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Sicily wines hit stride, with a volcanic assist

Jon Borne
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Sicilian red wines left-right: 2008 Biondi Outis (Nessuno) 2010 Girolamo Russo Oà Rina 2010 Passopisciaro as seen in San Francisco, California on Thursday, February 20, 2013. Photo: Craig Lee, Special To The Chronicle



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When last we left our intrepid Sicily, there were auspicious signs from the slopes of Mount Etna, its defining and still active volcano.

The reds of Etna (sfg.ly/ZqOCLo), and the whites as well, had brought a refined sensibility to a region once considered a spot for rustic wines, and then one that had succumbed to the usual roster of anywhere varieties: Chardonnay, Merlot and

the like.

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How quickly things change.

In the intervening four years, Etna has become Sicily's diva, enjoying a whirlwind popularity. Once I'd struggled to locate a half-dozen Etna Rosso wines, which are made from a mix of two indigenous grapes, Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Cappuccio. Now there are two dozen or more available on these shores.

It is easy to see why Etna's charms resonate. While their lightness of step evokes a fond comparison to Pinot Noir, they also share a rectitude and earthy depth with Nebbiolo. Aglianico and perhaps Sagrantino had hoped to become the new Italian darlings. But this quiet one from Sicily stole the show.

Etna by no means composes the sum of Sicily's red-wine prowess. For all the heat of the Mediterranean - although the volcano's altitude can bring chill and snow - Sicilian reds have become far more finely etched and subtle.

Nero d'Avola, which was supposed to be Sicily's great red hope, struggles at times with its sometimes brutish ways. It can look positively clumsy next to its neighbor, Frappato.

Luckily, the wines from the Cerasuolo di Vittoria appellation, grown near the town of Vittoria in Sicily's southeast, combine those two grapes' best natures, with Frappato's subtle strawberry-scented ways rounding out Nero's bar-brawl tannins.

Vittoria has enjoyed the spotlight cast on it by the dual fame of young naturalista Arianna Occhipinti and her uncle, Giusto, who cofounded the COS label. Arianna in particular became a darling for her SP68 wines, and more recently, her affordable Tami bottles of both varieties. But there is broader quality to be found, including from the Eloro area east of Vittoria, in the island's southeast.

This is not to dismiss the waves of bad Nero d'Avola ebbing out there, like a tidal pool of bad Chianti, but there is welcome progress.

As for Etna, it's barely possible to keep up with the growth.

Salvo Foti, the enologist whose work is arguably responsible for the area's rise to global attention, continues his work, with his own wines (under I Vigneri) and others. Names like Graci, which were just appearing in the U.S. four years ago, have rapidly - and gratifyingly - found a wide fan base. These wines still hover in that sweet spot between obscurity and overexposure. And the roster keeps growing, with new names like Girolamo Russo.

There even are new arrivals from the tiny appellation of Faro - meaning "lighthouse," an appropriate name for its location overlooking the Strait of Messina on Sicily's northeast coast. Again, this is a marked change from four years ago, when the region was mostly a curiosity for those who had the fortune to encounter its benchmark wine, Palari.

A conclusion from all this? Sicily has thoroughly shaken off the missteps of its past. Its best wines have a currency that is particularly rewarding at a time when northern Italy's most cherished bottles are rapidly becoming unobtainable.

Etna has paved the way for this renaissance. But looking forward, Sicily's future strokes are likely to embrace the island's full bounty of grapes. As its growing pains subside, Sicily is primed for greatness.

2008 Vini Biondi Outis Etna Rosso (\$38, 14% alcohol): Though the Biondi wines have recently gone through an ownership shuffle, Ciro Biondi's Outis has become a symbol of Etna's progress. With this vintage, Biondi himself took over much of the winemaking, and moved Outis toward a more ethereal style. From Biondi's various parcels near the volcano, this is slightly piney, with a distinct mineral presence - a coppery volcanic-soil tang that screams Etna. An aromatic side (think Carignane's celery-seed aspect) accents tangerine peel, Bing cherry and rosemary. (Importer: Oliver McCrum Wines)



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2010 Passopisciaro Sicilia Rosso (\$39, 14%): Andrea Franchetti's estate on Etna's north side has become an area standard bearer, in particular its single-vineyard wines. But this blend, using vines between 70 and 100 years old from a relatively cool vintage, shows the best of Etna's fine-boned style. Burnt sage, rose petal, a turnip-like earthiness and subtle mulberry flavors, with classic minerality under it all. It's slightly young, so consider aging it a bit. (Importer: Wine Warehouse)

2010 Graci Etna Rosso (\$30, 14%): Alberto Graci's finessed wines, also from the Passopisciaro area, have become one of Etna's great discoveries. This latest shows a meatiness, almost a bloody side, matched by leather, dried oregano and robust cherry fruit. Tannins are still taut, so age or decant it. (Importer: Vinity Wine Co.)

