



The beautiful island of Sicily

## SICILY COMES INTO ITS OWN

The Italian island of Sicily was for a long time the place where northern producers sourced their bulk wine. But after 30 years of hard work, Sicily is coming into its own as a region where exciting wines are to be found. Michéle Shah tracks the changes.

Until the early 1980s, Sicily was primarily producing vast quantities of bulk wine used for blending wines of the north and often shipped as far as France. There were few wineries to speak of with the exception of the Corvo wines from the Duca di Salaparuta winery and the family estate wines of Tasca d'Almerita.

Since then, the quality of production has made leaps and bounds. The most significant changes in Sicily's production took place in the mid-1980s thanks to the work

of a number of family estates, including Planeta, Donnafugata and Tasca d'Almerita, still considered the benchmark of Sicilian wines today. Following the example of Planeta, they established their reputation by planting international grape varieties.

### *A region emerges*

"It was necessary to reassure the world that Sicily could produce quality wines and not just bulk wine," explains Diego Planeta,

president of the island's largest co-op winery, Settesoli. Planeta planted Chardonnay, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon, and took on winemakers with international experience in winemaking in hot climates, particularly from Australia. Planeta's La Segreta label proved that good value wines could be made from Sicily, and their emergence could be considered the moment of Sicily's Renaissance.

International varieties led the way into the markets, yet at the same time, wine-

maker consultants such as Giacomo Tachis and agronomist Professor Attilio Scienza – both working with Sicily's Regional Institute for Wine and Viticulture (Istituto Regionale della Vite e del Vino, or IRVV) – believed in the potential of Sicily's indigenous varieties. Over the past 20 years, the IRVV and its consultants have contributed enormously to establishing vineyard management, research, and clonal selection of its main indigenous varieties, such as Nero d'Avola, Carricante, Nerello Mascalese, Catarratto and Inzolia, which today represent the face of Sicilian wines.

Sicily still has some tangled knots to comb out before it can glide successfully into the international arena. Its potential in exports is greatly under-exploited, with less than 10% of total production exported. Most producers think that if there were less fragmentation and more cohesion among producers, promotion could be more effective and export sales would therefore increase.

This is where the IRVV comes in, with its goal of creating a viable system of promotion under one umbrella. Under the eye of the IRVV, issues of quality control, research, training in viticulture and vinification have been addressed over the past years, yielding positive results. "Of course there are still some producers lagging behind, but on the whole the increase in quality production is still unknown to the outside world, this is why we really need to focus our attention on communicating to the consumer," says Dario Cartabellotta, the managing director. "Making good wine is not enough. We need to get the message across through commercial channels, where sales figures demonstrate Sicily's growing potential."

According to Cartabellotta the second important 'Renaissance' currently taking place with Sicilian wine is the communication of its quality to the rest of the world. Cartabellotta explains: "We are targeting international markets and taking part in international shows, as well as organizing events with importers and opinion leaders here in Sicily, in order to communicate the excellence of our wines and the uniqueness of our territory."

It takes time to implement changes across the board and one of the most frequent criticisms of Sicilian wines

expressed by the trade is that although quality has greatly improved, producers are still too ambitious with pricing, forgetting that quality/pricing is one of the most important factors for sales.

"The quality of Sicilian wines coming to the US market is very high. Estates like

### Ten Top Wineries and their Brands

#### Settesoli

Main brand includes single varietal wines under the label MandraRossa

#### IVAM (Messina)

Barone di Bernaj, Terra di Luce, Tralci Scansiana, La Bella Angelica, Eolo

#### Duca di Salaparuta

Corvo, Duca Enrico, Salaparuta, Terre d'Agala

#### Pellegrino

Duca di Castelmonte – HoReCa range and Passito di Pantelleria range  
Cantine Pellegrino – Marsala wines

#### Firriato

Camelot, Harmonium, Cavanera, Quarter, Santagostino, Etna, Altavilla, Chiaramonte

#### Tasca d'Almerita

Tenuta Regaleali, Capofaro, Island of Mothia, Tascante Estate, Sallier de La Tour

#### Cusumano

Noà, Pinot Nero, Jalé, Benuara, Angimbé, Cubla, Sàgana

#### Donnafugata

Lighea, La Fuga, Sherazade, Tancredi, Mille e una Notte, Kabir, Ben Ryé

#### Cantine Nicosia (Etna)

Sosta Tre Santi, Fondo Filaria, Vulkà, Manna Sicana, Alcantara

#### Planeta

La Segreta Bianco/Rosso, Chardonnay, Cometa, Burdese, Syrah, Merlot, Cerasuolo di Vittoria

