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Sicily: my top 10



Well loved as a holiday destination, this volcanic Mediterranean island is also home to a thriving wine industry that ticks all the authenticity boxes. Stephen Brook selects 10 estates at the top of their game

SICILY MAY BE an island, but it often feels like a country of its own. Waves of invasion have left their mark: Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs and Normans have all swooped in. Even the British made their mark, by inventing the fortified wine of Marsala.

Today there are about 110,000ha under vine and almost two-thirds of the plantings are white, which may come as a surprise. This is because the western part of the island, around Trapani, has a moderately maritime climate that allows white grapes to flourish.

Until the 1990s, Sicily was dominated by cooperatives, heavily supported by domestic and EU subsidies. Most wine was sold in bulk to the mainland. Yields were high, quality low. Gradually subsidies dried up, and some co-ops folded or fused with others. Even now, only 20% or so of production is bottled on the island.

Sicilian wines enjoyed no great renown until recently, other than specialised styles such as Marsala and the Muscats of Pantelleria and other islands. Diego Planeta was not the first producer to work with international varieties – that honour goes to Tasca d'Almerita – but he was the first to market them around the world. Although he knew Sicily had fine indigenous varieties, they often didn't age and had no reputation. Only wines such as Chardonnay could put Sicily on the map. Planeta was right, but the company soon added local varieties and styles to its portfolio.

At the same time, adventurous investors were discovering the amazing potential of the volcanic soils of Etna. A few local producers had long made fine wines, white and red, from Etna,

but it took an infusion of enthusiasts from Tuscany, the US and Denmark to exploit these remarkable, often ancient, vineyards.

Today, Sicily rejoices in its diversity, with an invigorating mix of large and small enterprises. The larger companies have maintained standards, and have been joined by other excellent producers such as Cottanera, Firriato, Spadafora and the biodynamic COS. Meanwhile Etna, with its rich micro-terroirs, is booming and continues to deliver beguiling wines. My selection of estates that follows aims to reflect the range of styles, from traditional to modern, that prevails in Sicily today.

Tasca d'Almerita

This noble property, spread over five hills in the centre of the island, is not so much a wine estate as an eco-system, farming so comprehensively that when dining here, it's usual to be informed that every item on the menu is produced on the spot.

Although best known for large-volume wines such as Regaleali Rosso and Bianco, named after the family's main estate, founder Conte Giuseppe had a more international vision and was probably the first grower in Sicily to plant varieties such as Chardonnay, from 1988, and Cabernet Sauvignon.

Today Tasca releases a bewildering range of wines, including bottles from the island of Salina, and Grillo from the island of Mozia near Marsala. The family has also retreated from its focus on international varieties, although those wines are still produced.

'Even today, only about 20% of Sicily's production is bottled on the island'





Gabriella Rallo oversaw the introduction of table wines of fine quality, and was one of the first to equip a winery with temperature control. Today Donnafugata owns more than 300ha and, like Tasca, produces an immense range of wines, including many dry white wines of freshness and elegance.

It gained an international reputation for Ben Ryé, a passito Muscat from Pantelleria, where it controls 68ha. Most of its other vineyards are in the obscure Contessa Entellina DOC east of Marsala. This is the source of its finest red wine, Mille e Una Notte, a blend of Nero d'Avola, Petit Verdot and Syrah, which is aged in mostly new barriques. Less iconic and costly is the barrique-aged Tancredi, which is based on Nero d'Avola, plus Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and a dash of Tannat.

Given that Donnafugata now produces close to 3 million bottles, quality is very high across the range, and even its simplest wines are enjoyable and balanced. Moreover, they are well packaged with stylish labels that radiate Mediterranean joie de vivre.

Donnafugata, Tancredi 2012 92

£29.40 Carruthers & Kent, Exel Wines

This Nero d'Avola-based blend can be austere when young, but the 2012 vintage is more open. The nose is lush and oaky, with brooding black fruits and a light savoury tone, but the palate is limpid, refreshed by good acidity. It is unusually graceful and charming without being superficial. Long, too. **Drink** 2018-2028 **Alc** 13.5%

Cusumano

Like Planeta and Donnafugata, this large firm, with an annual production of about 2.5m bottles, has vineyards in

various parts of the island. Of its more than 500ha, 190ha (mostly of white varieties) lie in the province of Palermo, with 140ha (mainly Nero d'Avola) in Butera, and 70ha more near Trapani. The first releases were in 2001, and Cusumano remains very much a family company, with brothers Alberto and Diego at the helm. A major development occurred in 2013 when it bought 15ha from Benanti on Etna, after searching for years for a suitable property there, and named the estate Alta Mora. Today there are 28ha under vine.

