Vini Siciliani: The New “New World” Wines from Italy’s Island of Sicily

By Anthony Giglio

One of the many ironies of Sicily, I discovered, while tasting my way across this gigantic, weather-beaten island last year, is that while its wine history spans three millennia, the lush, fruity, mouth-watering wines that we are only just beginning to taste in the U.S. are entirely new.

It could be said that Sicilian wine is reborn.

How is this possible? After all, Sicilia, as it is known in Italian (pronounced see-CHILL-ya), was the viticultural jewel in the crowns of both the Greek and Roman empires two thousand years ago. Sadly, successive invaders, including the twentieth century Italian government, allowed this magnificent island to squander its potential for making quality wine. But over the last decade, Sicily’s revival has been so swift it’s actually dizzying to follow.

Before we get to the revolution, we need to go back about 50 years—a veritable blip on the timeline—to understand why most wine professionals only think of Marsala—The Godfather—when they think of Sicily. Few wine professionals I know have a better handle on Sicily than David Lynch, the wine director at Babbo restaurant in New York, and co-author with Joseph Bastianich of Vino Italiano. To research Vino, Lynch took a yearlong sabbatical to traverse the entire Italian peninsula; he thinks Sicily is not only one of the most exciting wine regions in Italy, but in much of the winemaking world today.

“Many producers there see themselves competing with New World wines, as opposed to traditional Italian wines,” he says. “In one sense, the history of quality wine production in Sicily is very recent.”

Sicily is emerging from a half-century of co-op winery dominance. Since the time of the Romans, Sicily has been the granary for the mainland, and of course its incredible capacity for mass-production has been exploited for wine as well. In the 1950s and ’60s, when the Italian government set up cooperative wineries all over the peninsula as a means of supporting a flagging agricultural economy, Sicily was naturally well-positioned to become the country’s top producer of wine, most of it cheap bulk wine.

The co-op culture was so pervasive on Sicily that its commercial wine scene was defined by two estates: the Corvo-Duca di Salaparuta property in Casteldaccia, and the Conte Tasca d’Almerita estate in Vallelunga, better known as Regaleali. “If you asked for a dry Sicilian white in the Seventies and Eighties,” says Lynch, “you’d either get a glass of Corvo’s ‘Columba Platino’ or Regaleali’s basic ‘Bianco’,” both of which are simple, pleasant whites based on local grapes. Red choices, Lynch says, were likely to be scarce as well: “Duca Enrico” from Corvo-Duca di Salaparuta or “Rosso del Conte” from Regaleali. “Both of these wines showcased Sicily’s top native red, Nero d’Avola, to great effect,” he adds. “But other than these two brands there wasn’t much, at least not in our market.”

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“Sicily’s transformation is driven by the conversion from a cooperative culture to a ‘brand culture’,” says Lynch. A good example is Cusumano (imported by VinDivino), he says, naming a large co-op near Alcamo. “These guys saw an opportunity to identify certain growers and give them exclusive contracts to produce less fruit at higher quality. Then they set this wine apart as a brand.” Lynch says there are many exam-
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SICILIA

(SICILIA)

Cerasuolo di Vittoria COS 2000 $30
(BLEND: Nero d’Avola/Prugnola)

Cerasuolo di Vittoria Valle dell’Acate 1999 $34
(BLEND: Nero d’Avola/Merlot/Syrah)

Faro Palari 1999 $89
(BLEND: Nerello Mascalese / Nerello Cappuccio / Tignolino / Catocrate)

Nero d’Avola “Chiaramonte” Firriato 2000 $30

Nero d’Avola “Don Antonio” Morgante 2000 $50

Rosso del Soprano Palari 1999 (1.5L) $120

Sicilia Rosso “Vigna Cusiana” Ceuso 1999 $68
(BLEND: Nero d’Avola, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot)

Sicilia Rosso “Camelot” Firriato 2000 $60
(BLEND: Cabernet Sauvignon/Merlot)

Sicilia Rosso “Santa Cecilia” Planeta 2000 $70

Sicilia Rosso “Montenero” Sant’Anastasia 1998 $62
(BLEND: Nero d’Avola / Merlot / Syrah)

