

Sizzling Sicily

Michele Shah explores the eastern part of Sicily, an island so diverse that it considers itself a continent and introduces us to some of her favourite sites



The famous Duomo in Catania is representative of the neo-classical architecture style.

Right: An almond flavoured ice or granita served with a brioche

Sicily is an amazing island, rich in history and natural beauty, one of the hottest wine and food destinations ready to be explored and savoured. The Sicilians are often portrayed as very proud of their island's identity and culture and it is not uncommon for people to describe themselves as Sicilian rather than as Italians, and refer to Sicily as a 'continent'.

Sicily is in fact the largest of the Mediterranean islands, covering some 25,708 sq km (9,925.9 sq mi) with a population of about 5,000,000 people. Its capital is Palermo on the northern side of the Island. Other main cities include, Catania, Messina and Syracuse. Even today its economy is largely based on agriculture, in particular vineyards and orange and lemon orchards, which profit from its excellent micro-climate, Mediterranean sun and mild winters.

Since ancient times Sicily has been known for its wealth of archaeology. Through the centuries it has been conquered many times by the Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Saracens, Normans and Spaniards, each contributing to the island's culture, particularly in the areas of cuisine and architecture. For the tourist it is like visiting many countries in one.

The reason I have chosen to take you to the Eastern coast of Sicily is because it includes some of my favourite sites: Ragusa, Catania, Syracuse, Taormina and the volcanic Mount Etna. Meandering through these wonderful cities, from the beautiful rugged coastline to snow-capped Etna, savouring local cuisine, and excellent wines will be a memorable experience. My suggestion would be to fly to Catania and hire a car. Catania is placed at the centre of the eastern coastline with Ragusa and Syracuse to the south and Taormina and Etna to the north. Roads at times can be narrow and twisted, especially as you climb the heights of Mount Etna, but both the suggested itineraries are perfectly 'doable' and enjoyable.

Catania a UNESCO world heritage site is best known for





An aerial view of Catania a UNESCO world heritage site

its baroque and neo-classic architecture, much of which has been built with the use of dark grey volcanic lava stone, often set in light sandstone frames, casting a unique theatrical feel over the ancient palazzo buildings. Its lively historic centre is dominated by the main Piazza del Duomo, cathedral square with its classic cafés and outdoor tables. Be sure not to miss the central Elephant Fountain, the symbol of the city. From here take a stroll down the main streets dotted with small shops selling everything and anything from bread to fashion. If you like food markets, the food and fish market just below the Piazza del Duomo is fun to browse through in the mornings and, maybe, buy some of Sicily's renowned oranges, or sun-dried Pachino tomatoes, which are some of the best you'll ever taste! Catania's fish market is the busiest and most exotic in all of Sicily and has been described by the British TV chef, Rick Stein as the best fish market in the world.

Catania to Syracuse is a short, one hour drive, some 50 km south along the coast. What impressed me most was its architecture and the light, creamy, yellow-white of its buildings built from the local stone. I arrived on a rather windy, but sunny, crisp morning in March and the buildings set out against the bright blue sky were like a mirage! Syracuse was once described by Cicero as 'the greatest Greek city and the most beautiful of them all'.

Syracuse is an archaeological haven. The historic centre of town, the island of Ortygia contains most of the sights, and



The Elephant Fountain in Catania's Piazza Duomo

is best enjoyed on foot. The archaeological area is about 25 minutes' walk away from the Ortygia. Like most main squares in Italy/Sicily, the Piazza del Duomo is the heart of the city which houses the Basilica of Santa Lucia with an interesting cycle of Caravaggio paintings. The Aretus Fountain in the centre of the square is said to have inspired many poets and writers.

Syracuse is a lively town and well worth spending a few days to enjoy the atmosphere, good food and wines. The Greek Theatre arranges a well-esteemed programme which runs from May to July where you can enjoy stage dramas by famous authors such as Aeschylus and Euripides. If you're not into Greek theatre you can try your hand at scuba diving, sailing and workshops including Sicilian puppet-making, (which is a great tradition here) ceramics and cooking classes.

On your way southwest to Ragusa which is about 70 km, be sure to stop at Noto, a UNESCO Heritage Site also famous for its Moscato di Noto. Noto is packed with beautiful baroque churches. Don't miss the Caffè di Sicilia in the centre of Noto, famous for its excellent ice creams, Sicilian 'granita' (a semi-frozen ice made from sugar, water and natural ingredients, lemon granita is a classic), Sicilian marzipan and jams – a veritable institution!

