

Sensational

# SICILY

## Understanding the region's signature GRAPES & WINES

By ALISON NAPJUS

**I**T'S a golden age for the wines of Sicily. The Italian island's distinctive bottlings, many of them from native grapes, can firmly claim a place in the world of fine wines.

Fifty years ago Sicilian producers' primary focus was bulk wine. But beginning in the 1980s and '90s, a number of wine estates forged a new path, adopting modern techniques, and in the 2000s, interest from foreign winemakers in the potential of Mount Etna fueled a rebirth of quality wine production in the area.

There's a synergy to this success, says Alessio Planeta, whose family's Planeta winery has been a pioneer of quality production. Planeta cites awareness of the global market and promotion of the island's wines in that space, deeper understanding of Sicily's varied terroirs and native varieties, and healthy competition paired with a sense of community.

"In short, Sicily is an island," says Planeta, "But now it is joined to the world by a thousand invisible bridges."

U.S. consumers have taken notice. Today, Sicily exports 21% of its production to the U.S., and total exports to the U.S. market grew by 40% from 2016 and 2021, according to a 2022 Nomisma Wine Monitor report. *Wine Spectator* went from reviewing fewer than 50 wines from Sicily in the entire decade of the 1990s to more than 225 wines in 2021 alone, with close to half of them earning 90 points or higher.

Let this in-depth guide connect you to Sicily's grape varieties and wines.

### GRAPES OF SICILY

Catarratto  
Nero d'Avola  
Carricante  
Nerello  
Mascalese

Nerello Mascalese thrives in the vineyards of Mount Etna.

# CATARRATTO

ALSO KNOWN AS: *Catarratto Bianco, Catarratto Bianco Comune, Catarratto Bianco Lucido, Catarratto Bianco Extra Lucido, Lucido*

"In the higher hill and mountainous areas, [at] over 1,300 feet, we obtain wines with great acidity, freshness and minerality, with remarkable notes of grapefruit, pineapple and sambuco flowers. The results show complexity and excellent aging power," says Sal Romano, export manager for Feudo Disisa.

Winemakers working with Catarratto strive to preserve its aromatic profile.

This includes harvesting in late August or early September, and the use of inert gases and reductive conditions to preserve musts and wines from oxidation. Fermentation and/or aging in oak is rare; winemakers rely instead on stainless steel and/or cement vessels. Additional richness and complexity may come from extending skin maceration and/or additional lees contact.

## What does it taste like?

Reputable producers have advanced their techniques in the vineyard and winery to produce smaller crops of more flavorful grapes that result in fresh, appealing wines. Today, the best examples are typically softly acidic and lightly fleshy, with flavors of citrus, tropical and/or stone fruit set in a light- to medium-bodied frame. Anise, white blossoms and fresh rosemary or thyme are common accents, and an underlying minerality often shows itself as a salty quality on the finish.

## Why is it produced almost exclusively in Sicily?

Historically, this native variety was grown for use in the Marsala blend, one of Sicily's most important products in the 1800s. Through the first half of the 20th century, still wine made from Catarratto was sold as bulk wine to cooler climate, northern wine regions to blend in color, flavor and weight to the local wines. "The natural [separation] of Sicily as an island possibly reduced Catarratto's spread to other areas in the past. At the same time, Lucido is a truly Mediterranean cultivar requiring high levels of solar radiation, [recommending it] to Sicily," says Rallo.

## Recommended Wines

**Feudo Montoni** Catarratto Sicilia Masso 2021 (90, \$24)

**Feudo Disisa** Catarratto Monreale Lu Bancu 2020 (88, \$18)

**Casa Girelli** Sicilia Lamura White 2021 (87, \$10)

**Feudo di Santa Tresa** Catarratto-Pinot Grigio Terre Siciliane Purato 2021 (86, \$15)

**Donnafugata** Sicilia White Anthilia 2020 (86, \$18)



The Di Lorenzo family and export manager Sal Romano (second from left) at their Monreale estate Feudo Disisa

**R**ELATED to northern Italy's Garganega grape and referred to generically as Catarratto or Catarratto Bianco. For many years Catarratto Bianco Comune and Catarratto Bianco Lucido were thought to be two different varieties, but DNA testing shows that they are two clones of the same variety; Extra Lucido is a third clone. Referring to all Catarratto simply as Lucido is a recent rebranding of the grape, supported in particular by the Sicilia DOC consortium. At this time, most bottlings in the U.S. have not adopted the name change, but more will appear in the future.

