

An ancient grape for a modern era

Jo Gilbert travels to the home of Nero d'Avola in south eastern Sicily to chart the course of a success story

The history of the vine on the island is lost in the mists of time," reads the communication from members organisation Assovini Sicilia and the Consortium DOC Sicilia, on the topic of Nero d'Avola, proclaimed 'king' of Sicily's red grapes. First cultivated – probably – by the Phoenicians, between the eighth and seventh centuries BC, it's safe to say that Nero d'Avola somehow made its way from Asia Minor to the province of Syracuse on Sicily's south eastern coast. There, it became better known for its proximity to the town of Avola rather than by its Italian name Calabrese (aka "Calabrian").

Since then, Nero has become the island's flagship variety. Now widely present in all Sicilian provinces, it has become a flag bearer for Sicilian wine around the world. Just under 50 million bottles were produced from 14,749ha across Sicily in 2020 – approximately 10 million more than in 2018 (Consortium DOC Sicilia figures).

Despite its success, however, in some corners the grape is still fighting to be taken seriously on its own terms as a single varietal wine, distinct from a blend. In some senses, it lies largely in the shadow of Etna

↑ **PLANETA'S
BUONIVINI ESTATE
IN NOTO**

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Valle dell'Acate**

wines too, with the latter's unique sense of place and romantic story of volcanic slopes dominated by Nerellos Mascalese and Cappuccio. Indeed, Etna DOC is one of the few areas that is not known for Nero d'Avola production.

However, Nero has made major strides on its 'noble' journey in recent years, with more recent winemaking generations able to transform the grape's high adaptability and interaction with the environment into distinctive, terroir-expressive wines. Now grown in the central south, western and south eastern parts of the island, Nero d'Avola is also increasingly reinventing itself as a gastronomic wine, versatile for all types of cuisine, and capable of particular intensity and complexity. Stylistically, it can range from aged styles which display more layered complexity and oak influence, to young, juicy, (red) fruit-forward styles, which go great guns with spicy foods.

A snapshot of its versatility can be found via Planeta. Planted in four of the winery's five sites across Sicily, in Menfi the clay/calcareous soils produce a lively plum and chocolate-driven wine with menthol components. Whereas Noto's calcareous soils give way to a more fragrant, balsamic-driven profile.

As the birthplace of Nero d'Avola, the south east deserves re-exploring. "A spiritual spot for us in the heart of the birthplace of the variety," Calogero Riportella, agronomist at Planeta, says the producer decided to establish the Buonivini estate in Noto in 1998, as a way to explore the 'cradle' of Nero d'Avola and the area's white limestone soils. At Donnafugata too,

the variety can vary from rich in character, with a deep ruby colour and strong aromatic intensity, at its main Contessa Entellina in the south west; to lighter and softer in style with medium structure, in the south east.

In Vittoria in particular, Nero d'Avola produces wines which present a particularly flowery and fruit-driven character, where the colour is light ruby red.

Donnafugata's Contessa dei Venti wine, for example, "is a style of Nero d'Avola that most consumers do not expect as they are still used to richer and more structured expressions from other areas", says tourism manager and former sommelier Tommaso Bellisola. "In Vittoria, the soils tend to be sandy, interspersed with limestone tuffs, and the Mediterranean climate is mitigated by the breezes that blow in off the sea – a terroir that allows Nero d'Avola to express itself with particular finesse and a fruity fragrance."



DEFINED BLEND

In Cerasuolo di Vittoria DOCG, the soft red wines produced with a flowery character really come into their own. Currently Sicily's only DOCG, the area was elevated to its current status in 2005, when the blend parameters were pinned down to 50-70% Nero d'Avola and 30-50% Frappato. Roughly translated as 'cherry', Cerasuolo denotes a light red tone that often characterises this wine.

Fresh and fragrant, with hints of raspberries and violet flowers, the lighter style of Cerasuolo came from a history of exporting to France during the 1800s. Around that time, there was an "extreme decrease of wine production with high alcohol and intense colour", says Gaetana Jacono, owner and sixth generation winemaker at Valle dell'Acate, based in the DOCG classico area of Ragusa. "Instead, there

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Tommaso Bellisola, Donnafugata



was an increase of fine wines, with lower alcohol, fresher and more aromatic."

In 2021, modern winemaking is encapsulated by the likes of Valle dell'Acate. Founded also in the 1800s, for Jacono, modern Cerasuolo is the marriage of "elegant Nero d'Avola and the fragrant Frappato grapes" made from 100% biodynamic soils, which encompasses all 70ha of the estate.

"We embody a modern way of drinking fresher, less concentrated wine, in which a wine should go hand in hand with the food without ever dominating it," says Jacono. "You can drink Cerasuolo as a classical red, with lamb or chicken. But served slightly chilled, it can be combined with tuna fish prepared in a more complex way, in a sweet/sour style with caramelised onions, for example."



INTERNATIONAL MARKETS

As time goes by, Nero d'Avola is reaching further outwards to international markets by reimaging and repackaging ancient wisdom. Donnafugata's recent collaboration with Dolce & Gabbana, for example, is a reinterpretation of Tancredi, the winery's historic red, which is today made with Cabernet Sauvignon, Nero d'Avola and Tannat.

"The original Tancredi wine was born in 1990, from the – then innovative – union between an international grape variety and a native one," says Bellisola. Once again, he hopes "the blend will lead to the discovery of Sicilian enological excellence at an international level".

As a varietal wine, Nero d'Avola has its critics, even within Sicily itself. However, the traditional use of the variety as a blending grape is increasingly sitting alongside standalone styles, which would please lovers of other full-bodied reds like Cabernet Sauvignon or Syrah.

According to Antonio Rallo, president of the Consortium for the Protection of Vini Doc Sicilia, Nero d'Avola "is prone to aging, but virtuous and valuable already in its youth". It is exemplary in its ability to adapt to Sicily's "extraordinary mosaic of terroir", adds Laurent Bernard de la Gatinais, president of Assovini Sicili.

Nero d'Avola is marking this route out one wine at a time. Modern bottlings showcase Nero d'Avola as a Mediterranean red that can balance freshness with the capacity to evolve over time, straddling pleasant early-drinking wines and more elegant, mature styles. ■

Donnafugata's vineyard and winery in Vittoria

