarratto and Inzolia grapes. Marsala had the same reputation as sherry and madeira for more than a century. But by the 1950s it had been relegated to the kitchen as a cooking wine. Recent years have seen a renaissance. Modern Marsala is usually divided into three different styles: oro (golden), ambra (amber), and rubino (ruby).

The Greeks are usually credited with the introduction of viticulture in Sicily from about 600 BC. But the Phoenicians, traders from nations we now call Syria and Lebanon, grew grapes in coastal areas of the island before the Greeks, from about 900 BC. A major Greek wine region developed around Mount Etna in eastern Sicily, extending southwards to Catania and Siracusa.

Sicily's only DOCG (highest status) wine is Cerasuolo di Vittoria from around Ragusa in the southeast corner of the island. This DOCG was established in 2005. Ragusa is the most prosperous city of Sicily. Wines are made from Nero d'Avola and Frappato. Nero d'Avola originated between Ragusa and Siracusa but has spread everywhere, often with fluctuating results.

This hearty grape is Sicily's most popular non-fortified varietal. Similar to Syrah in terms of profile, adaptability and flavours, it is often blended with other reds. But when allowed to stand on its own it can produce elegant wines.

One of the best wines tried this week in Ragusa was a 2016 Floramundi Cerasuolo di Vittoria DOCG by Donnafugata. It consists of the classic Frappato (60 per cent) and Nero d'Avola blend, and was harvested in the middle of September.

Grapes were grown in the Acate region. Soils are sandy interspersed with a substratum of calcareous tuff and clay, which give the wine structure. But it is the intense aromas and flavours of cherries that make this wine so memorable.

The name of the region appears to come from “cerasa,” the word for cherry in the Sicilian dialect. The wine offers intense aromas of raspberries, strawberries and red currants plus a touch of black pepper. Tannins are soft. It’s a marvellous partner for local salamis, cheese and grilled vegetables. Given it is summer in Sicily, and day temperatures reach 35C, this wine needs to be kept in the fridge and served chilled.



The Floramundi label shown left deserves mention. The intertwining of flowers and fruit evokes the dialogue between Nero d’Avola and Frappato – and also the art of Carla Fracci, the great ballet dancer. Fracci is the patroness of Donnafugata Floramundi and was the special guest when the 2016 vintage premiered last year. Labels on Donnafugata wines are the work of the artist Stefano Vitale.

Wines produced from the Etna region north of Ragusa are very attractive. The region’s volcanic soils and winds from the Ionian Sea give the wines unique character and vitality. Locals make red and rosé from Nerello Cappuccio and Nerello Mascalese, and whites from Carricante, Catarratto, Inzolia and Grecanico.

The area of Messina in the north-east tip of Sicily has three DOC wines: Mamertino, Faro and the famous Malvasia delle Lipari. Lipari is the largest of eight islands in the Aeolian archipelago off Sicily’s north tip and gives its name to a golden-yellow wine known as Malvasia delle Lipari.

Italy’s once-glorious group of sweet Malvasia wines have faded in popularity because of changes in consumer tastes. People now seem to desire dry and serious red and whites. Malvasia delle Lipari wines vary in the amount of residual sugar (sweetness). The lighter and drier wines are intended to be drunk with main courses, or perhaps as an aperitif.

Those marked “dolce natural” – similar to *vin doux naturel* – are sweeter and best paired with desserts. Even sweeter than these, and fortified with grape spirit, is Malvasia delle Lipari Liquoroso. It can contain 20 per cent alcohol and is aged for six months or more in barrel. Pair it with the local dessert, cannoli – deep-fried pastry tubes with a creamy filling, typically sweetened ricotta cheese and pistachio nuts.

Zibibbo is said to be Sicily’s oldest grape, imported by the Phoenicians on the island of Pantelleria, south of Sicily’s mainland. It is a variety of Muscat of Alexandria and makes pure sweet wines. These were popular years ago compared with the trend for dry crispness now. Other historians say the Saracen Arabs introduced Zibibbo to Sicily during the ninth century, though this is disputed because Muslim laws reject alcohol.

Grape growing on Pantelleria became a World Heritage site in November 2014, the first time an agricultural technique has been included in UNESCO's heritage list. It is one of the most beautiful islands in the region.

Zibibbo can make anything from table wine to grappa. But Zibibbo made in a style similar to Marsala is different. It is produced from grapes partially fermented in the sun and then distilled naturally, without the addition of spirits.

It is typically slightly lower in alcohol than Marsala (at about 15 per cent compared with Marsala's 20 per cent). The Zibibbo grape is similar to Moscato, and the wine known as Moscato di Pantelleria Naturale is made mostly from Zibibbo grapes.

Other notable Sicilian grapes including Carricante, Catarratto, Grillo, Perricone and Inzolia will be discussed in future columns.

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