

Drink the Islands: These Mediterranean Wines Are Ideal for Summer

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Watching *A Bigger Splash*, the recent film set on the volcanic island of Pantelleria off the coast of Sicily, set off my recurring summer fantasy: sailing to a remote, sunbaked spot surrounded by a glittering turquoise sea, where I sip chilled local wines overlooking a harbor of gently rocking white yachts.

If, like me, you didn't make that dream happen this summer, you can let the taste of the best island wines take you to a selection of glam places such as Sardinia, Corsica, Pantelleria, and other fashionable Mediterranean playgrounds.

Many of the native grapes are unfamiliar, with hard to pronounce names (try niellucciu), but don't worry. The wines, born from grapes grown in volcanic soil and ripened by luminous sun, salt air, and the mistral wind, are really, really good.

Here's my summer tour.

Corsica



Workers harvesting grapes by hand at the Pieretti vineyard on Corsica.

Photographer: Pascal Pochard Casabianca/AFP/Getty Images

On this rugged island where Napoleon was born, 100 miles off France's south coast, the rhythm of beach life is appropriately languid. Right now, New York somms are touting its reds, whites, and rosés—Cedric Nicaise, wine director of Eleven Madison Park, has nearly 100 Corsican wines on his list.

The hottest grape is vermentinu (vermentino), which a British wine writer once dubbed “the yachtsman's white.” Its bright flavors seem made for drinking on the deck of a sailboat after a swim, and the island's rosés and reds are equally compelling. All seem to share the fragrant scent of maquis (macchia in Italian), the tangled wild scrub of lavender, rosemary, and aromatic shrubs that cover just about every Mediterranean island.

The wines:



2013 Domaine Comte Abbattu Cuvée Faustine Ajaccio Blanc; 2015 Domaine Comte Abbattu Rouge Frais Imperial.

Source: Domaine Comte Abbattu

2013 Domaine Comte Abbattu Cuvée Faustine Ajaccio Blanc (\$40)

This high-acid 100 percent vermentino has a refreshing, lime-inflected, salty taste that echoes the sea. The owner of this historic estate south of the Corsican capital, Ajaccio, is known to play Corsican songs to his vines to “keep them happy.”

2015 Domaine Comte Abbattu Rouge Frais Imperial (\$30)

A fragrant, light red based on sciaccarellu grapes (known as Corsica's pinot noir), it's spicy, delicious, and only 11.5 percent alcohol.

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2015 Yves Leccia Domaine d'E Croce Patrimonio Rosé (\$25)

Pale orange-y pink in color, with enticing spice and mineral aromas, this mouth-watering blend of sciaccarellu, niellucciu, and grenache has a taste of strawberries and the bite of salted lemons.

Sardinia



A vineyard in the rolling hills of Sardinia

Photographer: Thomas Stankiewicz /LOOK-foto/Getty Images/LOOK

The Mediterranean's second biggest island lies far enough off Italy's coast (200 miles) to have an exotic, otherworldly feel. Its striking, boulder-strewn hills are home to 4 million sheep, in addition to vineyards with gorgeous sea views.

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In recent years, the wines have progressed from rustic to refined, but they still capture Sardinia's wild, untamed character. As in Corsica, the star white is tangy vermentino, with the best bottles coming from the windswept northeastern region of Gallura. There the grape is planted on granite cliffs that fall dramatically away to the idyllic Costa Smeralda, famed for its sandy beaches and secluded yacht-filled marinas.

The wines:



2013 Argiolas Costamolino Vermentino di Sardegna; 2014 Vigne Sarrau Vermentino di Gallura Superiore Sciala.

Source: Vendors

2014 Vigne Sarrau Vermentino di Gallura Superiore Sciala (\$25)

With spicy aromas of wild sage, this fresh, crisp white features savory pear and almond flavors. Perfect with calamari salad or oily sardines.

2013 Argiolas Costamolino Vermentino di Sardegna (\$17)

Fresh and crisp, this delicious value buy from one of the island's leading estates is notably refreshing, an ideal beach party white.

Ischia



Grape vines on Ischia.

Photographer: Maremagnum/Getty Images

A tiny mountainous island in the Bay of Naples, about 19 miles from the city, Ischia features beach resorts and therapeutic mud baths and is nearly as popular a destination as Capri. Vines grow on steep, terraced slopes overlooking the sea; the most renowned grape is a white native to Ischia, biancolella.

The wine:

2013 Casa d'Ambra Frassitelli Ischia Biancolella (\$20)

The d'Ambra family specializes in wines from native grapes. This white comes from the stunning Frassitelli vineyard, 2,000 feet above sea level. One part of it is so steep that a monorail trolley brings the grapes down the slope. Bright and golden-colored, it's savory and juicy, with aromas of fennel and spicy, lemony flavors.

Greek Islands



A grape vine struggles through the rocky soil on Santorini.

Photographer: PANAGIOTIS KARAPANAGIOTIS/Getty Images/iStockphoto

Only a handful of Greek islands make exceptional wines that are widely exported. Best known is **Santorini**, whose striking landscape of black sand beaches and whitewashed cliff houses becomes a crowded tourist scene in summer. Drinking its edgy, earthy assyrtikos on your home deck almost takes you there. Green, mountainous **Cephalonia**, whose fine, golden-sand beaches invite barefoot walking, is the most important wine spot among the Ionian islands off the west coast of Greece. And **Crete**, known to archeology buffs for the famous site of Knossos, sports ultra-luxurious yacht club villas as well as a winemaking tradition that goes back 4,000 years.

The wines:



2014 Hatzidakis Assyrtiko Santorini; 2014 Donnafugata Ben Ryé Passito di Pantelleria (see below).

Source: Vendors

2014 Hatzidakis Assyrtiko Santorini (\$20)

A standout white made from organically grown grapes, it's intensely salty, lemony, and earthy, with a rich, polished texture.

2014 Gentilini Robola Cephalonia (\$20)

This fresh, light, white Robola, laced with mineral and citrus hints will make you think of grilled fish.

2013 Douloufakis Dafnios Liatiko Crete (\$15)

The red liatiko grape is indigenous to Crete. The pure, vibrant, spicy red fruit flavors of this wine recall an easy-sipping Beaujolais. It's best slightly chilled.

But let's return to Pantelleria. In *A Bigger Splash*, there's plenty of nude sunbathing by the pool as well as lazy drinking of chilled wine. The largest of Sicily's islands, with wild scrub hugging the rugged rocks, it draws fashionable wealthy Italians such as Giorgio Armani to its dammusi, or local stone cottages.

Its wines, made from dried zibibbo grapes, are luscious sweet dessert wines, powerfully fruity (think apricots and orange peel), with a sultry, seductive texture that sure matches the steamy atmosphere of the film—before it turns into a thriller.

My pick? 2014 **Donnafugata Ben Ryé Passito di Pantelleria** (\$43 a half bottle).

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