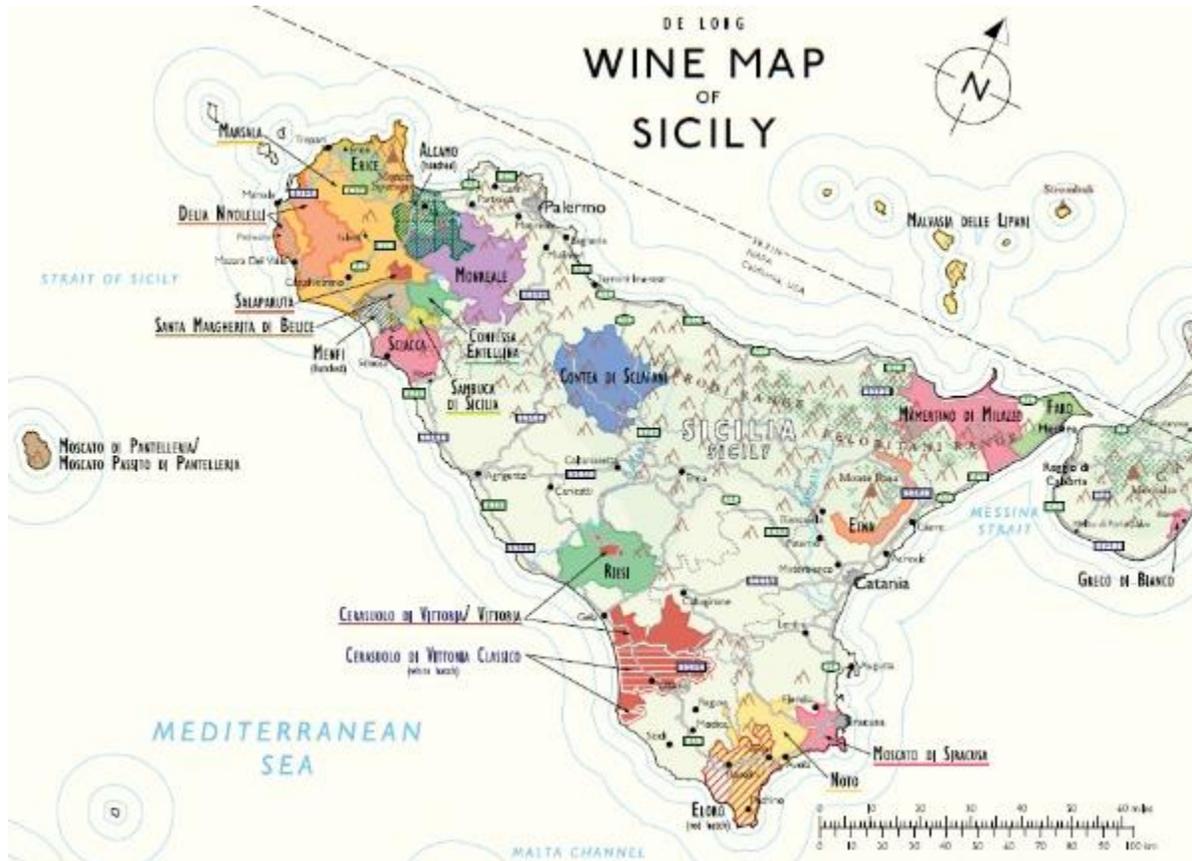


Sicily



Overview, climate, and geography

An island wine region located just a few miles off the coast of Calabria in southern Italy, Sicily has recently become one of the most interesting areas in the world for winemaking. Even though Sicily is #sohot right now, winemaking in this area is ancient – vines have been grown since before 750 BC. Historically, Sicily was known for producing bulk, table wine, as well as the sweet dessert wine Marsala, and to this day the region produces little wine at the DOC and DOCG levels. However, in the 90s and early 2000s, winemakers started to embrace the wealth of indigenous Sicilian grapes and focus on creating higher quality wines, often produced organically or biodynamically.