## Where is it grown?

Catarratto is Sicily's most widely planted grape variety and fourth in Italy as a whole. It is found throughout the island, but plantings are concentrated in the western half of Sicily, specifically in the provinces of Agrigento, Trapani and Palermo.

Catarratto performs well in calcareous soils, including sandy, lower-elevation sites along the coastline. But it also benefits from the diurnal temperature differences and chalk- and clay based-soils common to the inland hills, including the Alcamo and Monreale DOCs.

## How is it made and what are its styles?

"Lucido can be found in two main styles," says Antonio Rallo, owner of Donnafugata. "An approachable, fruit-driven style with stone fruit and citrus notes, fresh and uncomplicated, made for early consumption; this usually comes from the coastal areas or lighter, sandier soils. Lucido is also capable of producing *terroir*-driven [wines], especially when cultivated at elevation and far from the sea."



Catarratto



Donnafugata's Tenuta di Contessa Entellina estate



Feudo Montoni's Lagnusa cru

# NERO D'AVOLA

ALSO KNOWN AS: *Calabrese*

**T**HE ITALIAN National Registry of Vine Varieties records the official and historic grape name as Calabrese: "coming from Calabria." But today, a reported 98% of vine plantings are located in Sicily, making "Nero d'Avola" the more common moniker.

## Where is it grown?

Nero d'Avola is widespread throughout Sicily, second only to Catarratto in total vineyard plantings. This adaptable grape variety thrives along the island's warm and dry southern shores as well as in the high-elevation inland mountains, and some places in between. Its Sicilian namesake is the town of Avola, located in the Noto DOC in the southeastern corner of the island. But essentially, Nero d'Avola is planted almost everywhere except Mount Etna.

## How is it made and what are its styles?

Nero d'Avola is bottled as both blended and single-variety wines. Starting with the 2016 vintage, it can be sold only as a DOC or DOCG wine. This means no Nero d'Avola is bottled under Sicily's large Terre Siciliane IGT or as *vino da tavola*. Instead, look for it from the Cerasuolo di Vittoria DOCG, numerous small DOCs, and most typically, the Sicilia DOC.

Just as Nero d'Avola adapts to its *terroir* and local conditions, it also adapts in the winery and to its distinctive vineyard character. "At Montoni, we make a subdivision of the vineyard into different *cru*, [to] produce two completely different types of wine with Nero d'Avola. Winemaking is focused on allowing the strong identity of the grapes and the *terroir* to express themselves," says Fabio Sireci, owner of Feudo Montoni in central Sicily. Sireci

ferments both of the winery's Nero d'Avolas in cement tanks, but maceration times, stems or no stems, total aging and other decisions separate the Vrucara from the Lagnusa bottling. Others seeking a similarly neutral vessel utilize stainless steel.

Nero d'Avola's tannins often recommend it to oak fermentation and/or aging, including new oak. Very generally, Nero d'Avola with oak influence will feature darker fruit flavors, with more robust body and structure; bottlings that eschew oak will be brighter, often lower in alcohol and more medium-bodied.

## What does it taste like?

Nero d'Avola is known for its juicy blackberry, black cherry and sometimes currant fruit flavors. Fragrant herb and spice, ranging from dried thyme to menthol to anise to black pepper, are common accents. It's medium- to full-bodied and tannic, with good acidity; structured, but not overly so. Syrah is a good comparison.