The brothers' best-selling wine is the mostly unoaked Benuara, made from two-thirds Nero d'Avola and the remainder Syrah. Its top Nero is called Sàgana, cropped at low yields and aged in large casks. Moscato dello Zucco is a Moscato Bianco, the grapes dried for three months and the wine aged in small barrels – one of Sicily's finest Moscatos.

The initial releases of Alta Mora wines from Etna, especially two single-vineyard reds, show great promise. But even at more basic levels, the Cusumano wines are well crafted, consistent, balanced and sensibly priced.

Cusumano, Sàgana Nero d'Avola 2013 92

£26.95-£37.80 Eurowines, Hedonism

A more opulent expression of Nero d'Avola, this has complex and vibrant aromas of black cherries, damsons, tobacco and cloves. Rich, tannic and concentrated, it nonetheless has freshness too. Forceful and solid, it shows grip without toughness and excellent length. **Drink** 2018-2028 **Alc** 14.5%

De Bartoli

Near Marsala are the cellars of De Bartoli. As a fortified wine, Marsala was invented by the British in the mid-19th century. Once spoken of in the same breath as Port or Madeira, its reputation suffered a sharp decline once it became customary to add flavourings and concentrated must, use high-yielding grape varieties, and reduce ageing times. Quality plummeted and so did production.

The late Marco de Bartoli was well aware that authentic Marsala was essentially an oxidised wine from the Grillo grape given extended ageing in wooden casks. The minimum alcohol level for Marsala was 18%, the consequence of enthusiastic additions of brandy, but De Bartoli's wines were unfortified and thus below that legal requirement. His refusal to follow the rules led to his winery being shut down from 1995 to 2000.

Marco died in 2011 but his son Renato follows loyally in his footsteps. Today a range of fine and authentic Marsala is ➤



Above: Donnafugata's Tancredi 2012, and the Contessa Entellina DOC (top), home to many of the winery's vineyards

Right: Alberto and Diego Cusumano



still being produced, as well as a superb dry Grillo and remarkable wines from Pantelleria. The flagship wine has always been Vecchio Samperi, even though it cannot be labelled as Marsala. It's made in a solera system, with 6,000 bottles a year drawn off the barrels.



De Bartoli, Vecchio Samperi NV 93
£46.21-£56.99 Exel Wines, Les Caves de Pyrene, Noble Fine Liquor, Tannico

The nose is magical, figgy, intense and aromatic, but saline and lightly oxidative too. Creamy, intense and essentially dry, this shows no rough edges and the alcohol is integrated, with immense concentration and a long, walnutty finish. **Drink** 2018-2030 **Alc** 16.5%

Benanti

Dr Giuseppe Benanti, a pharmaceuticals entrepreneur, was one of the first to realise the potential of Etna's vineyards, which in the 1980s were producing mostly mediocre wines. His first vintage from the family's revitalised plots was 1991 and his ambition to set a higher standard was soon realised.

Today the property is run by his twin sons Antonio and Salvino. Most Etna estates are based in just one part of the region, but Benanti is unusual in having vineyards both on the cooler north side of the volcano (Rovittello) and on the southern side (Serra della Contessa). Both produce excellent but different Etna Rosso wines, with Rovittello being more structured and dense. The red wines used to be aged in barriques, but the estate is now reverting to large casks.

Benanti also revealed the potential of the Carricante variety, and the thrillingly saline white Pietra Marina is produced from 80-year-old vines grown at 920m. Many would argue that this is Sicily's finest expression of Etna Bianco. Newer producers may have grabbed more limelight over the past decade or so, but Benanti remains a name to be conjured with, and there is no better introduction to the Etna styles than the family's single-vineyard wines, both red and white.

Benanti, Rovittello Etna Rosso 2013 93
£39.50 AG Wines, Astrum Wine Cellars, Field & Fawcett, Petersham Cellar

There are fragrant red fruits on the nose, which is still reserved. The attack is intense and sleek, with lifted red fruits and tannins that are assertive but polished. Spicy and linear, it's also grainy and very persistent. Admirable purity here. **Drink** 2018-2036 **Alc** 13.5%

Photograph: Armando Rotoletti



Above: Giuseppe Benanti (left) and his sons Antonio and Salvino, who now run the family's Etna estate

Passopisciaro

Andrea Franchetti, blessed with boundless confidence and considerable resources, founded the Trinoro estate in southern Tuscany, where he makes powerful wines from Merlot, Cabernet Franc and other varieties.