In truth, Sicily has an excellent climate, geography, and terroir for high-quality winemaking. With significant Mediterranean and island influences, as well as abundant sunshine, the overall climate of Sicily is warm and dry. However, the island is quite mountainous, and the benefit of altitude helps to moderate heat, preserve acidity, and even out ripening. Island winds blow from the oceans to protect grapes from frost and mildew (hence the lack of necessity for chemical sprays in order to prevent disease, and therefore the abundance of organic viticulture), and the harvest is one of the longest across the globe, often lasting more than 90 days. Dark volcanic soil is prevalent throughout the island, with mountains and volcanic hills covering most of Sicily, but it is most significant on and around the active volcano Mount Etna in eastern Sicily.

Many of Sicily's wines are bottled under the general IGT Terre Siciliane designation (previously IGT Sicilia), which can be made in any style, from any grape, in Sicily. While this designation can include lower-quality wines, all IGT Terre Siciliane wines are not necessarily low in quality; the 2005 Calabretta Nerello Mascalese that we serve by-the-glass, among others, is labeled under this IGT!

Sicily's claim to fame: Etna DOC

Probably the most well-known of Sicily's wine regions is Etna DOC, a semi-circular region that curves around the base of Europe's largest active volcano, Mount Etna. Set along the east side of the island, Etna was Sicily's first DOC, designated in 1968, and while winemaking is ancient in Etna, poverty in the region caused many of Etna's vineyards to be abandoned, with locals seeking work in more prosperous parts of the country. In the early 1980s, there were less than 10 Etna wine producers, compared to more than 70 today. While many of the remaining producers were ripping out old vines to plant international grape varieties, hoping to gain international recognition through familiar grapes, one producer, Giuseppe Benanti, consulted with local oenologist Salvo Foti, who would soon become a star Sicilian winemaker and consultant. Foti vehemently opposed turning away from local grape varieties, arguing that ancient vineyards held untapped potential and by restoring them, Sicily's wine identity could bring back prosperity to the region.



Etna

So what makes Etna DOC, a region sometimes compared to Burgundy, special enough to risk smoke, steam, and lava from a relatively frequently erupting volcano? The answer is a combination of factors that can



basically be summed up as terroir. First, the soil: black volcanic soil dominates here. This not only adds a distinct minerality to the wines here, but historically, vines planted in this well-draining volcanic soil tend to be extra resilient. In fact, the soils themselves are resistant to the root louse phylloxera, which decimated vineyards across Europe in the late 1800s, so there is an abundance of old, sometimes pre-phylloxera grape vines in Etna.

Second, Etna DOC offers altitude, a key counterbalance to Sicily's hot, sunny climate. Vines can be planted over 3500 feet above sea level, but there is a growing trend to seek out higher and higher elevation vineyard sites (Mount Etna itself

is over 10,000 feet tall). Temperatures are cooler at higher elevations, and the soil is even richer with volcanic deposits, creating delicate, focused, and intensely minerally wines. The high elevation game is a dangerous one to play, however, as vineyards come in closer proximity to the mouth of the volcano.

Finally, exposure is key in Etna. The best vineyards in the region lie in Mount Etna's rain shadow, protecting them from moisture and allowing winemakers to farm without excessive chemical additions in the vineyard. The vineyards are also in close proximity to the Mediterranean, which reflects sunlight off the water and onto the vineyards. This is what allows winemakers to seek elevations that are some of the highest in the world; whereas normally temperatures would be too cool for the grapes to ripen, this sunlight reflection helps with complete ripening. Hence, wines with such acidity and finesse can still have ripe fruit flavors.



Fun fact: Mount Etna last erupted on December 3, 2015, with a lava fountain that reached a kilometer above the mouth of the volcano!

The wines and grapes of Etna DOC

Etna Rosso

As in most of western Sicily, Etna is most known for producing red wine, known as Etna Rosso. Nerello Mascalese, named for the plain of Mascali at the base of Mount Etna, is the most important red grape here, where it's made either as a varietal wine or as part the majority of a blended wine. Due to the fact that Nerello Mascalese is a late-ripening variety and is planted high up the volcano, where it's cooler, it is one of the last grapes harvested in all of Sicily, usually not picked until the second half of October. Sometimes likened to Pinot Noir or Nebbiolo, it tends to produce light-colored wines with plenty of acidity – thanks in no small part to the fact that it is usually grown at high elevation – and present, though not overtly harsh, tannins. Aroma and flavor-wise, Nerello Mascalese tends to be bright and red-fruited, and planted in the volcanic region of Etna, it readily showcases minerality from the soils.

