

SUMMER 2021 ₹250

# Sommelier INDIA

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# MOUNT ETNA

## The volcano famous for its wines

An unique volcanic terroir makes for great wines – as celebrated vintner Angelo Gaja has recognized by teaming up with local winemaker Alberto Graci in Etna. Michèle Shah on the magic of Etna



Mount Etna, captivating, mysterious and awe inspiring, is the highest (3,320m) and most active volcano in Europe and has always inspired fear and respect. Its name comes from the Greek Aitne, from *aitho*, “I burn”, and there is many a myth about its magical properties.

Over the centuries people in its vicinity have learnt to live with its ever-active eruptions, some minor and some major, such as the one in 1669 that cascaded right down to the centre of Catania at the foot of the volcano, killing more than 20,000 people and leaving thousands more homeless. Its latest eruption, which had been expected for over a year, began on February 16th this year.

Etna covers an area of some 1,600 sq km, and its base has a circumference of about 150 km, but its vines are mainly planted at altitudes starting at 350 metres with some reaching up

**Over the past 30 years Etna has enjoyed a revival as a wine terrain and has attracted many new investors from Sicily, and mainland Italy**

to 1,250 metres, such as the vines of I Vigneri estate, known as heroic vineyards.

Etna Wines are mainly planted to a land characterized by its steep slopes and terraced vineyards of ancient bush-trained vines. The main grape varieties planted to this unique volcanic terroir are the indigenous red varieties Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Cappuccio which absorb the minerals of the volcanic soils, producing wines that show depth and finesse. Etna Bianco DOC is made predominantly with Carricante grapes and counts fewer plantings. Out of 1,100 hectares registered (which is not entirely exact as there are at least another 600ha spread out among private properties, for domestic use and not registered) Etna Rosso Doc counts 800ha and Etna Bianco Doc 200ha, out of which 50ha is planted to Etna Bianco Superiore Doc. Both the white and red wines produce varietal wines, showing depth of

character with a distinct flavour profile, layers of complexity and ageing potential.

Compared to other regions of Italy, Etna’s soils are strictly related to constant volcanic activity and are therefore very complex, varying greatly in terms of depth and texture, even within the same parcel. However, according to Salvo Foti, Etna’s ‘guru’, the rising trend to rapidly increase new plantings on Etna soils – counting some 100ha of new vines per year – could endanger the balance between Etna’s old and new vineyards. The latter is often planted to ‘imported’ soils which are not as rich as those volcanic soils that have undergone a natural process of decomposition and are rich in organic matter. Foti is also concerned about importing new vineyard diseases into uncontaminated areas of Etna.

Over the past 30 years Etna has enjoyed a revival as a wine terrain and has attracted many

**Etna, the mercurial volcano is an awesome sight – a royal personage with snow on its shoulders like ermine**

new investors and investments from Sicily, as well as mainland Italy and further afield. Today its benchmark wineries remain, I Vigneri, Benanti, Ciro Biondi, Barone di Villagrande, Graci, and a number of others. Newer investors came later and include Duca di Salaparuta, Planeta, Tenuta di Fessina, Terre Nere, Passopisciaro, Girolamo Russo, Frank Cornelissen and, most recently, a joint-venture project between Angelo Gaja and Alberto Graci, “Idda”, which is the name of the project and the label on the wine, means “she” in the Sicilian dialect. It is a term of endearment and awe with which Sicilians refer to Etna.

For Gaja, the powerful image of the mountain has always remained alive – Etna, the sleeping giant, sometimes awake and often grumbling; a royal figure wearing snow as an ermine fur on its shoulders. But the real story begins in 2015, when Angelo Gaja and Alberto Graci meet for the first time.



"I believe that old age starts when the regrets are more than the dreams. Etna has been under the skin for some time," says Angelo. "The project is in its infancy, and it will move forward according to the nature of the wine. However, Etna, like Langa (Piemonte), is a place where elegant, enigmatic and intriguing wines can be made. I also took into consideration the challenges of climate change and the fact that Etna has the highest vineyards in Europe and the harvest period is among the last on the continent."

Gaia Gaja, Angelo's eldest daughter, has taken to the challenge with passion and a determination to make an important contribution to the discovery and appreciation of the region and its varieties. "It's an area that is growing fast, strong in its ancient culture yet youthful with a new generation of young passionate producers such as Alberto."

