



# SICILY'S WINE WORLD

Thanks to an array of climates, soils and elevations, Sicily offers great quality and a wonderful range of styles, particularly from its distinctive indigenous varieties, says Stephen Brook





**Above: the volcanic soils around Mount Etna create a unique terroir that has contributed to the growing reputation of this region's wine**

Sicily, once barely worth a mention during discussions about wine, is enjoying a resurgence of popularity and, indeed, in quality. There has been a huge proliferation in estates and producers, each with their own personality and often with a typically Italian flair for packaging as well. It's far from uniform, of course. With its proximity to north Africa, Sicily can be blisteringly hot in summer, but a maritime influence, in some areas, has a moderating effect. Differences in location and elevation explain the immense diversity of styles – from zesty and mineral unoaked white wines, to powerful reds from Nero d'Avola, to more ethereal perfumed reds from the Nerello varieties around Catania in the east.

### Viticultural heritage

Vines grow close to the magnificent Greek temples at Agrigento in the south, and it is likely that the ancient Greeks brought Greco and Muscat to Sicily. Muscat of Alexandria, an important variety here, is known locally as Zibibbo, an Arabic name. Some varieties such as

Catarratto are grown all over the island; others, such as Nocera, maintain lonely vigils in tiny, isolated pockets. Although varieties such as Chardonnay, Merlot and Syrah have aided the international marketing of Sicilian wines, these remain minor players, with most attention now focused on the many indigenous varieties.

Despite Sicily's growing reputation for fine wine, its industry has been shrinking. Since 1890, the area under vine has shrunk by two-thirds to around 112,000 hectares – slightly greater than the whole of Bordeaux. Less than half of those vineyards lie in the western province of Trapani, while the more chic zones such as Etna and southeastern Sicily have just a few thousand hectares of vines. The number of producers is soaring, as growers that used to supply cooperatives and large companies such as Corvo set up their own wineries. Although some co-ops seem mired in mediocrity, others are more dynamic. The Viticoltori Associati di Canicatti, north of Agrigento, controls about ➤





**Above:** like much of Sicily, Catania has a rich history, with Greek origins.  
**Right:** Regaleali, one of five estates run by the Tasca d'Almerita family

1,000 hectares but only bottles 20% of its production. At the top level its wines, especially the Nero d'Avola, are first-rate.

Although traditional styles of Sicilian wines – such as Marsala and the various Muscats – are probably centuries old, quality table wine arrived relatively recently. Only the nobility and a handful of large companies had the means to vinify, bottle and commercialise wines in large quantities, so although vineyards were widely cultivated in various parts of the island, most of the fruit was delivered either to those larger producers or to numerous cooperatives. Yields were high and quality, with few exceptions, was low. But by the 1980s quality was improving, with Tasca d'Almerita and Planeta among others, producing sophisticated wines, albeit from international varieties.

There was good wine being made from native varieties, including Tasca's Rosso del Conte from Nero d'Avola and Perricone. But these were in the minority. Sicily's vineyards were dominated by white grapes, which seems hard to understand. Even today, 64% of vines are white. Alessio Planeta, winemaker at the eponymous company, says that farmers were growing grapes for cooperatives and rewarded for quantity rather than quality. 'Remember, too, that we have a hot climate, which induces a greater demand for white than red wines.'

Marilena Barbera takes a different view: 'Red grapes often ripen fast and early in our hot summers. The result is wines with high alcohol. With white grapes this problem does not arise, so you can argue that whites are better suited to Sicily than reds. Whites from Menfi and other regions near the southern coast can have remarkable freshness.'

## Varietal diversity

Sicily's best indigenous white varieties – Grillo, Catarratto and Grecanico – can produce excellent wines when yields are kept low. Catarratto is the most widely planted grape, with almost a third of the surface. Although it is regarded as a workhorse, it is capable of



producing a refreshing wine for early consumption. Inzolia (also known as Ansonica) is less interesting, although with modern fermentation techniques, it can have freshness and vigour.