Many examples of Nero d'Avola from areas in southeastern Sicily and along the southern coast of central Sicily are

darker in color, richer and more full-bodied, good candidates for oak fermentation or aging. Some of the inland areas of southeastern Sicily are more elegant in style, with softer tannins. This includes Cerasuolo di Vittoria, the island's only DOCG, which regulates a blend of 50% to 70% Nero d'Avola with Frappato. Bottlings from northwestern Sicily, including hillside sites south of Palermo, are more even-keeled, medium-bodied examples, bright and brambly. And at the heart of Sicily, the mountainous central area produces versions that are often slimmer and fresher, with more red fruits and mineral character.

## Why is it produced almost exclusively in Sicily?

Through the 1800s and into the 1900s, Nero d'Avola was mostly produced as bulk wine to ship to northern European wine regions as a blending agent. The "fashion" for quality Nero d'Avola with a sense of place is relatively recent. A few dedicated local families throughout the island persevered with the production of quality Nero d'Avola in the second half of the 20th century, but its height has really come in the past two decades.

"Nero d'Avola is the 'father' of Sicilian vines—it represents Sicily in the world," says Carmelo Bonetta, co-owner of Baglio del Cristo di Campobello in northern Sicily. A handful of vines in California and Australia hint that Nero d'Avola might have a future outside Sicily, but for now it remains Sicily's own. "Nero d'Avola in Sicily finds a perfect marriage between the vine and the land, where it shows maximum expression of its kaleidoscopelike potential," says Sireci. "The varietal is given the possibility in Sicily, with its diverse suitable zones, to develop its variables of expressions."

## Recommended Wines

**Morgante** Nero d'Avola Sicilia Don Antonio Riserva 2018 (92, \$40)

**Cusumano** Sicilia Sägana Vigneto del Torrione Bianco Tenuta San Giacomo 2019 (91, \$50)

**Feudo Montoni** Nero d'Avola Sicilia Lagnusa 2020 (91, \$25)

**Valle dell'Acate** Nero d'Avola Sicilia Il Moro 2017 (90, \$30)

**Zisola** Noto 2020 (90, \$20)

**Tasca d'Almerita** Nero d'Avola Sicilia Sallier de la Tour 2020 (89, \$16)



Diego (left) and Alberto Cusumano

# CARRICANTE

ALSO KNOWN AS: *Catanese Bianco, Nocera Bianca*

**A**LMOST ubiquitously referred to as Carricante, sometimes with slightly altered spellings; occasionally called Catanese Bianco, and very rarely, Nocera Bianca. In the past, Carricante was sometimes confused with Catarratto.

## Where is it grown?

The world's plantings of Carricante are found almost entirely on the slopes of Sicily's Mount Etna, where it has thrived in the mountain's volcanic soils since ancient times. Based on the star power of wines from Etna and the intriguing results from this distinctive grape, vineyard acreage for Carricante has surged in the past decade. The number of Etna and Etna Superiore white wines bottled increased 37% in the first half of 2022 versus the same six months in 2021, according to the Etna consortium.

Carricante excels in Etna's high-altitude vineyards, with many of the best examples from sites beginning at about 1,900 feet above sea level and rising to roughly 3,300 feet. Wines labeled as Superiore, the top category for Etna whites, are produced entirely from grapes harvested in the commune of Milo, with vineyards from roughly 2,400 feet to 2,950 feet above sea level.

## How is it made and what are its styles?

Wines labeled as Etna or Etna Superiore account for the majority of bottlings from Carricante. For the basic Etna white category, Carricante must make up at least 60% of the blend; for the Superiore category, 80% is required. If a blend, Catarratto is a traditional partner for Carricante, but other white varieties such as Minella Bianca or Trebbiano are also allowed, choices that affect the resulting wine style.



Brothers Antonio (left) and Salvino Benanti with their father, Giuseppe

"Other schools of thought differ," says Benanti, "including blending Carricante with Catarratto and even using oak in parts of the vinification process. Obviously these choices will result in more fruity, powerful wines, with some toasty notes."

## What does it taste like?

Racy acidity and minerality are the two characteristics that most impact the perception of Carricante on the palate. These components work within an overall citrusy profile—Meyer lemon, orange and grapefruit—with some stone fruits and notes of orchard blossom, fennel seed, eucalyptus and other herbs.