**W**hile the most-planted and highest-valued variety on Etna is Nerello Mascalese, covering 80% of the vineyards, Angelo and Alberto intend to focus mainly on Carricante. They believe in the bright future of Etna's white wines, and in Carricante's

**Nerello Mascalese, covering 80% of the vineyards is the most planted variety in Etna**

**Angelo and Alberto believe in the bright future of Etna's white wines, and in Carricante's potential to develop great complexity and ageing potential**

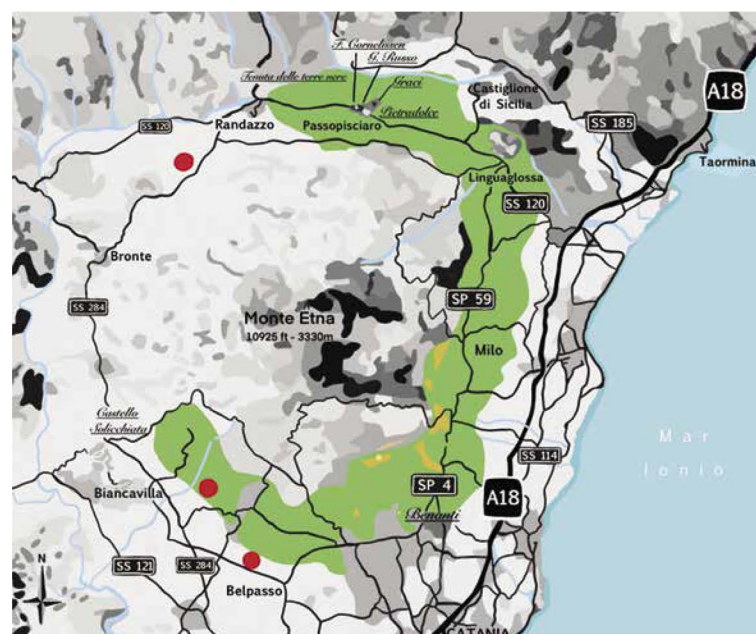


potential to develop great complexity and ageing potential along with moderate alcohol and high acidity.

The unorthodox approach of focusing on the southern slope of the volcano, often referred to as the "contrary" side of Etna, makes the project an even greater challenge. According to Angelo Gaja this under-valued region boasts a glorious past. It is where Baron Spitaleri, said to be the first producer to put Etna on a wine label, had planted vineyards in 1866. However, the southern side is relatively unexploited compared to the northern slope of the mountain, which is well developed with a remarkable reputation.

For Graci the joint venture with Gaja is a continuous source of enrichment, not only from the human point of view but also from a winemaking point of view, thanks to Angelo Gaja's great experience and vision.

"My family and I are very lucky to work with Angelo and his family," says Graci. "We share the same interpretation of Etna. We are looking for elegance and electricity. Very few places on earth can make wines with these qualities, and Etna is one of them."



Map showing the area around Mt Etna



Alberto Graci and Angelo Gaja, partners in a joint venture to produce wine in Etna

We approach this venture with humility, because we recognize that Etna is stronger than everything, and everyone else. Etna will dictate the identity of the wine we make and we will follow. We will follow the volcano."

It wouldn't be possible to sing the praises of new ventures without going back to the last 30 years or more and recognizing the incredible work that winemaker, Salvo Foti has accomplished on Etna, bringing its production to the forefront of Sicily's eclectic wines. For many years Foti was chief winemaker for the estate, Benanti and Biondi, some of the historic benchmark wineries of Etna, and one of the few that till today can boast of production partly made from some of the oldest, contorted bush-trained vines, thought to be over 100 years of age. A native of Etna, Foti has been consultant to a number of wineries on Etna. He left Benanti some 10 years ago to channel all his energy into his own venture, I Vigneri, which takes its name from a winegrowers' guild established in 1435 on Etna and is run like a cooperative with a handful of orthodox Etna producers and some producers from the

neighbouring islands of Salina and Pantelleria.

"I Vigneri is the culmination of more than 30 years of experience in Eastern Sicily," says Foti. "We have sought to use non-invasive methods and systems, to respect local traditions and our own ancient grape varieties as far as possible. Our work ethic lies in the pleasure of harmony with the environment, nature and the volcano Etna, which is so much a part of us. We look to a holistic system of grape growing and wine production which respects our environment."

Salvo Foti follows the strictest viticultural practices — using chestnut stakes in the vineyards, only dry lava stone terracing, manure from local sheep at zero kilometres and winemaking practices that often involve the use of the original "Palmento" in use some 30 years ago, which requires manual pressing and treading the grapes by foot.