If there is a star performer, it is Grillo. Its ability to reach high ripeness levels makes it the obvious choice for dry Marsala (see p72). When used for a dry table wine it offers citric freshness with weight, power, and structure. Although usually unoaked, in the right hands Grillo can be used to produce oaked wines of character. Carricante from eastern Sicily is another strong contender: with high acidity, it delivers a racy minerality when grown on the volcanic soils around Etna. Catarratto, Grecanico and Carricante all tend to be unoaked in order to preserve some racy freshness, but there are exceptions.

It's the reds, though, that have captured the interest of an international market. Nero d'Avola became fashionable in the 1990s, and for good reason. Its bright cherry and plum fruit can be delightful, and more serious, oak-aged versions can have an appealing savoury



## Sicily at a glance

### Vineyard area

112,725ha: 64% white vines; 36% red vines

### The main provinces (share of vineyards)

Trapani 58%, Agrigento 17%, Palermo 14%, Caltanissetta 5%, Catania 3%, Syracuse 1.5%, Ragusa 1.3%

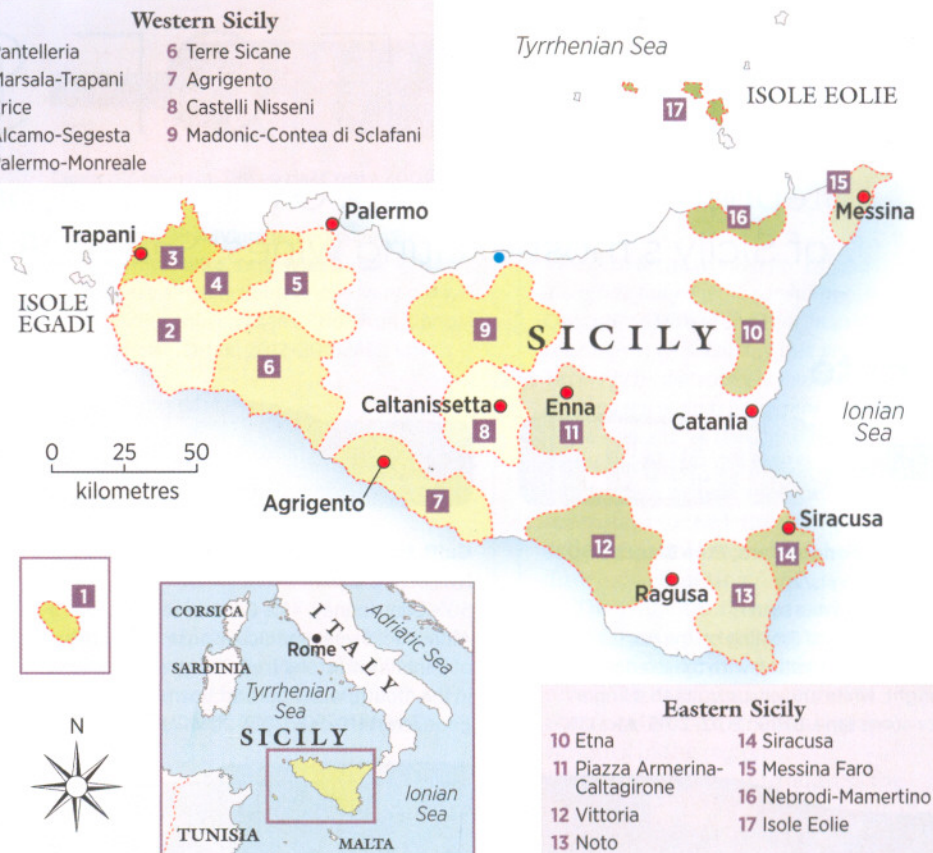
### Principal white varieties (proportion of plantings)

Catarratto 29%, Inzolia 6%, Trebbiano Toscano 5.5%, Grillo 5%, Chardonnay 4%

### Principal red varieties

Nero d'Avola 16%, Syrah 5%, Merlot 4%, Nerello Mascalese 3.5%, Cabernet Sauvignon 3%

