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Feature

Into the Vines: The Wines and Winemakers of Sicily

Gabrielle Hamilton
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Chef Gabrielle Hamilton meets the independent winemakers who bottle the flavor of Sicily.

Photos by Francesco Lastrucci.

I WAS MARRIED for more than 10 years to an Italian. An Italian Italian, from Rome, and we traveled to Italy frequently. But somehow, we never went to Sicily. More confounding, for the 14 years I've had my Manhattan restaurant, Prune, I've been selling, drinking, and championing certain Sicilian wines, never having met the people who make them. These excellent bottles from distant, faceless winemakers have arrived at my restaurant door stacked up on a hand truck and been lunked down the stairs to the basement by some indifferent, burly Brooklyn truck driver wearing a weight lifter's belt, while I've signed the shipping receipt.

But I've always felt connected to these wines. When Prune opened in 1999, if you were eating in serious dining rooms throughout the United States, you found the same tuna tartare and goat cheese and beet salad being served by Nehru-jacketed waiters to a Gypsy Kings sound track. At that time, Sicilian wines were still generally thought of as cheap, mass-produced wines. Prune's quirky dishes, such as monkfish liver on toast and roasted marrow bones, and the restaurant's unapologetic East Village demeanor (graffitied-over front gate, tattooed

waitresses) were as unfamiliar in the dining scene as Sicily's peppery nero d'Avola, curiously chilled frappato, and nearly mentholated nerello mascalese were in the wine world.



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Set 2,952 feet above sea level, Regaleali, shown here and at top, is one of five wine estates run by the Tasca d'Almerita family. The estate's high altitude causes grapes to mature more slowly, which means harvest can last from September through November.

In the 15 years since, we underdogs have supported each other. The experimental and defiant wines, made from indigenous grapes, found a clientele only in small, unconventional restaurants, and reciprocally, these idiosyncratic restaurants became more exciting by introducing guests to something new. Perhaps that's why I have a particular allegiance to these wines. But early on, the attraction was simple: They were the delicious and opinionated wines I wanted to drink with the deeply personal food I wanted to cook.

When I step off the plane in Palermo and take a deep lungful of the hot, early September air, thick with the smell of day-old brushfire and manure, I am jolted. Those first highly aromatic inhales are a vivid, uncannily familiar introduction to a land I've only ever sipped from a bottle. Within minutes I understand something more about these wines I've known, with their sometimes challenging personalities.

Like everyone, I'm intimidated when talking about wine. I'm about to spend a week touring the countryside, meeting the winemakers whose wines I have been serving all these years, and I am braced for the trip to be one long successive put-down by those wine types we have all met, the ones with the silk ties and the pursed lips. But if this is how Sicily introduces itself—as a *terroir* of brushfire and cow shit—how high and uptight can it be?

The two jovial guys at the car rental place relax me further. After putting me in a stick-shift tin-can Fiat, they settle into the more nuanced matter of my GPS system. Do I prefer a male or a female voice? I laugh out loud and start to describe the girl I'd like—perhaps a dark, Sicilian beauty? Hardworking but with a sense of humor? They are chuckling, too. Do I prefer Chiara? Or maybe Jessica? They both laugh and nod in fraternal agreement on Jessica's merits. But would they be remiss not to highly recommend Benedetta?

Soon Chiara and I are on the highway. Along the coast at first, and then up into the mountains, off the main road, and then onto gravelly, cracked pavement. I come to giant windmills standing stark on the hilltop like colossal white-winged angels. I turn off the engine and listen to the profound, oxymoronic nothingness of wind, and the whispering rhythm of the spinning blades—a brief but singular moment in which I get hold of my insecurities before I meet the aristocratic Tasca family at their estate, Regaleali.



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Arianna Occhipinti is nicknamed the “natural woman” for her approach to making wines.

The property is regal. The vineyards march on in endless neat, harmonic rows. Workers eat their paper-wrapped homemade lunches under a tree. A bright Tunisian-blue bench, a few cats, and an intoxicating arc of blooming jasmine welcome you into the courtyard. And the count himself, Lucio Tasca, stands on the balcony looking out on it all.

