

Take four

Seas, volcanoes, ancient terrains and lots of sunshine – no wonder there's such character embodied in Sicily's indigenous grapes. Carla Capalbo homes in on the top four

EVERY TIME I drive across the centre of Sicily on the main Catania-Palermo autostrada, I'm reminded of the description many Sicilians use about the island: that Sicily is a continent. I agree. There's something about the grandeur and ancientness of its mountains and the range and variety of its landscapes that lifts it out of the mould of a co-dependent region into a self-contained whole.

For its combination of sun, fertile soils and physical beauty, the Mediterranean's largest island has been desired and possessed by every culture that has landed on its shores – from the Phoenecians, Greeks and Moors to the Normans and Bourbons – and that appeal still holds today.

From a winemaking perspective, Sicily offers some of Europe's most exciting terroirs and indigenous grape varieties, with plenty of scope too in how to make the wines. Recently there's been a market-driven shift by top producers away from the international

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varieties – such as Chardonnay and Syrah, that people were planting all over Sicily 15 years ago – and we have seen renewed attention on the island's many unique native grapes.

I've focused here on four of the most important – the whites, Grillo and Carricante, and the reds, Nerello Mascalese and Nero d'Avola – but there are others to choose from. Catarratto and Zibibbo stand out as interesting whites, while red grapes Frappato, Perricone (also known as Pignatello) and Nerello Cappuccio will reward any adventurous taster's inquisitiveness.

Above: the football to Italy's boot, Sicily's unique location bestows real character on its native grapes

Carla Capalbo is an award-winning food, wine and travel writer and photographer

Grillo

This lightly aromatic white with lovely peachy and citrus notes and good structure has recently been confirmed through DNA testing to be a cross between Sicilian white Catarratto and the hugely aromatic Zibibbo, or Muscat of Alexandria, that stars in the opulent dessert wine, Passito di Pantelleria.

'In the mid- to late-1800s, when fortified Marsala was the world's most-sold and best-travelled wine, research was carried out by Baron Mendola in Favara into this grape,' explains Franco Rodriguez of Enoteca Garibaldi in Marsala. 'They were always looking for more aromatic versions of Catarratto to improve Marsala and this hybrid dates back to that period, though the cross had probably taken place in nature long before.'

Grillo for producing Marsala was at the time grown all over western Sicily. Then the 1984 Marsala DOC limited it to just Trapani province. 'This is the only part of Sicily that was not colonised under Magna Graecia,' continues Rodriguez. 'Instead, it owes its cultural and viticultural heritage to the

Phoenecians.' So the grape's origins may stretch back to Mesopotamia.

Grillo grapes have thick skins and lots of pulp, which make them resistant to high heat. 'Grillo gets its aromatics from Zibibbo but its acidity from its other parent, Catarratto, especially when it's grown on limestone close to the coast,' says Renato De Bartoli, whose late father, Marco, was Grillo's great champion and first experimented with making it into dry wines as early as 1985.

'My father saw Grillo as part of Sicily's quality winemaking future, as long as its vigour was controlled,' says Renato. 'He always maintained its nobility, though people called him mad when he started vinifying it using the cold technology that's currently used for other fine whites.'

Marco's hunch was right: today Grillo is often bottled as a varietal wine in central and western Sicily, and is gaining followers for its lovely nose, good structure, in-built salinity and length. It can age well in wood and also has the potential to produce fine sparkling wines. ➤



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Above: Renato De Bartoli, whose father led the way in making dry Grillo in the 1980s

Left: Francesco Cucurullo grows his Grillo organically at Masseria del Feudo



Photographs: Carla Capalbo

Grillo: three to try



Marco De Bartoli, Grappoli del Grillo, Grillo Terre 2013 91/100

£23.50 **Berry Bros & Rudd**
The first in De Bartoli's range of dry Grillos, Grappoli ferments on wild yeasts and is aged in wooden barrels to complement the grapes' salinity and natural fine aromas of elderflower, herbs and honey. A penetrating wine, it ages well, developing complexity and

maintaining lively acidity and interest.
Drink 2016-2020 **Alcohol** 12%



Masseria del Feudo 2014 90
N/A UK www.masseriadelfeudo.it
Organically grown Grillo from Sicily's interior; this offers floral, honeyed and herbal notes, with lively acidity and fine energy plus moreish depth and richness. **Drink** 2016-2017 **Alc** 13.5%



Donnafugata SurSur 2014 86
£13.99 **Liberty, Noel Young, Starmoreboss, Toscanaccio, Valhalla's Goat, Valvona & Crolla, Wholefoods**
This offers hints of lychees, a dash of northern acidity in a pleasurable, easy-drinking summery style. Would be a great match for shellfish. **Drink** 2016-2017 **Alc** 12.5%

For full details of UK stockists, see p95

Carricante

If Nerello Mascalese is the red grape *per eccellenza* on Etna, Carricante is the white. It's been grown for centuries primarily around Milo, on the less-dry, eastern slopes of the volcano. While it has long been found in Etna's white field blends (with Minella, Inzolia and other local varieties) and is the basis for both Etna Bianco DOC and its Superiore versions, only fairly recently has excitement been generated about this white as a standalone.

