

Sicily - Italy's new California

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Filippo Riportella's father wore short trousers because he could not afford long ones. He drove a mule and earned his living growing artichokes in western Sicily. His son smokes cigars, has two cars, two houses, a boat, designer jeans and earns his living growing wine - in western Sicily.

After years of producing wine mainly for the dispiriting purpose of shipping it north in anonymous bulk for blending or - worse - for the stills that turn Europe's wine surplus into equally unwanted alcohol, the Sicilian wine trade (*pace* Fiat's troubles) is ebullient. A new sense of confidence pervades the wild west of the island, and the more civilised east too. Ambitious big Italian wine companies such as Zonin at their zappy new winery Feudo Principi di Butera are investing in Sicily. The phrase 'Italy's new California' is bandied about, a reference to Sicilian growers' current enthusiastic planting of fashionable grape varieties and the freedom to decide what those might be.

On *il continente* (mainland Italy) most wine producers export DOC wines and are constricted by the precise grape varieties laid down in their complex regulations. Few DOCs ever had much of an export reputation in Sicily and so growers have embraced the new option of selling their wines much more flexibly as IGT (Indicazione Geografica Tipica) Sicilia - a sort of Italian answer to France's Vins de Pays.

Although older companies such as Regaleali have been trying hard for decades to prove to the world that Sicily can produce fine wine, the company that really put this Mediterranean island on the wine map in the modern era is Planeta, run by three cousins whose combined ages are yet to total a century.

When about five years ago I first became aware of the Planeta phenomenon - thoroughly modern, cleverly packaged and crafted Chardonnay and Merlot gaining worldwide attention - I assumed that the name was the result of diligent market research. Planeta is a perfect name for a modern wine company, suggesting infinite possibilities, obeisance to nature and easy recognition in myriad languages.

In fact, Planeta is the family surname - or rather a shortened, modern, businesslike version of the name of one of Sicily's aristocratic families. Diego Planeta was already the president of Settesoli, the powerful coop that dominates the western Sicilian one-horse town of Menfi. He encouraged his daughter and two nephews to set up what in California would be called a boutique operation nearby, overlooking a useful reservoir under some spectacular crags just west of the half-horse town of Sambuca di Sicilia.

Francesca looks after export sales, Santi succours the enthusiastic Italian market but I sense that much of Planeta's success is due to the older nephew, Alessio, who is in charge of winemaking and policy, considerably aided by the international perspective of experienced oenologist Carlo Corino who spent many years working at Montrose winery in New South Wales. Alessio claims that his own most seminal experience was some months spent working for a small Burgundian domaine where he learnt 'the philosophy of wine'. In his preppy blazer and chinos, he is as smart as a tack.

What Planeta does today, other Sicilian wine producers anxious to bask in its slipstream will do tomorrow. It was the international vine varieties that brought Planeta to the wine world's attention in the mid to late 1990s, so there has been a flurry of plantings and bottlings of Chardonnay in particular but also of Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon throughout the island.

But the wines from Planeta's portfolio that struck me back then as much more interesting were the less expensive Segreta blends of indigenous Sicilian varieties, red Nero d'Avola and white Grecanico specifically.

On a recent visit to Sicily (the first since the mid 1980s when I remember tasting only one wine of serious interest, Regaleali's Rosso del Conte), I was struck by how fast things are changing. Planeta have since gone native, launching a special varietal bottling of Sicily's finest red wine grape Nero d'Avola (called Santa Cecilia after the rest of the family name). So Nero d'Avola, making truly engaging cherry-flavoured wine for ageing, and Grecanico, responsible for tangy, refreshing whites, are the hot new vine varieties. Settesoli coop sells them under the Mandrarossa label in Italy and Inycon labels abroad. (See my [wine of the week](#) for 29 October 2002.)

These are the vines prosperous Filippo (who doubles as Planeta's vineyard manager so presumably has the inside track) has chosen to plant on his own vineyard - whose produce he, like virtually all his neighbours, sells to the Settesoli coop. But Nero d'Avola is actually native to quite another part of Sicily in the far south-east. (Planeta bought their own vineyard there.) So Sicily's vine growers, who boast happily of concentrating now on *vitigni autocthoni* are in fact completely reinventing their viticultural traditions.

This is less of a renaissance than a naissance, as Sicily does not have a glorious vinous past to regain, other than a long-gone heyday of exporting fortified Marsala from the far west. Growers in the Marsala zone have somewhat lost the plot, although the Trapani coop earned a prestigious three-glass award in this year's edition of the Gambero Rosso wine guide, arbiter of Italian taste, for its Cabernet Sauvignon. (Other Sicilian producers so garlanded include Abbazia Santa Anastasia, Cusumano and Salvatore Murana.) This should provide some much-needed encouragement for growers there to join the modern world of table wine.

What is alluring about Sicily for now is that it can promise not just water and a range of *terroirs*, but reliable sunshine and relatively low costs. Firriato has been churning out a succession of well-made bargains for British supermarkets, for example. Unlike in its old rival Puglia (and most of the rest of Italy, France and Spain), Sicily is even happy with the 2002 vintage, its growing season usefully longer than usual.

The visitor from northern Europe is struck not just by the ubiquitous irrigation pipes in Sicily's vineyards, essential for viticulture on almost the same latitude as Tunis, but by the obvious youth of most of the vines. Presumably once these vines mature, the wine they produce will be even better.

And now the Planetas have launched an exciting, full-bodied white wine Cometa based on Fiano, an ancient vine imported from near Naples. We will surely see acres and acres of Fiano planted over the next few years by Filippo and his like.