Western Sicily	
1 Pantelleria	6 Terre Sicane
2 Marsala-Trapani	7 Agrigento
3 Erice	8 Castelli Nisseni
4 Alcamo-Segesta	9 Madonic-Contea di Sclafani
5 Palermo-Monreale	



**Left: Alessio Planeta of Planeta is among those transforming the reputation of Sicily's wines**



*'Sicily has true regionality: the differences between Trapani in the west and Etna in the east could scarcely be greater'*

intensity and lush texture. Quality-oriented producers such as Firriato and Donnafugata produce Nero d'Avola in various styles: light and fresh with an immediate fruity appeal; and more concentrated and powerful with structure and staying power. The heartland of Nero d'Avola is the region north of the coastal town of Agrigento, although Noto in the southeast is often thought to produce the finest and best quality. Those from Feudo Montoni and Donnafugata show just how good this wine can be.

Nerello Mascalese is capable of producing wines with a beguiling perfume, texture and finesse. Other wines from eastern Sicily, such as Palari's often sublime Faro (also dominated by Nerello Mascalese), can also rise to great heights. Frappato can have surprising delicacy and is best known when blended with Nero d'Avola to produce the luminous Cerasuolo di Vittoria from southeast Sicily; this wine, says Alessio Planeta, was intended as a red to accompany fish.

Once immensely popular, Perricone has almost vanished from Sicily's vineyards. It is tannic and full bodied and needs to be vinified with care. In coastal regions it was often planted with white grapes to moderate its chewiness. Although only around 200 hectares of Perricone remain, excellent examples are made by Firriato and Barbera. Meanwhile, Planeta is experimenting with the even more obscure Nocera on the northeastern coast of the island, convinced that it will deliver excellent results.

### Work in progress

If Sicily's diversity is a positive feature of its wine industry, its lack of transparency can work against it. The majority of its wines are marketed as IGTs (now IGP). But this signifies nothing: such a wine can come from anywhere on the island and can range in quality from the superlative to the wretched. Although DOCs such as Etna, Cerasuolo di Vittoria or Noto may be recognisable to some consumers, others mean little. And many, including Contessa Entellina, Contea di Sclafani and Menfi, are used by only a few producers. There are complex regulations to enforce the typicity of DOCs. But as they are now almost defunct, it is not surprising that most wineries decline to use them.

Sicily has true regionality – the differences between Trapani in the west and Etna in the east could scarcely be greater – but to date it has struggled to communicate this fact to the consumer. Nonetheless, it seems certain that the years ahead will bring not just a profusion of good-value brands but a growing band of wines with real personality and typicity that will confirm Sicily's growing reputation as one of Italy's most dynamic wine regions. **D**



# A TASTE OF SICILY

Stephen Brook and Mark O'Halleron recommend a selection of Sicily's most exciting wines. See p108 for stockist details

## White



**Nicosia, Fondo Filara, Etna Bianco 2009**

★★★★ 17.5 pts/20

£10.95 **The Wine Society**

Reminiscent of Riesling on the nose, this is a ripe wine, bursting with toast-edged, sweet, bright, white and citrus fruits that linger for some time. **Drink:** 2012–2015. **Alc:** 13%



**Tenuta di Fessina, A' Puddara, Etna Bianco 2009** ★★★★★ 17.5

£25.70 **Outis**

100% Carricante, fermented in cask and aged for five to six months in oak. Mineral, precise and powerful, with delicious, candied edging to the abundant citrus fruit. Still young, with fine potential. **Drink:** 2012–2017. **Alc:** 13%



**De Bartoli, Grappoli 2009** ★★★★★ 17

N/A UK [www.marcodebartoli.com](http://www.marcodebartoli.com)

Light nutty nose, with integrated oak. Rich, creamy and full bodied, this has far more concentration and character than most Grillos, and a wonderfully long, nutty finish. **Drink:** 2012–2014. **Alc:** 13%



**Gorghi Tondi, Kheire Grillo 2010** ★★★★★ 17

N/A UK [www.gorghitondi.com](http://www.gorghitondi.com)