Ragusa is divided into the newer Ragusa Superiore and the older Ragusa Ibla. Ibla is where you want to head. It is a spectacular mix of narrow streets, steep winding steps, old



The Piazza Duomo in Syracuse houses the Basilica of Santa Lucia

churches, and fantastic views. Ragusa is also home to some of Sicily's top restaurants and is one of the prime areas of wine production, especially for Nero d'Avola. In the Ragusano area, Nero d'Avola is often still grown to single 'alberello' vineyards, in particular in the area of Noto, which together with Pachino are areas traditional to Nero d'Avola, yielding well-structured fruity, red berry wines, high in acidity with good complexity.

In the area of Ragusa and Vittoria there are two wineries that are very interesting to visit. The first is Azienda Agricola Gulfi in the area of Chiaramonte near Pachino (also known for its famous cherry tomatoes). Gulfi produces serious Nero d'Avola wines from traditional bush-trained Nero d'Avola vines. The entire winery production is organic and focuses on individual styled wines, in particular the three single vineyard Nero d'Avolas: Nerosanlorenzj – Nerobufaleffj – Nerobaronj. Gulfi also produces a good white Carricante – Carajcanti and Valcanzirja a blend of Chardonnay/Carricante/Albanello.

The second winery is Cos Winery in Vittoria owned by two architects, Giambattista Cilia and Giusto Occhipinti, the main protagonists behind Sicily's only DOCG Cerasuolo di Vittoria. One of Cos's goals has been to renovate an old rural residence which they converted into a winery which today houses 140 amphorae with a capacity of 400 litres each. This is one of the biggest collections of wine in amphorae in the world and to taste their wines is well worth a visit.

Cos winery produces a fine Cerasuolo di Vittoria

WINE IN SICILY

Microclimate and soils vary enormously with grapes grown from the western coastal areas of Palermo, Trapani and Agrigento, with its torrid climates and sandy soils, to the southeastern areas of Ragusa, Syracuse and the more northern cooler climates of Etna, with its mineral-rich soils. Within this panorama it is possible to sample a range of wine styles, from fruity concentration to deep elegance, detecting a notable distinction in wines made from the same grape variety grown in different parts of the island.

GRAPE VARIETIES

Many grapes types are grown, used either 'in purezza' (single grape variety wines), or blended. Some have been around for centuries, others are more recent imports. The following are some of the main varieties:

Red grapes: Nero D'Avola, Nerello Mascalese, Nerello Mantellato, Perricone, Frappato, Calabrese and the more recently introduced Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Shiraz (Syrah).

White grapes: Cataratto, Grecanico, Grillo, Inzolia, Zibibbo, Damaschino, Trebbiano, Ausonica, Moscato Bianco, Corinto Nero and the more recently introduced Chardonnay, Viognier and Fiano.

WHITE WINES

Carricante A distinctive white from the Etna area with minerality and a fresh citrus touch to it.

Cataratto Bianco A white wine, traditional in the Trapani area, it is fairly full bodied and used in Marsala wine, characterized by a delicate flavour tending to citrus notes.

Grecanico (Greco) A white so-called for its Greek origins. It is a crisp, apple-flavoured grape with an almondy finish.

Inzolia, Inzolia or Anzolia Commonly found all over Sicily, it produces delicious whites with delicate floral aromas.

Malvasia Round, fleshy variety, can be full-bodied, with fresh peach and apricot notes.

Zibibbo (Moscatellone). A variety of Muscat introduced by the Saracen Arabs during the 9th century, used in fortified wines and alone. Ripe, honey nose can be vinified in the dry version or sweet version.

Grillo Full-bodied white used in Marsala and Alcamo blends among others. Crisp and light in texture, with moderate acidity and notable sweetness.

RED WINES

Frappato Usually produced in its pure form, and presents a light, refreshing wine, with a full bouquet, low tannin content, and notable acidity. Used as a key component of the Cerasuolo di Vittoria DOC wine.

Nerello Mascalese and Cappuccino The two main red varieties grown on Mt Etna. Due to the rich mineral soils the cooler micro-climate and the steeper exposure they produce elegant mineral wines capable of good ageing.

Nero D'Avola (also called **Calabrese**) Nero D'Avola is one of the oldest indigenous grapes and Sicilian winemakers are justifiably proud of the recognition that this variety is now receiving. It is a hearty, red with soft tannins and can be drunk at an early age as a more fruity, berry style or aged to greater complexity.

Thirsty Traveller

DOCG, which is a blend of Frappato and Nero d'Avola. It is a refreshing red, which can be produced in a more complex blend with ageing potential. Frappato, which is lighter in colour and fruity in appeal has good acidity and freshness and is often paired to fish instead of white wines.

I would strongly suggest that if you go north of Catania, visit Taormina's ancient theatre, one of the most celebrated ruins in Sicily which hosts a summer programme of international concerts, opera and theatrical performances. Taormina itself is a charming town perched on the top of a mountain, but has over the years become a hive for tourism, making it rather over-crowded.

