

## Sicily

5 Sep 2008 by Jancis Robinson

**In a nutshell:** Dessert wine tradition but in complete transformation.

**Main grapes:** Catarratto, Inzolia (white); Nero d'Avola, Nerello Mascalese (red).

Sicily is as fascinating to students of the modern wine world as it is to those of ancient civilisations. This large island, not far from the African coast, regularly produces as much wine as Australia, Chile and Bulgaria put together - and is dramatically upgrading the quality of its better wines. Like Puglia, it was a key supplier to northern blenders and, less usefully, a key contributor to the European wine lake, but is today undergoing the most exciting revival as a fine wine producer. Surprisingly, it grows far more white grapes than red, the local Catarratto being so widely planted that it has been second only to Sangiovese in Italy's league table of grape varieties.

There are more signs of dynamic indigenous winemaking here than in any of the southern mainland regions. The island's chief viticultural research station just outside Palermo is hard at work harnessing the potential of local varieties such as the white Inzolia and red Nero d'Avola and Nerello Mascalese. Inzolia is probably intrinsically more interesting than the widely planted Catarratto, but it is the deep-coloured, crisp, cherry-bright Nero d'Avola that is increasingly recognized as western Sicily's trump card. It blends well with other local red grapes such as Nerello and Frappato (which are eastern Sicilian and tend to be lower in acidity) as well as with an ever-widening roster of international varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Syrah. In fact blends of international and Sicilian varieties (Catarratto and Chardonnay, for example) have proved particularly successful for the flying winemakers who invaded the island, eager to harness the keenly-priced grapes that are grown in such profusion. There has also been considerable progress with cooler and more sophisticated fermentations and, inevitably, the use of small oak barrels.

The island benefited for years from enormous subsidies from Brussels and, thanks to its isolation, none-too-keen overseeing of how they were spent. But today there are signs of real dynamism in both vineyards and cellars as foreign and mainland wine producers eye up the potential on this diverse and historic terrain. The family firm of Planeta in the western interior of the island played an important part here by launching a series of highly-priced, extremely well-made international varietals on the world market. The Planetas have subsequently concentrated most on Sicilian, or at least Italian, grapes such as Nero d'Avola and Fiano from Campania however.

Other particularly quality-conscious producers of unfortified wines from both local and imported grape varieties include Castiglione, Abbazia Sant'Anastasia, the Elorina co-op (specializing in Pachino, historically the finest Nero d'Avola), Donnafugata, Duca di Salaparuta and Regaleali. Regaleali's heady yet structured red Rosso del Conte, made from Perricone and Nero d'Avola, provided the first signs of Sicily's modern revival as a producer of table wines, thanks to vineyards at an altitude of more than 500 m (1600 ft) - generally the key to producing high-quality table wines on the island. More recently the volcanic slopes of Mt Etna have been a hotbed of experimentation with ancient Nerello vines by the likes of Benanti, Terre Brune and Passopisciaro.

For years the island's most famous wine was **Marsala**, made in Sicily's wild west. Made from very ripe white grapes to which heated, or cooked (*cotto*) musts and grape spirit are added before ageing in the hot warehouses of the port of Marsala, the wine is not unlike Madeira but tends to be darker brown, sweeter, much less acid and, in most cases, much less admired. Until recently Marsala producers were allowed to reduce the wine to something simply cheap, strong and sickly. The rules have been tightened up, however, so that although basic cooking Marsala and the odd eggy syrup designed to put a *zabaglione* taste in a bottle exist, there are some truly fine wines produced here - notably by De Bartoli, who offers a range of different strengths and sweetness levels.

Sicily's temperatures make it ideal for dessert wine production and the island has a long history of making noble, rich Muscat. **Moscato di Pantelleria** is still made on an island just off the Tunisian coast but a more subtle, still orange-tinted, powerful sweet wine made off Sicily is **Malvasia delle Lipari**. Carlo Hauner was single-handedly responsible for the survival of this curious wine, a direct link with ancient civilisations and winemaking techniques on the almost black, volcanic island of Lipari off the north east coast.

**Some favourite producers:** Benanti, Calabretta, Cos, Donnafugata, De Bartoli, Duca di Salaparuta, Morgante, Palari, Passopisciaro, Planeta, Regaleali, Girolamo Russo, Santa Anastasia, Tasca d'Almerita and Terre Nere.