Tasca d'Almerita, Planeta, Donnafugata, Cusumano and a number of emerging Sicilian estates all have contributed to elevating the image of Sicilian wines," explains Leonardo LoCascio, the CEO of Winebow, USA. He says that Sicily's top offerings are world-class wines that compare favourably with top wines from all over the world, and consumer interest in varieties like Nero d'Avola and, to a lesser extent, Grillo and Inzolia has never been higher. "That said, in my opinion Sicilian

wines in general are missing a huge opportunity in today's market place. Most of them retail in the \$15.00-\$25.00 range, right in the middle of the most competitive price segment for Italian wines. Given Sicily's climate and abundant available vineyards it should be possible to produce high-quality wines that retail in the \$10.00-\$12.00 segment." LoCascio says that price point is "a sweet spot that has been all but vacated by Italian wines in recent years, and that's where serious business could be done. At current price levels Sicilian wines provide interesting alternatives to offerings from other areas, but it will be difficult for these brands to reach large volumes."

### *A look at Sicily*

Sicily today has 22 DOC areas of production and one DOCG Cerasuolo di Vittoria, yet most wine is labeled IGT Sicilia. "This gives us more freedom and allows us to bottle single varietal wines, with the mention of the grape variety on the label, which is not possible under the DOC denomination," says Giuseppe Monaco, export manager of Cantine Nicosia. Sicily's ongoing debate over creating the new DOC Sicilia is the hottest issue disputed among producers.

Sicilian wines have historically been shipped to the north and used for blending. It is also true that from the 1990s, thanks to the growing popularity of Nero d'Avola, large quantities of bulk wine was shipped north and bottled under labels of northern wineries. They were sold cheap in international markets, creating friction between wineries in Sicily and those bottling Sicilian wines out of Sicily, an issue that the new DOC Sicilia will attempt to regulate.

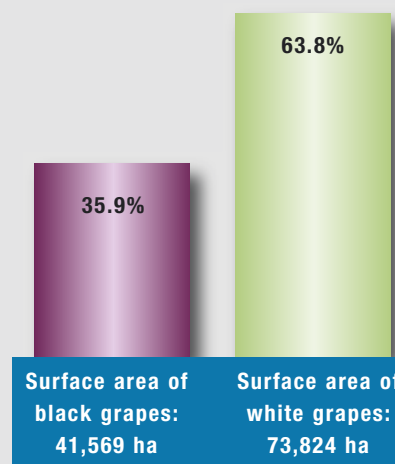
"The only reason that justifies creating the DOC Sicilia is to regulate and obligate the bottling of Sicilian wine in Sicily," comments Fabio Piccoli, co-author of 'Il Vino Oltre la Crisi' and international marketing consultant to a number of Italian consortiums, including Sicily. "However, this at present is not possible, for the very fact that the EU will not change the bottling rights which have been acquired over the past ten years by a number of large bottlers outside Sicily and Italy." Piccoli also identifies a second important factor. "Though no-

## REGIONAL ANALYSIS

## Sicily



- |                                   |   |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| 1] Alcamo                         | 13] Noto  |
| 2] Cerasuolo di Vittoria D.O.C.G. | 14] Moscato di Siracusa                           |
| 3] Contea di Sclafani             | 15] Moscato, Passito di Pantelleria e Pantelleria |
| 4] Contessa Entellina             | 16] S. Margherita Belice                          |
| 5] Delia Nivolelli                | 17] Sambuca di Sicilia                            |
| 6] Eoro                           | 18] Sciacca                                       |
| 7] Etna                           | 19] Riesi   |
| 8] Faro                           | 20] Mamertino                                     |
| 9] Malvasia delle Lipari          | 21] Erice   |
| 10] Marsala                       | 22] Salaparuta                                    |
| 11] Menfi                         | 23] Vittoria                                      |
| 12] Monreale                      |   |



SOURCE: IRIW

one wants to admit it, Sicily's bulk wine (and there is plenty of it, as only 20% of its total production is bottled in Sicily) is a lucrative business, in particular for the larger cooperatives in Sicily." Piccoli goes on to explain that if these issues were to change under the DOC Sicilia, not allowing bulk Sicilian wine to be bottled outside, Sicily would submerge under a sea of bulk wine, with no sales outlet. Piccoli adds, "What producers in Sicily still need to learn is how to sell their wines to international markets."

The key issue is the bottling of wine outside Sicily, as Piccoli explains, is that to evaluate the volume of business this brings or takes away, one would need to know exactly how much wine is bottled outside Sicily. This, apparently, is not known, or if it is, it's not admitted.

"The DOC Sicilia is necessary as long as the identity of the individual DOCs are retained," says Professor Scienza. "DOCs such as Etna and Pantelleria should be upgraded to DOCGs and historic DOCs such as Menfi and Marsala should stand

fast. The DOC Sicilia is necessary to regulate IGT Nero d'Avola and Inzolia, which is bottled outside Italy with no quality or authenticity control, and sold at outrageously cheap prices."