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Alberto, Lucio's gentle son, greets me, accompanied by his own boisterous young children, elegant wife, and slightly muddy dog, and instantly I am at ease. The thing that has brought me to this vineyard, in a way, is my own youngest son. When Leone was born, we carried a Regaleali catarratto at Prune, also called Leone, referencing the lion in the Tasca family crest so, of course, I had to come here first.

Before dinner, I tour the fields. It's new to me, picking wine grapes straight from the vine and eating them. Somehow I had no idea the process was this straightforward. I had never apprehended the way that the vineyard and winemaking parallel the garden and cooking. The grapes: They're just fruit.

There has been rain, so the vines have been clipped of any leaves that might block the grapes from the scarce sun and the breeze that keeps them dry and healthy. I detest sex words in food writing, but these grapes are noticeably “lusty.” They are swollen, tumescent, buxom. I mean, it's thrilling and embarrassing. I actually giggle a little.



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Gabrielle's [guide to where to eat, taste, and stay](#) in Sicily.

At the harvest, which is happening when I arrive in Sicily, people work all day, and in some cases all night. They sleep little, eat even less. The fruit must be collected on time, and “on time” can be down to the hour. Too ripe and you lose the grapes. Too green and you lose the wine in a different way. The grapes have to be crushed and the juice collected, and everything needs to be cleaned—the tanks and the barrels and the conveyors and the floors and the bottles, of course, but even the fields and the vines themselves. All those clipped leaves aren’t just left to rot on the muddy ground where they fall. I deliberately chose this frenetic and exciting time to finally meet these winemakers, and I’ve come prepared to be either very small or very useful, whichever seems most appropriate.

At Regaleali, they’ve got the harvest so expertly in hand it appears effortless, as if by now, in the family’s second century of continuous winemaking, the wine just appears in the cellars while we discuss dinner plans in the salon. Alberto says drily, “To make a small fortune in wine, you have to invest a large fortune.” At the dinner table with the family and a few guests, conversation runs briskly from politics to wine to art to family to food. At 70-plus years old, the count remains undiminished in virility. He regards you with sharp—I’m not kidding—penetrating focus. He smiles devilishly when mentioning that while he is divorced, he still, of course, “has friends.” He describes a fishing excursion from which he just returned, during which he landed and released a 30-pound tuna. Power and restraint. The very characteristics of his celebrated wine Regaleali Rosso del Conte. There is intellectual wine, technical wine, and earnest wine. Then there is the wine of Lucio Tasca.

First thing in the morning, I am up, refueling the car, having a coffee, and mapping my route to the Occhipinti vineyard, started by Arianna Occhipinti when she was only 21 years old. I already think I adore her—if for no other reason than her wines are not always easy to like. Her blend of nero d’Avola and frappato is as honest an expression of the grapes as there can be, and I find that unapologetic willingness to be opinionated and difficult very soothing. Even in a glass of wine.



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Alberto Tasca, the son of Count Lucio Tasca, shares a bottle of Rosso di Conte with his cousin, Fabrizia Lanza, who runs a nearby cooking school.

I spend the whole afternoon eagerly driving around in the countryside of Vittoria—one of Sicily's most visited wine regions—excited to meet her. I comb the famous wine route SP68, surrounded by dirty, dusty, hardworking vines laden with grapes, and yet I don't find Occhipinti. Chiara accepted Occhipinti's satellite coordinates without complaint, but she still can't quite bring me to the vineyard.

With daylight fading, I finally retreat. I climb the zigzag road to the ancient city of Ragusa, about half an hour away. By the time I reach the top, the sun is gone. I'm defeated, disappointed. And hungry.

I find a large, beautiful piazza just below the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist and sit at a café sipping a negroni. The locals, with their extravagant indifference to such spaces, stroll home from work. A few children are learning to ride their bikes on the gleaming limestone tile. The church bells ring 8:30. The gas lamps bathe us in their yellow-green glow. For a full 30 minutes I sit transfixed, looking out over the square, and do nothing but sip my drink, wrestle with my Occhipinti disappointment, and think of every overworked woman I know, wishing each of them the chance to luxuriate in this brief, idle half hour of glorious repose.