#### THINGS TO SEE AND DO

Etna is not just wine. Depending on the time of year you visit Etna, you can ski, cycle, trek, horse-ride, parachute or go for a helicopter dive into one of Etna's craters. There are a number



## ETNA DIRECTORY

### WINERIES

[www.ivigneri.it](http://www.ivigneri.it)  
[www.graci.eu/?lang=en](http://www.graci.eu/?lang=en)  
[www.benanti.it](http://www.benanti.it)  
[www.villagrande.it/en/barone\\_di\\_villagrande\\_en/](http://www.villagrande.it/en/barone_di_villagrande_en/)  
[www.frankcornelissen.it](http://www.frankcornelissen.it)  
[www.vinifranchetti.com/passopisciario/](http://www.vinifranchetti.com/passopisciario/)  
[www.tenutaterrenere.com/it/](http://www.tenutaterrenere.com/it/)  
[www.tenutadifessina.com](http://www.tenutadifessina.com)

### RESTAURANTS

#### ETNA

Bar Damico-Valastro, Castiglione di Sicilia  
– home made grainta, ice-cream, brioche, arancini, cakes  
[www.shalai.it](http://www.shalai.it) (Michelin star restaurant)  
[www.ladispendadelletna.eu](http://www.ladispendadelletna.eu) – Castiglione di Sicilia  
[www.facebook.com/TrattoriaLinguaGrossa/](https://www.facebook.com/TrattoriaLinguaGrossa/)  
Lingualossa  
[www.4archi.it](http://www.4archi.it) in Milo  
[www.ristorantesangiorgioeiladro.it](http://www.ristorantesangiorgioeiladro.it) – Randazzo  
[www.caveox.it/](http://www.caveox.it/) - Solicchiata frazione di Castiglione di Sicilia.

#### CATANIA

Razmataz | Wine Bar Catania - Via Montesano, 17/19, 95131 Catania CT -  
+39 095 311893  
<https://ristoranteanticamarina.com>  
<https://www.fud.it>

### HOTELS

#### ETNA

[www.shalai.it](http://www.shalai.it)  
[www.keposetnarelais.com](http://www.keposetnarelais.com)  
[www.hotelfedericosecondo.com/](http://www.hotelfedericosecondo.com/)  
[www.centotari.com/](http://www.centotari.com/) - guesthouse  
[tenutadifessina.com/ospitalita/](http://tenutadifessina.com/ospitalita/) - suits and rooms – winery accommodation

#### CATANIA

[www.una-hotel-palace.catania.hotels-sicily.net/it/](http://www.una-hotel-palace.catania.hotels-sicily.net/it/)  
[www.manganellipalace.it](http://www.manganellipalace.it)

### 4X4 TOURS ON ETNA

[www.etnalcantara.com](http://www.etnalcantara.com)  
[etnajeepexcursion.eu](http://etnajeepexcursion.eu)  
[www.excursionsetna.it](http://www.excursionsetna.it)

### HELICOPTER TOURS

[www.butterflyhelicopters.com](http://www.butterflyhelicopters.com)

**Etna is not just wine. Depending on the time of year you visit, you can ski, cycle, trek, horse-ride, parachute, or go for a helicopter dive into one of Etna's craters**



Idda, white and red wines. Idda is also the name of the project between Gaja and Graci

of specialized tour companies that organise 4x4 drives to the old lava flows and will also organise a combination of different activities in a day's visit. Hiring a car is the best option so that you can visit Etna's wineries and also its delightful towns, such as the centre of Linguaglossa, famous for its ancient churches and the peasant-themed mural frescoes that embellish its old houses.

In Castiglione di Sicilia you can admire medieval churches, remains of an ancient castle and the precious Byzantine Cuba church. Not far from here be sure to visit the Alcantara Gorges. A visit to the villages of Motta Camastra, Mojo Alcantara, Malvagna are also a must. From Linguaglossa take the road that reaches the splendid Ragabo pine forest and, if you're visiting in winter, hire a pair of skis at the ski resort of Piano Provenzana.

While you're in the area you can also visit Taormina, a one and half minute drive from Etna's slopes and one hour from Catania. Taormina's beautiful ancient amphitheatre offers spectacular views over the coast and surrounding hills. Catania will be your starting and ending point. It is a charming city by the sea, characterized by its grey and white architecture; many of the palaces were built using Etna's lava stone. Another must, when in Catania, is a visit to the fish market, open most mornings. It's fascinating to watch the fresh catch being sold in one of the world's most colourful and vociferous, fish markets.

The best time to visit Sicily is Spring from April to early summer in June, when the weather is not too hot. Avoid July and August for the heat and crowds, but September and October can be blissful. One of the advantages of visiting Etna is the altitude and the cool winds. Catania, the city closest to Etna, is about an hour's drive and has an international airport with plenty of connecting flights to Rome. ♦