Lynch, although he adds that few producers make a varietal Cataratto (both Inzolia and Cataratto are, of course, two of the whites used to make Marsala, which is why they’re in such quantity). In fact, though Cataratto is the base of a number of DOC whites, it is typically used for blending. Great examples, however, include those from the Alcamo DOC, including Rapitala (imported by Frederick Wildman & Sons), Spadafora (imported by Domaine Select), and Pollara; and those from the Erta zone, where Cataratto is blended with another variety unique to Sicily, Carricante. From Erta, look for crisp, aromatic wines of Beninati, Murgo, and Barone Villagrande.

The best Sicilian whites are usually made outside of DOC parameters, such as the crisp, minerally Columbia Platino from Corvo, which combines 80 percent Inzolia with 20 percent Grencanico; and Regaleali’s fruity, aromatic “Bianco” is a mix of Inzolia, Cataratto, and Grencanico. And non-native grapes of course are adding to the “International” style of Sicilian wines that is gaining more and more ground every day. At Donnafugata, Inzolia is the foundation of their whites, but it is blended with Cataratto to make their delicious “Anthilia,” and with Muller-Thurgau and Sauvignon Blanc to make their wonderful “Lighea.” And Planeta’s “Alastro” and “La Segreta” whites blend Grencanico with Chardonnay. Chardonnay—not surprisingly—is the grape of the moment in Sicily, where in the intense heat of the southern Mediterranean, “It ripens into a veritable tropical fruit bomb,” says Lynch, citing Planeta’s many styles, as well as Donnafugata’s “La Fuga” and Valle dell’Acate’s oak-fermented Inzolia-Chardonnay blend called “Bidis.”

REDS: Though the majority of grapes grown in Sicily are white, the real interest, says Lynch, should be in Sicily’s reds, particularly those made with the Nero d’Avola grape, whether bottled on its own, or in blends with Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, and especially Syrah, to which it is often compared.

“When I sell Nero d’Avola, I sell it as resembling Australian Shiraz in style,” says Lynch, “first, because it’s true, and second, because it resonates with people. It has all the right ingredients: ripe fruit and soft tannins.” While Nero d’Avola is considered king of Sicilian red grapes, there are also excellent wines being made with the spicy Nerello Mascalese used best in the Etna DOC wines of producers such as Cottanera and Val Cerasa and Faro DOC blends of Palari and the popular rosato of Regaleali; as well as the tart, strawberry-scented Frappato grape, which is combined with Nero d’Avola in the Cerasuolo di Vittoria DOC wines of southeastern Sicily (Vall dell’Acate and COS are two great producers here).

According to Lynch, Nero d’Avola reds fall into three main categories: those that are 100 percent Nero d’Avola, such as the varietal bottlings of the Morgante estate, Donnafugata’s “Mille e Una Notte,” Regaleali’s “Rosso del Conte,’ Corvo’s “Duca Enrico,” and “Santa Cecilia” from Planeta; those that combine Nero d’Avola with Cabernet, Merlot, and/or Syrah, such as Ceuso’s “Vigna Cusiana,” Abbazia Sant’ Anastasia’s “Passomaggio” (Nero/Merlot), Casumano’s “Benuara” (Nero/Syrah), and Regaleali’s “Camastra” (Nero/Merlot); and those of Cerasuolo di Vittoria, perhaps the only historic DOC zone in Sicily with an untarnished reputation for quality reds.

SWEET WINES: Prior to the red-wine revolution of the nineties, Sicily was known principally for its sweet and fortified wines. There are basically three types to know: Marsala, which ranges from nutty/dry to caramel sweet; Passito di Pantelleria, which is often compared to golden raisins in a bottle; and Malvasia delle Lipari, which tastes like mouthwarming, overripe apricots. Look for Marco DeBartoli’s “Vecchio Samperi” Marsala or Passito di Pantelleria “Bukkumari” for perfect examples; and Donnafugata’s “Ben Ryé” Passito di Pantelleria is simply exquisite.

Anthony Giglio is an award-winning food and wine writer who contributes regularly to Wine & Spirits and Boston Magazine.