

# Sicilian wine ups its game

James Bayley reports back from Sicilia en Primeur on the strength and resilience of the Sicilian wine industry

**M**ore than 90 international wine journalists convened in Sicily in May for the 20th edition of Sicilia en Primeur, an event attended by *Harpers*, which united over 100 wineries in the region. These wineries, including founding members Planeta, Tasca d'Almerita and Rallo, collectively produce around 900 labels, accounting for more than 80% of the value of bottled Sicilian wine. Nearly all of these companies (99%) produce wines with a controlled designation of origin (DOC), with exports representing more than half of sales and reaching 100

countries and counting.

Despite challenges such as extreme weather events and downy mildew, white wines and organic cultivation remain pivotal in Sicily. In 2023, while exports of DOP red wines decreased by 4%, exports of DOP still white wines grew by 7%. Notably, Sicilian DOP white wine exports saw significant increases in the United States (29%), Canada (13.9%) and Germany (6.8%), while DOP red wines found growth in France (7.5%) and the UK (6.8%).

Speaking more broadly, the European market leads in Sicilian wine exports, comprising 98.6% of total exports, followed by North America, England, Japan, China and Australia.

According to Mattia Filippi, co-founder of Uva Sapiens, during the 20th edition of Sicilia en Primeur: "From this 2023 vintage, we will be drinking red wines with a strong identity, white wines with a complex aromatic profile, native vines increasingly faithful to the territory and international ones with a new and interesting profile."

According to Uva Sapiens, Sicily's grape yield in 2023 was approximately 50% less per hectare compared with the national

average of the past 13 years.

Uva Sapiens adds that Sicily's 37,650ha represents 28% of Italy's organic vineyard area. To put that in a global context – Italy, Spain and France dominate organic vineyard space, with Sicily alone accounting for 8% of the world's total.

Despite a 3.48% decrease in total DOP and IGT production compared with the previous year, Sicilian wines have maintained their identity, terroir and quality, as evidenced by an exhaustive technical tasting of more than 300 wines during the event.

The wines from the 2023 harvest were distinguished by their clarity and definition. Notably, Grillo wines exhibited evolving positive traits over time highlighted by vertical tastings, while Catarratto demonstrated its appeal as a single grape variety. Nero d'Avola, Frappato, Nerello Mascalese and Perricone have also established their quality credentials, with elegant, versatile and fresh styles.

Another notable discovery was the resilience of Syrah grapes to weather conditions, yielding wines with balanced acidity and sugar content with promising

ageing potential.

Despite challenges, the Sicilian wine industry, represented by Assovini Sicilia, responded adeptly. The 2024 edition of Sicilia en Primeur, themed Cultivating the Future, celebrated the 2023 grape harvest characterised by a 'less is more' approach.



## COMPLEX HARVEST

"It was a very complex winegrowing year that highlighted some critical issues linked to the particular aggressiveness of downy mildew, but also revealed a very skilled production sector that was able to interpret and enhance the peculiarities of an exceptionally unusual grape harvest," Pietro Russo MW told *Harpers* at Sicilia en Primeur.

Sicily's grape harvest, spanning 100 days, from mid-summer to the end of October, was the longest in Italy, marked by complexities due to downy mildew. Across Italy, the 2023 harvest witnessed historically low productivity, its lowest production rate since 1947, with Sicily experiencing a 31% decrease in production due to adverse weather conditions, mirroring trends in other central-southern Italian and southern European regions.

However, Mariangela Cambria, president of Assovini Sicilia, praised the proactive measures taken by associated companies to manage the challenging harvest, emphasising a strategy focused on prevention, technical expertise and prudent management.

"The associated companies of Assovini Sicilia have demonstrated that they know how to manage a challenging situation, such as the last grape harvest, with expertise, knowhow and technique.

"An approach focusing on prevention and careful management implemented by the producers proved to be successful, as well as a series of agronomic techniques and monitoring activities capable of verifying water stress conditions in advance and being able to intervene promptly," Cambria concluded.