Bright, lifted pear fruit nose. Fresh, creamy and concentrated palate, with taut acidity to balance and a long, salty finish. **Drink:** 2012. **Alc:** 13%



**Gulfi, Valcanzjria 2010** ★★★★★ 17

N/A UK [www.gulfi.it](http://www.gulfi.it)

50% Chardonnay, 45% Carricante and 5% Albanello. Sweet, medicinal nose with touches of banana and stone fruit. Tangy and crunchy in the mouth, with apple and citrus fruit and good length. **Drink:** 2012–2014. **Alc:** 13.5%



**Viticoltori Associati Canicatti, Aquilae Grillo 2010** ★★★★★ 17

£9 **Vinum**

Rich apple compote and marzipan nose. Juicy, rounded and full bodied, with plenty of weight and moderate acidity but a long, tangy finish. **Drink:** 2012. **Alc:** 13%



**Fazio, Aegades Grillo 2010** ★★★ 16

£11.60–£12.99 **Caves de Pyrène, Slurp, Swig**

Mild apricot, apple and lanolin nose. Juicy, concentrated and full bodied, this has spice, acidity and persistence on the palate. **Drink:** 2012. **Alc:** 13%

## Sweet white



**Pupillo, Solacium, Moscato di Siracusa 2009**

★★★★ 16

N/A UK [www.solacium.it](http://www.solacium.it)

Honey, pine, grape and lemon fruit with an appealing, bitter twist. **Drink:** 2012. **Alc:** 14%

## Red



**Feudo Montoni, Vrucara Nero d'Avola 2006**

★★★★ 18

N/A UK [www.feudomontoni.it](http://www.feudomontoni.it)

Aromas of plums, eucalyptus and mocha. Rich, textured and spicy, with acidity to give finesse, and great concentration and depth. Refined and long. **Drink:** 2012–2015. **Alc:** 13.5%



**Firriato, Ribeca 2008** ★★★★★ 18

£19.99 **Continental Wine & Food**

Sweet, juicy black cherry nose with some oak. Concentrated and structured but elegant, with fine-grained tannins. Lifted, refined and long. **Drink:** 2012–2015. **Alcohol:** 14.5%



**Gulfi, Neromaccarj 2007** ★★★★★ 18

£31.99 (2005) **Hanford, Planet of the Grapes, Vineking**

Concentrated and rich with a ripe strawberry fruit and spice nose. Sweet and spicy palate of brambly fruit and good acidity to balance. **Drink:** 2012–2014. **Alc:** 14.5%



**Morgante, Don Antonio Nero d'Avola 2006**

★★★★ 18

£19.80 (2005) **Nicholls & Perks, The Wine Treasury**

Vibrant oaky nose, with cherry and plum fruit. Tight, concentrated and forceful, with fine acidity and length. **Drink:** 2012–2015. **Alc:** 14%





**Planeta, Santa Cecilia Nero d'Avola 2007**

★★★★ 18

£19.28–£21.75 **Carluccio, Exel, Hailsham Cellars, Secret Cellar, Slurp, Swig**

Lush cherry nose, chocolatey yet elegant. Suave and spicy with complexity and grip from the ripe tannins. **Drink:** 2012–2016. **Alc:** 14%



**Tenuta di Fessina, Il Musmeci, Etna Rosso 2008** ★★★★★ 18

£31.90 **Outis**

100-year-old Mascalese and Cappuccio vines produce fantastic concentration and notes of sweet red cherry, cranberry, freshly turned earth and aniseed. **Drink:** 2012–2016. **Alc:** 14%



**Cusumano, Noa Nero d'Avola-Cabernet Sauvignon-Merlot 2006** ★★★★★ 17.5

£33 **Harrods**

Rich, plummy, oaky nose. Plump, concentrated and quite powerful, almost jammy but with ample acidity and spice. Good length. **Drink:** 2012–2015. **Alc:** 14%