While Nerello Mascalese is king in Etna – it must comprise at least 80% of a DOC-level wine – it is typically blended with a bit of it's Etna Rosso counterpart, Nerello Cappuccio. While Nerello Cappuccio, at a maximum of 20% of the blend, doesn't have quite as much influence on the final blend, it adds necessary body, color, and alcohol to Etna Rosso wines. Fleshier and fruitier, it can be thought of as the Merlot to Nerello Mascalese's Cabernet Sauvignon. Some producers do create 100% Nerello Cappuccio wines, but they cannot be labeled as Etna DOC and they generally lack the focus and structure that Nerello Mascalese brings to the table.

Etna Rosso wines also permit for up to 10% of the blend to be made up of other local red grapes.

Etna Bianco

Etna also does white wine well, and Etna Bianco bottlings, like Etna Rosso, can either be made as varietal or blended wines. Carricante is the primary grape used in Etna Bianco and must make up at least 60% of any DOC-level wine. Though Carricante has been grown for centuries – it dates back to the 9th century, in fact – it still only covers about 250 acres of Sicily's vineyards (comparatively, Cataratto covers over 100,000!). High natural acidity and citrus flavors are hallmarks of Carricante, and therefore, of Etna Bianco wines in general. Versatile in nature, Etna Bianco can range in style from simple and fresh, with racy acidity, to intensely flavored and complex, with savory, mineral qualities, depending on vineyard site, vinification, and aging.

Carricante can also be blended with up to 40% Cataratto, Sicily's most planted grape, and a maximum of 15% other non-aromatic white grapes, such as Trebbiano and/or Minella Bianca.

The wines and grapes of Vittoria

Located along the southern coast of Sicily, in the southeastern province of Ragusa, is the region of Vittoria, where the majority of wine production is red wine. Here exists both the Vittoria DOC, an appellation for both red and white wines, and the region's star Cerasuolo di Vittoria DOCG. Both appellations cover the same physical area but produce two different types of wines. For Cerasuolo di Vittoria DOCG, Sicily's first and only DOCG appellation, elevated from DOC in 2005, winemakers produce bright, cherry-colored (hence *cerasuolo*, meaning cherry-like) wines that tend to be medium-bodied, as opposed to the more deeply colored wines of Vittoria.

Cerasuolo di Vittoria wines must always be a blend of two grapes: Nero d'Avola and Frappato.

Named for the town of Avola, Nero d'Avola is Sicily's most planted red grape. Historically used for table wine, due to its ability to produce high volumes of wine with deep color, Nero d'Avola gained recognition as a quality grape in the late 90s when a few Vittoria producers started bottling single varietal wines from this grape. It



comprises the majority of the blend in Cerasuolo di Vittoria, where it contributes full body, moderate-plus tannins, deep color, and rich fruit flavors. Sometimes likened to Shiraz/Syrah, Nero d'Avola's aromas and flavors include black cherry, dark raspberry, chocolate, pepper, and more. There are two different major winemaking styles when it comes to quality Nero d'Avola: fruit-forward, rich versions, often with new oak influence, or lighter, more elegant versions without oak influence, that bring out the more red-fruited, herbal side of the grape. Unfortunately, there are still quite a few low-quality Nero d'Avola wines produced, which usually lack acid, are high in alcohol, and have jammy, overripe fruit flavors.

Frappato may comprise less of the blend in Cerasuolo di Vittoria, but it contributes a much needed tenor note to Nero d'Avola's bass. Light-colored, high in acidity, and light in body, Frappato balances the scales and brings freshness to blends. The grape tends to be aromatic and floral, with flavors of red cherry, strawberry, and red flowers, plus a true "grapey" quality – almost like cru Beaujolais. Single varietal bottlings are also made (usually labeled as Sicilia DOC or Terre Siciliane IGT) and are perfect for warm-weather drinking: light-bodied and peppery, with low tannins and lots of freshness.