2007 I Custodi Aetnus Etna Rosso (\$34, 14%): Enologist Salvo Foti has become Etna's great caretaker, and this project from Mario Paoluzi, meant to highlight the mountain's traditional winegrowing, gets a pitch-perfect assist from Foti. Head-trained vines from Etna's north side offer a remarkable expression. It has an arid, intense aspect, with a sanguine tinge to match dried cranberry and tangy pomegranate, almost like biting into a pomegranate seed. (Importer: Wine Warehouse)

2010 Girolamo Russo 'a Rina Etna Rosso (\$25, 14%): Russo, a trained pianist who took over his family's property in 2004, is a relative Etna newcomer. While his single-vineyard wines can be a bit flashy, this blend of all four of his organically-farmed parcels is a wonderful introduction to Etna's strengths. It starts out robust and rich, with brambly fruit, but then it tightens focus, with pine pitch and mineral accents, and roasted-carrot sweetness. A name to watch. (Importer: Oliver McCrum Wines)

2009 Palari Rosso del Soprano Sicilia Red (\$41, 13%): Soprano is the little sibling to Palari's majestic Faro bottling. The two Nerello grapes dominate the blend, and in basalt soils they show a fantastic birch-bark and carob warmth that bolsters ruby fruit flavors and menthol accents. (Importer: Vinity Wine Co.)

2009 Bonavita Faro (\$40, 14%): Biondi told his importer, Oliver McCrum, to seek out this tiny estate run by Giovanni Scarfone. The limestone-clay soils, and the use of a small amount of the Nocera grape, underscore the difference from Etna. Aged 16 months in old wood, it's a broodier expression of Nerello - deep and heady, with sweet aniseed and roasted beet elements to the fruit, plus a welcome bitter edge to the tannins. (Importer: Blackbird Wines)

2011 Valle dell'Acate Vittoria Frappato (\$23, 13%): This estate, now run by Gaetana Jacono, helped establish Vittoria's reputation, and its latest Frappato is a great snapshot of that grape: intensely floral and lean, with high-wire raspberry flavors and a bright crushed-stone minerality. That isn't to overlook the 2009 Valle dell'Acate Classico Cerasuolo di Vittoria (\$27, 14%), which has a slight sanguine tinge and just enough rusticity to have depth, but also the finesse that so much Cerasuolo misses. (Importer: Vinity Wine Co.)

2010 COS Nero di Lupo Sicilia Nero d'Avola (\$30, 12%): COS is almost synonymous with Cerasuolo, but this lesser-known varietal bottle from sandy limestone-tinged soils in Bastonaca, near Vittoria, is worth a look. Aged in concrete, it needs a moment to open, and then shows pretty amaro cherry, licorice root and liqueur, and a dustiness that reveals the grape's nuanced side. Decant it. (Importer: Domaine Select Wine Estates)

2009 Riofavara Spaccaforno Eloro Nero d'Avola (\$20, 15%): The Padova family's wines, a new addition to the Lynch portfolio, show a density from older vines (30 years in this case) on limestone soils, revealing a loamy side to deep cherry flavors. A toasted fenugreek accent adds a complexity too often lost with this grape. (Importer: Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant)

2010 Marabino Noto Nero d'Avola (\$18, 14%): Noto is south of Siracusa, on Sicily's

eastern edge, and this effort from poor chalky soils is a creature of the area's hot summers. This is Nero channelling Shiraz, with big blueberry flavors, plus a celeriac bite and dusty side that lift the deep, almost muddled fruit. (Importer: PortoVino)

2010 Morgante Sicilia Nero d'Avola (\$18, 15%): With winemaking from consultant Riccardo Cotarella, this sizable estate in southern Sicily has found a way to take the edges off the grape's gruff nature. Dark earth, toasted coriander and juniper add depth. (Importer: Winebow)

2011 Tenuta Rapitala Campo Reale Sicilia Nero d'Avola (\$12, 14%): The established Rapitala estate, in the island's northwest, has a welcome modesty in its basic Nero that's lost in some of its tonier bottlings. Aged for four months in old oak and steel, it shows a delicate floral side as it opens - pansies and shoe leather to match crushed fresh black currant. (Importer: Frederick Wildman & Sons)

Panelists: Jon Bonne, Chronicle wine editor; Shelley Lindgren, wine director, A16 and SPQR.

Jon Bonne is The San Francisco Chronicle's wine editor. Find more of his coverage at sfgate.com/wine. E-mail: jbonne@sfgate.com Twitter: [@jbonne](https://twitter.com/jbonne)

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