By 2000 he was searching for cooler sites that would generate wines in contrast to hot Tuscany, and when he visited the Etna slopes he realised this was just what he was looking for. He bought an abandoned winery outside the town of Passopisciaro as well as a vineyard at 1,000m, and gradually acquired 26ha, both purchased and leased, planted with old bush vines of up to 120 years old. From these he makes a range of single-vineyard wines as well as a generic blend called Passopisciaro, and an atypical Chardonnay.

Franchetti likes to pick late, so in some vintages the wines can be too high in alcohol. In cooler years such as 2015, however, he produces finely balanced wines with great intensity of fruit. They are aged for 20 months either in cement tanks or large casks, and bottled without filtration.

Tasting the single-vineyard wines side by side, it's clear there are differences between them – of personality rather than quality. Quantities are limited and prices high, but these are structured wines that repay cellaring, although the generic Passopisciaro, which should not be underestimated, is more accessible on release.



Above: Andrea Franchetti of Passopisciaro

Right: Palari – one of Stephen Brook's top three Sicilian reds

Stephen Brook is an awarded author and has been a Decanter contributing editor since 1996



Left: Salvatore Murana with trunks of old Zibbibo vines in his Pantelleria vineyards



Passopisciaro, Etna 2014 91

£32.95 **Corney & Barrow**

Explosive on the nose, showing power and forthright cherry and red-fruit aromas. Broad and fleshy for Etna, this is concentrated and tannic, chewy and forceful – an imposing style that has grandeur rather than finesse. Long.

Drink 2018-2028 Alc 15%

Palari

Whenever I drink this wine (*below*), it makes me sigh with pleasure. It's certainly among my favourite three red wines of Sicily. It comes from 7ha in the obscure Faro DOC, which owner Salvatore Geraci helped put on the map.

It's a cousin of Etna Rosso, in that Nerello Mascalese forms a large part of the blend, but in other respects it has little in common with Etna. The steep, stony vineyards are tucked along the Straits of Messina in the island's

northeastern corner, looking across the water to the mainland city of Reggio Calabria. The climate here is more Mediterranean than volcanic, elevation is around 400m, and the vines are up to 80 years old.

The main components of the blend are Nerello Mascalese, Nerello Cappuccio and Nocera. Palari is fermented in wooden vats and aged for 20 months in one-third new barriques.

Any lots that Geraci is not entirely satisfied with go into his second-label wine, Rosso del Soprano, which spends less time in wood yet often comes very close in quality to Palari.



A recent vertical tasting of 13 vintages back to 1998 persuaded me of Palari's ageability, though after about 12 years' ageing, secondary characters begin to overshadow the wine's beguiling fruit, elegance and seductiveness.

Palari, Faro 2010 95

£48.55-£58 **AG Wines, Exel Wines, Les Caves de Pyrene**

The nose is lean and intense, with aromas of sour cherries and a hint of coffee. Although very concentrated, it's silky, fresh and lively, with almost tangy acidity. It shows elegance and poise rather than plumpness and weight, and the tannins are well integrated. Very long, with great potential.

Drink 2018-2028 Alc 13.5%

Murana

Almost every region in Italy has its tradition of passito wines – that is, drying bunches of grapes for weeks or months in order to increase their sugar content before pressing and vinification.

In areas such as Soave and Valpolicella this is done by laying bunches on racks in an attic; in more southerly regions, bunches are spread outdoors under direct sunlight. On the island of Pantelleria this became a cottage industry with some two dozen producers, including Donnafugata and De Bartoli. The grape used is Zibbibo, an Arabic term for Muscat.

The most doggedly traditional producer is Salvatore Murana, a former fireman. He claims to have been producing wine since he was four years old. 'When I was in kindergarten I'd run off to help my grandfather!' Today he controls 15ha of Zibbibo and makes a range of wines of varying intensity. Some can be extreme: the wine he calls Creato was vinified in 1976 and aged in barrels until it was bottled in 2005. Tasted in 2014, Creato resembled an old Rutherglen Muscat from Australia in its viscosity and figginess. His best wines are Khamma and Martingana, from single vineyards planted in 1932, but Mueggen is more affordable and classic in style.

Murana, Mueggen Passito di Pantelleria 2009 92

£48.45/50cl **Tannico**

Less figgy and burnished than his single-vineyard passito wines, Mueggen is still astonishing. Yellow-gold colour and a nose of honey and apricots. Mandarins and quince flood the palate, which is sleek and intense, yet with fine acidity and length. A classic passito, with 160g/l of residual sugar. **Drink 2018-2040 Alc 14.5%** **D**