As for the blend of Cerasuolo di Vittoria, 50 to 70% must be from Nero d'Avola and 30 to 50% must be from Frappato. The wine must be aged at least until June 1 of the year following harvest (about 9 months from harvest). A Classico version of Cerasuolo di Vittoria is produced as well and must be made from grapes harvested in a delineated "classico" region within Vittoria, which more closely matches the original heart of vine growing in this area. These bottlings must be aged longer, until March 1 of the second year following harvest (about 18 months). The DOCG regulations also limit the amount of maceration that winemakers can use for the grapes so that the finished wines are a light *cerasuolo* color. The wines can vary in style, but overall, they tend to be medium-bodied, with smooth tannins, red fruit flavors, herbal notes, and a present earthiness that can sometimes be ashy, due to the volcanic soil found here.

The wines and grapes of western Sicily

Though the wines of eastern Sicily have garnered the majority of the Sicilian wine spotlight recently, it's thanks to a specialty wine of western Sicily that the island's wines gained their first international recognition. The fortified dessert wine Marsala put Sicily's wines on the map in the late 1700s, when an Englishman landed in Marsala, a city tucked in the northwestern corner of the island, and discovered that the local wine produced was similar to Spanish and Portuguese fortified wines (Sherry, Port, and Madeira) which were popular in England at the time.

Marsala is a wine from the Marsala DOC area around the city of Marsala and can be either dry or sweet. It becomes a sweet wine through the process of fortification, a technique famously used in Port, Sherry, and Madeira wines. While a wine is fermenting, a winemaker will add grape spirit (brandy) to the wine. This raises the alcohol content to anywhere between 15 – 20% and kills off any remaining yeast, stopping fermentation. The reason for fortification originally – as with other fortified wines – was so that the wine could withstand long ocean voyages. The tradition continued because export markets preferred the style. Marsala also has a variety of different classifications based on sweetness, aging (it typically spends time in barrel), and color. Unfortunately, most consumers today think of Marsala simply as a cheap cooking wine, despite its history!, because in the 1960s that large cooperatives started focusing on quantity, rather than quality, and the overall reputation of Marsala diminished. Quality Marsala is high in alcohol and quite viscous, with characteristic nutty, caramel-like, oxidative flavors.

Marsala is typically made one or more of three different grapes: Grillo, Inzolia, and Cataratto. However, partially due to the fact that dessert wine has fallen out of fashion in export markets (like the United States) more and more producers in western Sicily are making still or sparkling table wines from these grapes as well, usually labeled as DOC Terre Siciliane.

Grillo (meaning “cricket” in Italian) is thought of as the highest quality of the three grapes grown in this region. Tolerant of high temperatures and dry conditions, it does well in Sicily’s climate. It has high levels of sugar, meaning that it has the potential for high alcohol. This is very good for Marsala, but ripeness and alcohol need to be closely managed for still wines – if it is left on the vine for too long, it can produce overripe, flabby wines. At its best, Grillo makes a fresh, light white wine with citrus, apple, and nutty flavors.

Inzolia (aka Ansonica) has a complicated history, but most think that it is related to Grillo, though some hypothesize that it could be related to the Greek grape variety of Roditis. It typically adds weight and a nutty quality to both Marsala and table wines, but on its own, it can lack in acidity. It also has citrus and herbal character and tends to produce higher-quality wines than Cataratto, though it is not as prized as Grillo.

Cataratto not only the most widely planted grape in Sicily but the second most planted grape in all of Italy, after Sangiovese. While it is important as a blending grape in Mount Etna whites, it is very important in the wines of western Sicily. Unfortunately, Cataratto is grape that leans more towards quantity than quality and is so widely planted because it is high yielding. When allowed to produce maximum yields, it is neutral, low in acidity, and without character. However, some producers choose to pay careful attention to Cataratto, and at its best it is medium-bodied and fresh with crisp lemon flavors and texture. That being said, with the recent refocus on quality wines in this part of Sicily, more producers are moving away from relying on Cataratto so heavily and instead choosing to highlight Grillo and Inzolia in both table wines and Marsala.