Depending on the *terroir*, minerality in the wine shows as an underlying flintiness or persistent streak of salinity, petrol or lanolin. "[These are] wines that may resemble a Chablis when they are young, but which acquire Riesling-like petrol and flint notes as they evolve," says Benanti.

Tóth says Carricante can also show considerable differences based on vineyard elevation and soil. "Starting from [1,950 to 2,300 feet] we find deeper, darker soils, with a softer, rounder, more complete profile [for Carricante] in its youth," she says, describing a warmer range of fleshy yellow fruit flavors with wild herb and floral notes. At higher elevations, with poorer soils, Tóth finds examples to be: "Linear, sharp, compact ... a real mountain white."

## Why is it produced almost exclusively in Sicily?

Parts of Mount Etna are among the rainiest in Sicily, a contrast to the arid conditions found elsewhere on the island much of the year. Yet the mountain slopes receive ample sunlight, good

ventilation and dramatic temperature swings between day and night, factors tailored to Carricante, a slow-ripening variety that's high in acidity.

It's also a grape with the ability to reflect Etna's various soils.

"Carricante from Mount Etna is capable of delivering vibrant, pure, ageworthy wines with a very clear volcanic sense of place," says Benanti.

## Recommended Wines

**Benanti** Etna White Superiore Pietra Marina 2017 (93, \$128)

**Tenuta delle Terre Nere** Etna White Calderara Sottana Cuvée delle Vigne Niche 2020 (92, \$48)

**F. Tornatore** Etna White Pietrarizzo 2021 (92, \$60)

**Idda** Sicilia White 2020 (91, \$54)

**Planeta** Carricante Sicilia Eruzione 1614 2018 (91, \$27)



Planeta's Feudo di Mezzo winery



Carricante

Today, many producers choose for Carricante to dominate their Etna white blend, or eschew other varieties altogether. "We at Benanti have always produced Carricante as a varietal wine. We believe this allows us to present the most typical, finest and purest wine possible," says Salvino Benanti, co-owner with his brother Antonio and father, Giuseppe, of their family winery.

With the renewed interest in Carricante, Etna's producers are utilizing a variety of winemaking techniques to explore the grape's stylistic range. But most avoid new and/or toasted oak, especially small-format oak *barriques*. Stainless steel and larger, neutral oak containers are common. "In the cellar, we feel that less is more," says Planeta winemaker Patricia Tóth. Like Benanti, Planeta prefers stainless steel fermentation and aging, working carefully with the lees to ensure complexity. These versions are minerally and graceful.



Tasca d'Almerita's Etna vineyards



Nerello Mascalese

# NERELLO MASCALESE

ALSO KNOWN AS: *Nerello, Nerello Calabrese, Niureddu*

**T**HE SUCCESS and attention given to Mount Etna's red wines over the past decade has led to the widespread use of Nerello Mascalese as the common name for this native Sicilian variety.

## Where is it grown?

Nerello Mascalese shines brightest as the star of the Etna DOC red wines, where it must be at least 80% of the blend. In that appellation, its usual blending partner is Nerello Cappuccio. Nerello Mascalese also has a strong presence in the far northeastern tip of Sicily, near Messina. It is the primary grape variety from the Faro DOC, which produces only red wines, with Nerello Mascalese accounting for 45% to 60% of the blend. Outside of Etna and Faro the grape is not dominant, but it is planted throughout the island. From these sources it is often blended with other varieties and bottled under the Terre Siciliane IGT.

## How is it made and what are its styles?

Nerello Mascalese is primarily produced as a red wine with a sense of finesse and restraint; it's well-defined and expressive without becoming muscular or exuberant. And with the desire to showcase the grape's restraint as well as its ability to express *terroir*, most producers limit the influence of oak, particularly new oak, when vinifying and aging it. Producers that do use oak during fermentation most commonly employ large-format vessels, neutral in character. At F. Tornatore, the winery's Etna reds are fermented in either stainless steel or cement tanks before aging in large oak *botti*.