## VOLCANIC RENAISSANCE

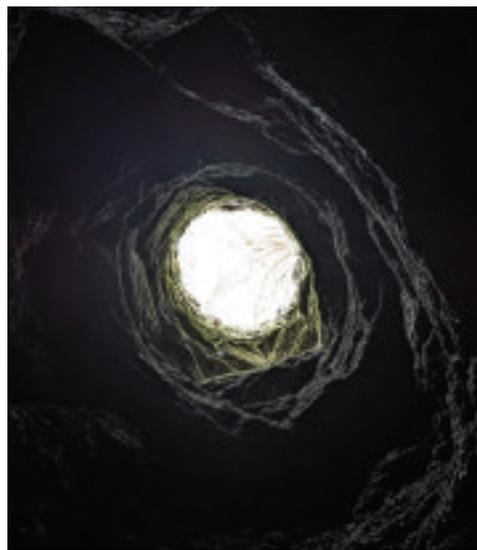
Mount Etna, Europe's tallest and most active volcano, has always been fertile ground for winemaking, boasting a centuries-old history. Over the past two decades, however, a resurgence in white wine production has emerged, driven by a new generation of Sicilian winemakers. These innovators are harnessing the unique terroir of Etna's south-eastern

slopes to craft wines that are gaining international acclaim alongside the reds.

The revival of Etna wines began in the early 21st century when passionate pioneers sought out the mountain's volcanic terroirs. Their success with Nerello Mascalese reds and Carricante whites drew global attention, leading to further investment from established winemakers across Sicily, Italy and California. Figures like Piedmont's Angelo Gaja joined the Etna wine scene, enhancing its reputation.

Now, a third wave of predominantly Sicilian winemakers is taking over, building on their predecessors' knowledge while carving out new niches, particularly in white wine production. Carla Maugeri, working with Tuscan-born winemaker Emiliano Falsini, exemplifies this movement. The Maugeri family, with vineyards in the Etna Bianco Superiore DOC region near Milo, focuses on producing Carricante wines from mineral-rich, volcanic soils.

Milo's proximity to the Mediterranean and its higher rainfall, combined with ancient volcanic soils, impart a distinctive minerality to its wines. Carricante, the region's star white grape, showcases



Monte Gorna vineyard, Cantine Nicosia

sharp acidity and complex textures that can evolve with age. "Our mission is to focus on white varieties, recognising that our part of Etna excels in producing these wines," Gea Calí, export sales manager for Maugeri winery told *Harpers* at Sicilia en Primeur.

Another key player in Etna's wine renaissance is the Nicosia winery. Under Carmelo Nicosia's leadership, the family business transformed through significant investments in vineyard expansion and modern winemaking facilities. "The region has shifted from mass vinifications to single-parcel vinifications, enhancing the unique characteristics of each vineyard," explains Graziano Nicosia, owner of Cantine Nicosia. This focus on terroir and microclimate allows winemakers to produce wines that truly reflect Mount Etna's diverse landscape.

Terra Costantino, the first organic winery in Etna, also plays a pivotal role. Founded over 40 years ago by Dino Costantino, the winery continues to embrace organic practices. Fabio V Costantino, the current owner, notes at Sicilia en Primeur: "Our long-term goal is to produce elegant and vertical wines even in 20 years, addressing climate change by planting new vineyards at higher altitudes."

Etna winemakers are adept at adapting to consumer preferences, with a growing trend towards terroir-driven wines. This has led to increased demand for Etna DOC wines in markets such as the US, Canada, Japan and the UK. Producers are investing in areas best suited for white and sparkling wines, and adopting organic practices. Terra Costantino, for example, focuses on producing wines that reflect the unique terroir of Etna's eastern slope.

Looking ahead, Etna winemakers are excited about further innovation and growth. Environmental sustainability remains a key focus, with initiatives aimed at mitigating the impact of climate change. The production of traditional-method sparkling wines is also gaining traction, with several wineries experiencing success.

As for Maugeri, white wines will continue to dominate production except a Nerello Mascalese vinified in the same manner as the estate's white wines, according to Calí.

The wines of south east Mount Etna, particularly the whites, are experiencing a renaissance driven by innovation, tradition and a deep respect for the volcanic terroir. As winemakers continue to explore and refine their craft, the future of Etna wines looks incredibly promising, with each bottle telling the story of this remarkable region. No longer just a trend, Etna DOC stands proudly alongside Italy's foremost wine regions. ■