Regional profile

Etna, Sicily

An influx of growers and winemakers over recent decades has meant that the vinous potential of Etna's unique volcanic terroir is finally being fully realised. Exciting times, says Simon Woolf

ETNA, 1988. TUMBLEDOWN stone wineries punctuate the terraces of abandoned alberello vineyards. Cheap Nero d'Avola fills the tankers heading north. After enjoying a few rounds of golf near Rovitello, captain of industry Dr Giuseppe Benanti repairs to a local restaurant with a friend. In a moment of pride Benanti orders a bottle of the local rosso, but it's disgusting: oxidised, thin and tannic. 'Christ,' he thinks. 'Surely we can do better.'

The region has developed explosively since that lightbulb moment, expanding from a mere five quality estates to 110 today. Benanti's restrained wines have won international repute. As the buzz around Etna wine reaches fever pitch, new producers are crowding onto the market and most major Sicilian estates (Planeta, Cusamano, Tasca) have a stake on the mountain – but is the fuss deserved, or is Etna at risk of overheating?

The benefits of altitude

There's no doubt that Etna's volcanic soils and high elevations produce exciting wine. Nerello Mascalese is the main protagonist, producing pale reds with good structure, perfumed berry fruit, and wild, gamey flavours. Comparisons with Nebbiolo are apt – there's a similar tension between highly strung acids and assertive yet refined tannins. Etna is Sicily's only cool-climate region, littered with ancient, ungrafted vineyards, making top wines that can be as regal, complex and ageworthy as anything further north.

Etna's whites sometimes outdo the reds when it comes to longevity. Carricante, the major white variety, possesses a Riesling-like ability to age, mutating from nervy saltiness to honeyed, smoky maturity, without any assistance from oak. Try Barone de Villagrande or Benanti's Bianco Superiore to appreciate this classic style.

Etna Bianco still suffers from a lack of definition, however – the DOC allows up to 40% of lesser white

Etna at a glance

Vineyard surface 3,181ha (656ha DOC)

Annual production 78,500hl (12,572hl DOC)

DOCs

Etna Rosso: min 80% Nerello Mascalese, max 20% Nerello Cappuccio Etna Rosso Riserva 4 years' age (including at least 1 year in wood) Etna Bianco: min 60% Carricante

Etna Bianco Superiore:

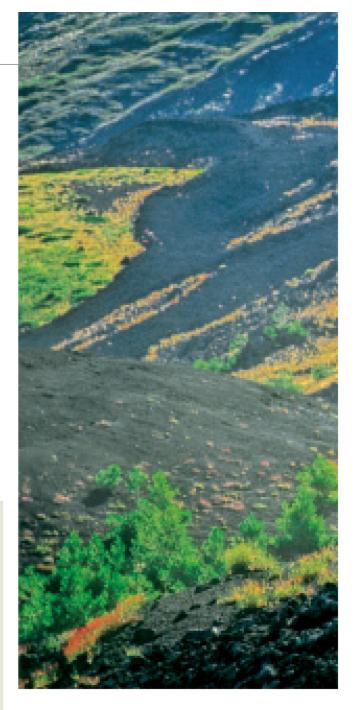
min 80% Carricante, from Milo only Etna Rosato

Etna Spumante Grape varieties for DOC wines

Red grapes: Nerello Mascalese (2,454ha), Nerello Cappuccio (24ha)

White grapes:

Carricante (140ha), Catarratto (22ha), Minella, Grecanico, Insolia



Above: only in the last few decades have winemakers begun to master the soils bestowed upon this corner of Sicily by the continuoulsly active Mount Etna (right)

varieties, and the wines span the gamut from lean and angular, to aromatic and Sauvignon-like, or fat and fruity (see box). The superiore area around the village of Milo retains more stylistic consistency maybe the DOC area is just too broad?. Ciro Biondi of C & S Biondi feels it's simply a matter of time. 'It will take another 40 years for producers to really understand our terroir,' he says.

Prime movers

Andrea Franchetti (Passopisciaro) and Marco de Grazia (Tenuta delle Terre Nerre) are the showmen who turned the world onto Etna. Arriving in the early 2000s, both were looking to replicate their respective successes in Tuscany and Barolo. Franchetti initially had little interest in Nerello, admitting 'It took me 10 years to learn that it's a high-quality variety.' Nerello isn't easy – low yields are vital to avoid a mean, astringent mess, and new oak does it few favours – something most producers now thankfully seem to have learned.