Finally, I phone a restaurant that has been repeatedly recommended to me, and in my best charming, slightly perforated Italian, I befriend the maître d' and get myself a table. He suggests 9 p.m. "Don't rush me," I say. "I can't get there before 9:30. I need to hear one more round of the bells of the cathedral before dinner!" He smiles over the phone. "Don't worry, Signora—we are here for you."

The restaurant turns out to have "ambitions." It's one of those places that tells you how to eat. The guy stands over you, stiffly gesturing: "Chef invites you to start with the foie gras ice cream . . . and to use your fingers." I can never forgive this approach—as if the waiter were in charge.



The sommelier sets the wine list down on the table. It's the size of a child's coffin. I smile at the sommelier and say, "Un progetto"—a project for the diner to accomplish. It would take two days to look through it all. He nods, unsmiling.

I leaf through the pages of the Sicilian reds section and hoot out loud in the funereal dining room when I see it on the list: Arianna Occhipinti's SP68—her blend of nero d'Avola and frappato. There you are, lady! With every acidic, earthy sip, I chuckle at how I drove every inch of SP68 and yet never found the place. I can't wait to tell Chiara.

I resolve to not miss any of the other spots on my list. At each vineyard, the story repeats itself: soil, climate, fruit. But each voice brings it to life in a new way. At Di Giovanna, a little-known winery in the village of Sambuca di Sicilia, the Di Giovanna brothers are awash in juice when I arrive. I find them hand-raking the fruit out of the back gate of a truck, its hydraulic bed tilting back farther and farther as the guys hoe and rake the streaming, juicy grapes into steel receiving vats. This simple juice will eventually become cheerful, friendly nerello mascalese—a light red that I have enjoyed at Prune the past couple of summers. The juice gushes out of the truck like a spigot open wide enough for washing your face. Somehow, again, I never knew it was so literal. At this stage, it's actual grape juice.

At Planeta, just down the mountain and across the plain, the land is unruly, thick with wild bay leaves, asparagus, mint, fennel, blackberries, chamomile, and at its heart, a 200-year-old fig tree whose purple-black fruits have burst open, their crimson innards now ruptured pinwheels among the branches. I am thrilled but utterly baffled. The famous Cometa wine, a deep yellow fianno, is the definition of refinement. But with that first precise handshake with Chiara Planeta, who welcomes me to a tasting room set with glasses in descending size, a sharpened pencil at each seat, the source of the cool-as-glass character of the wine becomes clear. Come to think of it, there was not even one overlooked fig laying at the base of that magnificent tree.



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Arianna Occhipinti's young crew harvest frappato and nero d'Avola grapes from her vineyards in Vittoria. Occhipinti refuses to use chemicals in her vineyards or in the cellar, preferring to create all-natural wines that give a pure expression of their terroir.

My plan to circle the entire island and visit all the vineyards on my list in just a week caused some friends to gently chide me for "toeing the bases" as a baseball player might. But this is not my first mountaintop, my first piazza, my first ancient church, my first shepherd, my first whispering windy silence, my first diesel truck on a zigzagging mountain precipice, my first crush of oregano, mint, and fennel underfoot. My chromosomes have been shaking with a bodily memory ever since I stepped onto the tarmac and smelled brushfire. I know the language, the gestures, the way the traffic flows or doesn't, the stray dogs and the way they wander and sleep by the side of the road, how the fried food smells here, the dignified, elderly couples in their phlegmy Mercedes Benzes who pull up in the piazzas, alight, enter the restaurants, and exchange pleasantries with the owner before being led to their table. I know it intimately. Which frees me up for other experiences, like finally allowing myself to drive like a real Italian: fast. And that gets me the extra hour I need to toe one more base: Feudo Montoni Winery, whose nero d'Avola wines, including its flagship Vrucara, are rare in the United States.