"In the cellar, we follow the viticultural philosophy to respect our grapes without intervening too much and without influencing their character during winemaking," says Nawal Bouselham, export manager of F. Tornatore, a family estate owned by Francesco Tornatore and his wife, Nina Puglisi; Bouselham's husband, Giuseppe, is the next generation at the winery.

Nerello Mascalese also makes distinctive examples as bottlings of sparkling and still rosé. The still rosés are notable for their typically deeper hue—more of a light garnet or ruby color than the ubiquitous Provençal pink—and their lightly tannic structure, which recommends them to food.

## What does it taste like?

Nerello Mascalese is often compared to Pinot Noir, specifically from Burgundy, for its ability to express nuanced yet concentrated flavor and *terroir* in an elegant, light- to medium-weight frame. These wines are fruit

forward, with red cherry, raspberry, strawberry, cranberry and/or red currant notes. There's a notable herbal overtone, including dried medicinal, Mediterranean or balsamico herbs.

Nerello Mascalese is relatively high in both acidity and tannins, creating a taut, refined structure for the flavor profile. Another component of Nerello Mascalese is its minerality, which ranges in character from a subtle earthiness to salinity to ashy or tarry smoke notes and beyond. Today Nerello Mascalese is prized on Mount Etna for its ability to express the variegated *terroir* resulting from this active volcano.

"Surely the soil is what makes Nerello Mascalese from Mount Etna so special," says Bouselham.

"These are mineral soils rich in obsidian, made up of layers of lava that alternate, with vineyards reaching up to 3,280 feet above sea level."

Etna's soils vary in consistency based on the site's elevation and the age of the eruption on which they are based. They range from fine, sandlike ash through to large pieces of deconstructed lava known locally *lapilli* or *ripiddu*. Vine roots dig through these porous soils to find water and minerals.

## Why is it produced almost exclusively in Sicily?

Nerello Mascalese has evolved to thrive in its birthplace. Factors associated with elevation are key components to its success. Mount Etna's vineyards, rising to about 3,300 feet, and the hillside sites of the Faro DOC, up to about 1,200 feet, provide an environment in which it flourishes. "It is on Etna that [Nerello Mascalese] found its natural habitat," says Bouselham. "In addition to the characteristics of the soils, Nerello Mascalese loves the temperature variations between day and night that characterize the volcano."

The grape's affinity for volcanic *terroir* and its difficult nature in the vineyard have contributed to its limited spread outside Sicily. In fact, many Nerello Mascalese vineyards were abandoned or pulled during the 20th century; it's a low-yielding variety that's costly in the vineyard, requiring hand-harvesting and other labors. And as with all late-ripening varieties, there's a greater threat of disease while waiting for ripeness.

## Recommended Wines

Vini Franchetti-Passopisciaro Terre Siciliane Contrada P 2019 (94, \$90)

Tenuta delle Terre Nere Etna Prephyloxera La Vigna di Don Peppino Vecchi Vigne 2019 (94, \$144)

Tasca d'Almerita Etna Tenuta Tascante Contrada Sciaranuova VV. 2017 (93, \$120)

Giovanni Rosso Etna 2019 (93, \$51)

F. Tornatore Etna Pietrarizzo 2019 (93, \$60)

Emanuele Scammacca del Murgo Etna 2020 (90, \$22)

Terra Constantino Etna de Aetna 2020 (90, \$32)



Nina Puglisi and Francesco Tornatore of F. Tornatore

# Mapping the WINES

At just over 9,900 square miles, Sicily encompasses one DOCG appellation—Cerasuolo di Vittoria—and 23 DOC areas. With the exception of the Etna and Sicilia DOCs, most of Sicily's DOCs are relatively small, with limited examples shipped to the U.S.

The majority of wine from Sicily is bottled under the Terre Siciliane IGT, followed by the Sicilia DOC. Both designations allow the production of sparkling, white, rosé, red and dessert wines. Both allow grapes sourced from anywhere in the region of Sicily, either blended wines or bottlings labeled as single-variety versions (85% or more of the listed variety) or multi-variety versions. The

## West

This area was historically important to the production of dessert wine from the Marsala DOC; today, more than two-thirds of the vineyards here remain planted to white varieties, albeit more commonly used for still wines.