A few producers – notably Benanti with its iconic Pietramarina, first bottled in the early 1990s; Barone di Villagrande, who championed the superiore classification (which calls for at least 80% Carricante); and Marc De Grazia, who currently produces five Carricante wines at Tenuta delle Terre Nere – have led the way in showing Carricante as a white that can age with complexity and style. Others are following suit, including Tasca d'Almerita and Planeta, whose investments in Carricante vineyards reflect the grape's appeal and their future commitment to it.

Carricante has delicate notes of peaches, flowers and honey that, when underpinned by its great structure, citrus-like acidity and deep mineral salinity, give complexity and allow for age development.



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Carricante also lends itself to a winemaker's interpretation. 'Pietramarina, which comes out several years after the harvest, has always been the benchmark for Carricante,' says Ivo Basile of Tasca d'Almerita. 'But now we're seeing younger versions, whether made in steel or wood, macerated on the skins, or blended with other varieties that show the grape's wider range and potential.' Some old vineyards do exist, including some at altitude, but these account for less than 5% of the Etna appellation.

'Carricante is easier in the vineyard than in the cellar,' says De Grazia, who has been making it since 2007. 'It's shy and needs volcanic soil and some coaxing to reveal its greatness and a complexity that's reminiscent of Burgundy's.'

Above: Patricia Toth, winemaker at Planeta, produces Carricante from vines at 800m

Left: one of the Carricante pioneers, Barone di Villagrande championed the superiore classification

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Nerello Mascalese

This is the noble red grape from Mount Etna, Europe's largest active volcano. In the past it was used, like Nero d'Avola, to boost the alcohol level and backbone of northern wines, but the last two decades have seen a renaissance of fine winemaking on Etna from this elegant, ancient grape variety.

First bottled as a varietal wine by Benanti in 1995, Nerello has become something of a cult grape, attracting a crop of new winemakers, many of whom have settled on the volcano's stunning north face. Here, the black volcanic soil, black dry-stone walls and green vines offer a unique landscape within which to craft some of Italy's most interesting wines. Nerello can offer a finesse and structure that has been compared with Burgundy and Barolo, with the minerality that only the volcano can supply.

'Nerello Mascalese is a late-ripening, difficult variety, and only here on Etna does it retain its fragility and the elegance that makes it great,' says Alberto Aiello of Graci. 'It's the mixture of the hot Sicilian sun and the northern-style climate that allow for this,' says Giuseppe Russo of Girolamo Russo, one of the few premium producers to have been born on Etna. 'Nerello has a unique capacity to express the character of the soil it's growing in; plant it anywhere else and it loses its soul. What some people perceive as high acidity is actually the wine's freshness, its minerality.'

The range of expressions is eclectic, and include Frank Cornelissen's natural wines; Marc De Grazia's crus focusing on the terroirs of differing *contrade*; Passopisciaro's French-inspired wines; and Anna Martens' wines raised in Georgian terracotta *qvevri*. Several leading players from other Sicilian areas, including Planeta and Tasca d'Almerita, have also invested in Etna recently so that they can include Nerello wines in their portfolios. ➤



‘Only here on Etna does Nerello Mascalese retain its fragility and the elegance that makes it great’ **Alberto Aiello**

Photographs: Carla Capalbo

Carricante: three to try

Tenuta delle Terre Nere, Santo Spirito, Etna Bianco 2014 96
£24.46 (2013) **Justerini & Brooks**
An impressive nose with little white flowers and creamy smokiness leads into one of Etna's most engaging wines: pure, mineral and focused, it looks forward to long ageing with classy complexity. This captures the essence of place and grape. **Drink** 2016-2024 **Alc** 12.5%

Barone di Villagrande, Etna Bianco Superiore 2014 95
£21.66 (2010) **Lay & Wheeler**
From one of the Carricante pioneers, this wine reflects the salinity and sulphuric minerality of the volcano at Milo, riding through with razor-sharp clarity and elegant austerity. A few years of age will coax out its latent, built-in complexity. **Drink** 2016-2020 **Alc** 12.5%