I intend to just glance at the vineyard, but I realize within 20 seconds of stepping out of the car and kissing both scruffy cheeks of 44-year-old winemaker Fabio Sireci, who immediately holds me by both elbows, that I never want to leave. Fabio is standing in his yard surrounded by dirty tractors, dirty workers, dirty dogs, and a pile of ugly extracted grape skins dumped on the ground. He hasn't shaved in days, is wearing work boots, jeans, a T-shirt, and a baseball cap. He and his crew have been up until 2 a.m., picking by tractor light. They haven't eaten, showered, or cleaned the yard. They are all surprised to realize I am here today, this Wednesday of this week, but within 10 minutes we are on the tractor, its tanklike treads caked in mud, making our way down the steep hillside to see the 85-year-old nero d'Avola grapevines.



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The small town of Scicli, just outside Ragusa, retains a slow pace that offers a real glimpse of traditional Sicilian life.

The vines, hardly more than a tennis court's worth, are deeply etched and as twisted as old hags from some Grimm's fairy tale. We graft a vine with Pietro Scaccia, the vineyard master with profoundly calloused hands who can do more than 300 grafts a day. He clips a sturdy new shoot from one vine, cuts the gnarled root of another just so, to expose the fresh white flesh inside, secures the graft with a flat, wide elastic, and then clothes the naked scar in a couple of big, healthy green grape leaves, which allows the coupling to take hold in a single night. In this way the legendary vines are propagated and are able to bear fruit seemingly in perpetuity.

Again, we pick and taste the grapes. The nero d'Avola first, but also, at the top of the mountain, where it's colder and clayier, the grillo and catarratto grapes. Blindfolded, I wouldn't instantly know they weren't table grapes. Fabio can't stop speaking of his grapes passionately, appreciatively, as if they were beautiful women. But his gals are not the luscious, voluptuous Sofia Lorens from a few mountaintops away at Regaleali. They are more like plain village girls in head scarves, with not-so-faint moustaches on their upper lips. Fabio prefers them that way. Some are small and tight, and others are nicked here and there with tiny scabs, though plenty are a perfect frosted blue, like plums.



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The grapes at Feudo Montoni, which is the highest vineyard site in Sicily for nero d'Avola, are all picked by hand.

We are followed by wildly happy mutts who run up the hills chasing the tractor. Fabio walks us around in the barn, where there are large sacks of fermenting, mildewed fava beans and dried peas. He warns me not to touch them; they are caustic. He works the molding legumes into the soil, their high levels of ammonia eliminating predatory weeds.

The caves have unlabeled bottles stacked to the ceilings, and a small desk where the labels for magnum-sized bottles of Vrucara will be written by hand. The barrels are lined up and stacked, doing their time. Fabio doesn't put his name on the bottle, he says, because "the land makes the wine, not the man." Therefore the estate name—Feudo Montoni—goes on the label, rather than his own. When we finally pause to sample the wines, we have to hunt down some glasses. Fabio knocks over a lamp looking for the switch, and we clear magazines and happy dogs off the couches to sit and have a taste. His frenzy reminds me exactly of how I feel when I am trying to pull together family meal for the staff at my restaurant.

As Fabio pours me a glass of wine, I vow that I will never again allow myself to be intimidated by wine people or wine talk or lists of what's important and what's not. Winemaking is farming. Winemaking is cooking. Winemaking is work. What we have all been doing these past 14 years—without ever knowing each other—is exactly the same.



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Less well known than its prestigious neighbors, the town of Scicli sits in a gorge and was rebuilt in a Sicilian Baroque style after a major earthquake destroyed much of the town in 1693.

Can you imagine the wine made by a man who loves the local, plain Sicilian village girls with moustaches, who drives the tractor, who stays up until 2 o'clock in the morning harvesting? Can you imagine the wine made by the man a few mountaintops away who just hooked and released a 30-pound tuna, who has stunning ripe, pregnant fruit literally weighing down his vines and a staff that dates back generations to tend to them? Or the wine from two friendly brothers who rake everything into pristine stainless steel tanks, flanked by computers and powerful cleaning hoses and glass beakers, with a few slices of soppressata and fresh bread spread out on the table amid the notebooks? To finally meet these people is to finally understand that what is in the bottle is a direct expression of who puts it in the bottle.

It is like meeting the parents of children you have been friends with forever. Suddenly, you see the lineage, the genetics. You understand why those teeth, that slope to the eye, that habit of gait. You meet the makers, and suddenly the wines make perfect sense.

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