**Vineyards:** Coastal sites rising to inland hills

**Elevations:** As high as 1,900 feet

**Soils:** Generally calcareous, mixing red clay in some areas

## Central

Wine production is limited in the heart of the island, with some notable exceptions moving toward Sicily's coastlines, highlighted below.

**Vineyards:** From Palermo and running south, hillside vineyards are common, including the Alcamo, Contessa Entellina and Monreale DOCs. In north-central Sicily, a mountainous inland region encompasses the Contea di Sclafani DOC. To the south, roughly from the Menfi DOC to the Riesi DOC, vineyards hug the coast through to inland hills.

**Elevations:** South of Palermo, elevations rise to about 1,300 feet. In north-central Sicily, vineyard sites climb mountain slopes up to 2,900 feet. On the southern coast, vineyards are lower-lying, to about 800 feet.

**Soils:** The area encompassing the Alcamo, Contessa Entellina and Monreale DOCs are extremely chalky in some parts and can be summarized



as calcareous clay. In the Contea di Sclafani DOC, lower-elevation soils are clay dominant, mixed with iron; higher locations are a mix of sand and sandstone. Coastal vineyards to the south mix sedimentary and sandy.

## Northeast & Mount Etna

Mt. Etna is the rainiest part of Sicily, with an average of 47 inches per year; the average for the rest of Sicily is about half that, with less than an inch of precipitation in July and August.

**Vineyards:** Limited vineyard plantings are found among the plain that lies along the northern coast, with a nota-

ble concentration of hillside sites in the Faro DOC, at Sicily's northeastern tip. The majority of Sicily's northeastern vineyards are planted on Mt. Etna's slopes as part of the Etna DOC.

**Elevations:** Up to about 1,200 feet in the Faro DOC and up to about 3,300 feet in the Etna DOC.

**Soils:** The coastal vineyards and the Faro DOC show a mix of sand, calcareous and clay, depending on location. The Etna DOC is volcanic, from sand-like, compacted ash to pumice to gravelly pebbles to large chunks of deconstructed lava known as *lapilli* or *ripiddu* soils.

## Southeast

This part of Sicily is extremely hot and dry, strongly influenced by the warm sirocco winds from Africa.

**Vineyards:** Primarily coastal locations.

**Elevations:** Low-lying elevations, up to around 450 feet.

**Soils:** Around Vittoria, home to the DOC of the same name and Sicily's only DOCG, Cerasuolo di Vittoria, soils are sandy, often red in hue due to mixed iron oxide, with white rocks and calcareous. In the Noto DOC, the soil shows a strong limestone content, with some mixed clay, and large white rocks coating the surface of most vineyards.

## Other White Grapes to Know

**Grillo:** Bright and citrusy, with subtle saline and herb accents. Shows good potential, with bottlings on the rise. Try: Zisola Sicilia White Azisa 2021 (\$89, \$15)

**Inzolia (Insolia):** Lightly fleshy and

softly acidic, with floral, almond and spice character. Try: Feudo Montoni Inzolia Sicilia Fornelli 2021 (90, \$22)

**Zibibbo (Muscat d'Alexandria):** Fragrant orange fruit and blossom notes and a subtle spiciness. Celebrated from the Pantelleria DOC as a *passito* or dessert wine style. Try: Donnafugata

Passito di Pantelleria Ben Ryé (94, \$48)

## Other Red Grapes to Know

**Frappato:** Lively, with abundant raspberry, strawberry and cherry accented by herb and spice. Blended with Nero d'Avola in the Cerasuolo di Vittoria DOCG. Try: Feudi del Pisciotto Terre

Siciliane Red Carolina Marengo for KISA 2019 (90, \$26)

**Perricone:** Earthy, with firm tannins and notes of red fruit and herb. Often blended with Nero d'Avola. Try: Tasca d'Almerita Sicilia Contea di Sclafani Tentata Regaleali Riserva del Conte 2016 (90, \$200)