Mount Etna is the biggest and currently major active volcano in Europe. Etna's small villages that lie at the foothills, under the lava craters have a magic charm of their own with their characteristic houses built from the same lava stone. The Etnians are used to 'living on the edge' – it is said that the volcano is always in action. The frequent eruptions occur mainly from the summit and are very spectacular. Etna's most violent eruption was on 11 March 1669, during which flows of molten lava destroyed villages around its base and submerged part of the town of Catania. If you're fit and looking for adventure, check out the possibility of a guided climb up Etna. (Gruppo Guide Alpine Etna Sud, Via Etna 49 at Nicolosi)

While visiting Etna, be sure to plan a visit to one of its wineries. My suggestions would be the Benanti Winery or the Barone di Villagrande winery. Etna's indigenous Nerello Mascalese, Nerello Cappuccio and Carricante are planted to volcanic soil at altitudes varying between 400 m and 1,200 m. Etna's abundant rainfall and temperature excursions make for elegant, age-worthy wines, with good minerality. Its reds bear good tannic structure balanced by ripeness and high acidity.

The unique character of Benanti's wines owes as much to dramatic geological events in Sicilian history as to modern research and development. Their origins begin with the eruption of Europe's highest volcano and the creation of the Etnian region on the island of Sicily. Through the ages, people tenaciously worked to cultivate the land from what was a landscape of black lava. Mount Etna's vineyards climb up the entire mountain and share their slopes with pear and citrus orchards, cultivated fields and farms.

Although the Benanti family first came to Sicily in 1734 at the behest of the King of Sardinia, it was not until the late 1800s that Giuseppe Benanti's grandfather began to produce wines on the slopes of Etna. Today his grandson, Giuseppe Benanti, continues the family tradition. ♦



Pietramarina with its lava stone countryside near Mt Etna



Pupillo, a famous vineyard in Sicily, known for its Moscato



Benanti is one of the oldest vineyards in the shadow of Mt Etna



Most vineyards like Benanti have their own restaurants

DIRECTORY OF WINERIES, HOTELS, B&BS AND RESTAURANTS TO VISIT

Wineries

Vinicola Benanti, Vignagrande, Etna
www.vinicolabenanti.it

Pietradolce, Solicchiata di Castiglione di Sicilia, Etna
www.pietradolce.it

Azienda Agricola Pupillo, Syracuse
www.solacium.it

Barone di Villagrande 1727
www.villagrande.it

Cantina Gulfi, Chiaramonte, Gulfi, Ragusa
www.gulfi.it

Azienda Agricola Cos, Vittoria Ragusa
www.cosvittoria.it

Valle dell'Acate. Contrada Bidini, Acate, Ragusa
www.valledellacate.net

Hotels & B&Bs

Ristorante Locanda Don Serafino di Ragusa Ibla
www.locandadonserafino.it

Villa Carlotta Hotel and Ristorante la Fenice, Ragusa
www.villacarlottahotel.com

L'Orto sul Tetto, Via Tenente Distefano, 56, Ragusa Ibla
www.lortosultetto.it

Shalai Resort, Via Marconi 25, Linguaglossa, Etna
www.shalai.it

Il Palmento La Rosa, Pedara village, Etna
www.palmentolarosa.com

Des Etrangers et Miramare, Passeggio Adorno 10/12, Siracusa
www.desetrangers.it

Palazzo del Sale, Via Santa Teresa, 25, Siracusa
www.palazzodelsale.com

Hotel Katane Palace, Via C. Finocchiaro Aprile 110, Catania
www.katanepalace.it

Hotel Villa Schuler, Via Roma, Piazzetta Bastione, Taormina
www.hotelvillaschuler.com

Tao Domus Hotel, Corso Umberto, Taormina
www.taodomus.it

Restaurants

Ristorante Duomo di Ciccio Sultano, Ragusa Ibla
www.ristoranteduomo.it

Ristorante La Gazzaladra, Modica, Ragusa
www.ristorantelagazzaladra.it

Sicilia in Bocca, via Dusmet, 35, Catania
www.siciliainbocca.it

Osteria Antica Marina, Via Pardo, 29, Catania (right in the fish market)
www.anticamarina.it

Ristorante Don Camillo, Via Maestranza, 96, Siracusa
www.ristorantedoncamillosiracusa.it

Trattoria Archimede, Via Gemmellaro 8, Siracusa
www.lonelyplanet.com/italy/sicily/syracuse/restaurants/sicilian/trattoria-archimede

Trattoria il Crocifisso, Via Principe Umberto, 48 Noto
www.ilcrocifisso.it/main/

Da Nino, Via L. Rizzo, Letojanni (on the sea few km from Taormina)
www.danino.it/

Ristorante San Giorgio e il Drago, Via Giorgio La Pira, 28, Randazzo, Etna