**Donnafugata, Tancredi Nero d'Avola-Cabernet Sauvignon 2007** ★★★★★ 17.5

£25.45–£30 **widely available via Liberty Wines**

Very ripe black fruits nose with ample sweet oak. Rich, supple and concentrated, with firm tannins, solid and structured. Good length. **Drink:** 2012–2017. **Alc:** 13.4%



**Gulfi, Nerojbleo 2008** ★★★★★ 17.5

£16.99–£17.75 **Hangingditch, Old Forge Cellar**  
100% Nero d'Avola. Candied, nutty tones on a concentrated nose of forest fruits and dried flowers. Strong and structured with plenty of drive. **Drink:** 2012–2017. **Alc:** 14%



**Tasca d'Almerita, Rosso del Conte 2006**

★★★★ 17.5

£39.95–£45.99 **AdVintage, Berkmann, Elite Wine, Harrods, Slurp, Swig, Wine Direct**

Lush cherry and blackberry nose, very oaky. Fresh acidity enlivens dense, ripe fruit. Long, elegant finish. **Drink:** 2012–2016. **Alc:** 14%



**Viticoltori Associati Canicatti, Aynat Nero d'Avola 2008** ★★★★★ 17.5

£14.84 **Vinum**

Lush, savoury black cherry nose. Full bodied, chocolate and velvety, forceful but has ample acidity and freshness. Long, with a mocha finish. **Drink:** 2012–2015. **Alc:** 14.5%



**COS, Frappato 2010** ★★★★★ 17

£14.95–£18.69 **AG Wines, Bat & Bottle, Bottle Apostle, Caves de Pyrène, Joseph Barnes, Swig,**

**Ultimate Wine Co, Vagabond, Zelas**  
Fantastic perfume with flowers and wild strawberry and amazing vitality. Fluid, smooth and charming. **Drink:** 2012–2016. **Alc:** 12.5%



**Nicosia, Fondo Filara, Nerello Mascalese 2009** ★★★★★ 17

£10.95 **Jeroboams, Laytons**

Aged in steel, concrete, barriques and large casks, this wine has a balsamic nose and a breezy acidity with layers of red fruits packing a velvety punch. **Drink:** 2012–2015. **Alc:** 13%



**Cottanera, Etna Rosso 2008** ★★★★★ 16.5

£27 **Astrum**

Poised and pure, with clean wild strawberry and red cherry aromas. Silky in the mouth, with precise red fruits complemented by a gamey edge. **Drink:** 2012–2014. **Alc:** 13.5%

## Decanter's Man of the Year in Sicily

*Vincenzo Melia worked for 10 years alongside famed wine consultant and Decanter's Man of the Year in 2011, Giacomo Tachis. During this period, Tachis helped create the foundations of the modern wine renaissance in Sicily. Melia remembers those days: 'I met Tachis for the first time in 1992, when he was appointed consultant to the Istituto Regionale della Vite e del Vino, which I directed at that time.'*

The viticultural research Melia and his team of young agronomists had been doing was starting to reveal the enormous potential of both local and international grape varieties in the region.

The next step was to address the issue of vinification. The president of the Institute, Diego Planeta, enlisted Tachis to support the development of new approaches to red wine production, in ways specific to Sicily.

On the technical side – the understanding of phenolics and malolactic fermentation in particular – Tachis' impact was enormous; however, Melia emphasises that his influence went far beyond chemical science. 'Tachis is a person of great sensibility... and he has an extraordinary relationship with nature. He searches for those elements in a wine that reveal the secrets of its terroir. Unlike many other great winemakers, he does not put his own signature on a wine but that of its place of origin, be it Etna, Alcamo or Pantelleria.'

Melia recalls that Tachis believed totally in the cause and the potential of Sicilian wine. 'Tachis is a great oenologist, but first and foremost he is a passionate humanist. The history of wine in Sicily is indissolubly linked to that of its peoples. Tachis was fascinated by the origins of Sicilian wine in the ancient world, but also in the history of the last 50 years. He believed in the Sicilians. One of his favourite sayings was "great wines and great people are two manifestations of the same civilisation".'

– *By Richard Baudains*