Planeta, Eruzione 1614 2014 88
£19 **Cranbrook Wines, Great Western Wine, Harrods, Noel Young**
Pale yellow; floral and citrus notes on the nose merge with the full, ripe palate's mountain herbs and fresh salinity. It reflects Planeta's interest in this grape. From young vines at 800m, which will bring more complexity as they age. Includes 5% Riesling. **Drink** 2016-2019 **Alc** 13.5%

Nerello Mascalese: three to try

Girolamo Russo, Feudo, Etna 2013 96
£30.62 (2012) **Mondial Wine**
Russo's wines marry class with terroir character. This single-vineyard wine shows the minerality and appeal of Nerello at its best, engaging but never heavy. The complex nose of herbs and peppery spice, elegant fruit and long finish leave you salivating and wanting more. **Drink** 2016-2024 **Alc** 14%

Graci, Arcuria, Etna 2013 95
£29.50 **Berry Bros & Rudd**
In the heart of the north face of Etna, this fruity Nerello with its medium ruby colour, has a perfumed nose with hints of herbs and raspberries, and maintains fine elegance with minerality and balance. Good structure and length. Still young... so put a few bottles away for the future. **Drink** 2016-2024 **Alc** 14.5%

Tascante, Ghiai Nera 2013 88
£20 **Berkmann, WoodWinters**
Tasca d'Almerita is ever more committed to making Etna wines, as the fine character of this drinkable Nerello from young vines attests. Light red in hue, its nose is tinged with vanilla and wild herbs. Smooth tannins, firm acidity and sweet red fruits add to the appeal. **Drink** 2016-2020 **Alc** 13%



Nero d'Avola supporters
Davide Catania (*right*), son
of Gulfi founder, Vito, with
local expert, Signor Latino

Nero d'Avola

This is Sicily's best-known and most extensively planted grape. Quality varies hugely: like most wines, it needs great terroir to achieve great results or age well. Its best varietal wines are juicy and full, with deep colour and strong tannins cushioned by balsamic flavours of plum, mulberry, chocolate and mint. Great examples have enough acidity to keep the wines tasting fresh. At the other end of the scale are cheap, bland if not sickly wines, most of which are bottled outside of Sicily by northern industrial-scale wineries. The Sicilians are fighting this trend, as it lessens Nero d'Avola's quality and image. Nero d'Avola is also widely used in blends.

Nero d'Avola is adaptable: it's being grown on all terrains from sea level to high hills. This vine likes the heat and some of its best results – from Marabino, Gulfi and Planeta – come from the hottest, southeastern corner of Sicily, in the province of Noto, where the limestone

ground is chalk-white and retains moisture well. Until recently, many were still grown as independent bush vines, but sadly most producers have now switched to trellising for practical reasons. Recently there's finally been a move away from ageing Nero d'Avola in too much oak. 'Everyone thought the way to make "the big red" from Nero d'Avola was to use new barriques, but in 2007 we took a step back to larger barrels and older barriques,' says Patricia Toth, Planeta's winemaker. 'The wines are now more expressive of the grape and reflect their terroir better.'

Until the 1980s, Nero d'Avola was mostly used to bring colour and alcohol to northern wines, including French and Tuscan ones. Vineyards near the Avola coast sent the must from freshly crushed berries directly into tanker-ships and trains heading northwards. The Sicilians now hope that quality Nero d'Avola will become their flagship wine. **D**

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Nero d'Avola: three to try



Marabino, Archimede, Riserva, Eoro Pachino 2012 95

£16.95 **Drinkmonger**

Biodynamic wine from southeastern tip of Sicily, from bush vines of over 50 years. The palate is juicy with good mineral intensity, lots of black fruit, ripe tannins and fine acidity that brings a long, vibrant finale. **Drink** 2016-2024 **Alc** 14.5%



Gulfi, Nero Maccarj 2010 93

£31 **James Nicholson**

Made in the southeastern corner of the island, this well-built wine shows ripe red cherries and dark chocolate on a lovely, lifted nose that precedes its succulent and well-integrated palate, which is enlivened by fresh acidity and a fine finish. Vey good. **Drink** 2016-2022 **Alc** 14.5%



Masseria del Feudo, Il Giglio 2014 88

N/A UK www.masseriadelfeudo.it

Made in the heart of Sicily near Caltanissetta, this shows what a pleasurable, easy-drinking wine Nero d'Avola can be. Ruby red, with berry flavours, it's juicy and fruity but not overly sweet. Smooth tannins, fresh acidity and great value. **Drink** 2016-2021 **Alc** 13%