### The wines

Until 30 years ago Marsala, a fortified wine, was one of the few commercially known wines from Sicily. The history of Marsala as a quality wine, based on the white varieties of Grillo, Catarratto, Inzolia and Damaschino is part of the country's

historical wealth - but the style seems to be dying a slow and painful death. Marsala's image today has been internationally degraded to that of a cooking wine - 'Scaloppine al Marsala', a must on most Italian menus. Although there are still 14 producers of Marsala, the style is in danger of becoming extinct, as only a handful - Marco De Bartoli, Florio, Martinez and Pellegrino - are seen to produce quality Marsala for niche markets. However, the IRVV, together with the Consorzio DOC Marsala, has launched a proposal to revive Marsala based on a project of research, increased quality and promotion. But it will be a battle, as the consortium faces a number of problems.

"Producers in the Marsala consortium are in discord and lack unanimity," says Leonardo Agueci, president of IRVV. "Changes are needed in the appellation regulations, which are outdated. This also means reducing the number of styles of Marsala, focusing on the styles of Solera and Vergine, returning to production based on the traditional bush-trained vines. Our aim is for Marsala to recapture its image as one of the great Mediterranean wines."

When it comes to other styles, the future looks much brighter. Recent changes in the style of wines show that Sicilian wines are veering away from the chunky, overripe, over-oaked wines to more fruit-forward wines showing elegance, balance and lower levels of alcohol. The IRVV is currently engaged in a research programme to bring down the level of alcohol with the use of a specific yeast (*Candida stellata*), which lowers the sugar level, diminishing the alcohol content while increasing the level of glycerin. The other study is based on early harvesting, allowing the grapes to ripen and reach phenolic maturity while lowering the sugar content and alcohol level by 1% to 1.5%, producing wines of structure, yet more aromatic, not over 12.5%-13% alcohol.

The emblem of Sicilian wine is still Nero d'Avola, in terms of both plantings and popularity. It's planted to 18,830 hectares, second only to the white indigenous variety Catarratto, which covers 32,903 hectares.

Nero d'Avola does well in most of Sicily, according to Alessio Planeta. And it's a terroir wine, changing its character depending on where it is planted. "If you are looking to

produce a modern style of wine, characterized by a rounded, fruity appeal and easy drinking, however, not particularly good for ageing, then Menfi and Sambuca in western Sicily is the best area to plant Nero d'Avola," explains Planeta, "whereas if you



**"Making good wine is not enough. We need to get the message across through commercial channels, where sales figures demonstrate Sicily's growing potential."**

**Dario Cartabellotta,**  
managing director, IRVV

are looking for a more complex Cru showing elegance, aromas and acidity with good ageing potential, then the area of Noto, Vittoria and Ragusa in the southeast are excellent areas. Contea di Sclafani in the centre of Sicily is another area with excellent potential, yielding age worthy, structured wines with bold fruit."

The most recent trend in Sicily is the growing interest in wines from Etna, characterized by its steep slopes and terraced vineyards of ancient bush-trained vines showing the depth and finesse of more celebrated northern European bottlings. "In recent months, Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Cappuccio from the unique volcanic terroir of Mount Etna have gained a lot of attention on account of their distinct flavor profile," says LoCascio. Top bottlings of the Etna Rosso DOC, made with a blend of local grapes Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Cappuccio, can be complex and refined with real cellaring potential, as can the smaller quantities of Etna Bianco DOC, made predominantly with Carricante grapes.

### *New elegance*

The changes are not only taking place in wine styles and varietals. Sicily's agricultural sector was historically male dominated, concentrating on powerful wines lacking elegance. According to Cartabellotta: "The future of Sicilian production is in the hands of Sicily's women winemakers. Thanks to them, the style of Sicily's wines are changing to a more tasteful, elegant refined style of production." ■

#### Export of Sicilian wines in bulk and bottle Value (000€)

	Bulk	Bottle
1997	39,574	24,403
1998	37,621	35,020
1999	69,179	34,731
2000	48,388	42,658
2001	33,752	50,222
2002	19,184	59,595
2003	15,931	56,116
2004	12,843	66,539
2005	9,574	67,775
2006	8,984	73,279
2007	1,648	72,817
2008	8,317	72,712
2009	8,834	75,471

#### Export of Sicilian wines in bulk and bottle Volume (hL)

	Bulk	Bottle
1997	1,208,631	111,678
1998	1,032,341	163,269
1999	1,973,590	153,929
2000	1,531,620	192,128
2001	1,101,323	215,922
2002	421,968	225,579
2003	227,002	193,432
2004	167,322	260,263
2005	83,111	266,941
2006	113,970	291,969
2007	140,422	276,259
2008	70,336	263,984
2009	118,906	340,743

SOURCE: IRVV