
WINES OF SICILY

AT THE FOOT OF



Animaetnea Vineyards with a view of Mount Etna, one of the world's most active volcanoes in the background | Photo: Valerio M. D'Urso

MOUNT ETNA



Altitude, fertile volcanic ash, and abundant sunlight create a unique environment for vineyards, writes *Michèle Shah*

Nestled on the slopes of one of the world's most active volcanoes, Mount Etna, is a unique viticultural treasure. Rising over 3,300 metres (10,827 feet) into the sky, Etna's imposing height not only defines the landscape but profoundly influences the wines produced here. This is the realm of heroic viticulture, where grapevines cling to ancient terraces, battling the elements to produce some of Italy's most distinctive wines.

Etna's presence is both imposing and captivating, casting a mystical shadow over the surrounding landscape. For centuries this majestic giant has shaped not only the terrain but also the lives and livelihoods of those who dwell in its shadow. Etna's winemaking history dates back 3,000 years. The Greeks were among the first to recognize the potential of this volcanic soil for grape cultivation. The combination of fertile volcanic ash, altitude, and abundant sunlight creates a unique environment for vineyards.

At altitudes ranging from 400 to 1,000 metres, Etna's vineyards benefit from cooler temperatures and significant diurnal temperature variations. These conditions allow the grapes to ripen slowly, preserving acidity while developing complex flavours. The high-altitude terroir imparts a remarkable freshness and elegance to the wines, reminiscent of the finesse found in Burgundy and Barolo.

Etna's geological history is a story of continuous change and renewal. The volcano's eruptions, both explosive and effusive, have layered the landscape with ash, pumice, and lava. Its landscape is a mosaic of contrasts, a testament to the volcano's relentless activity over millennia. The black and grey hues of ancient and recent lava flows weave through the green vineyards, creating a striking visual tapestry. The volcanic soils of Etna are rich in minerals and vary dramatically across the mountain's slopes. These soils, composed of lava, ash, and sand, provide excellent drainage and contribute to the unique minerality, structure and longevity of Etna wines. The resulting wines often exhibit a vibrant acidity, pronounced minerality, and an aromatic profile that sets them apart from other regions.

Etna's vineyards are predominantly bush vines, planted with indigenous grape varieties, most notably **Nerello Mascalese** and **Nerello Cappuccio** for red wines, and **Carricante** and **Catarratto** for whites. Nerello Mascalese, often compared to Pinot Noir for its elegance and complexity, thrives on the northern slopes, where cooler temperatures enhance its aromatic qualities. Carricante, known for its high acidity and longevity, is the star of Etna's white wines, often showing citrus and saline notes. The area of Milo is dedicated to Etna Bianco Superiore made from 100% Carricante and ages as well as good Burgundy.



Vingeri old vines. Some Etna wines are over a century old | Photo: Michèle Shah

The mountain is divided into 133 Contrade (geographical areas), each with its own microclimate, thanks to Etna's varied elevation and exposure. The northern slopes, cooler and more humid, are ideal for Nerello Mascalese, producing wines with finesse and longevity. The southern slopes, warmer and drier, favour Carricante, resulting in rich and complex white wines. Each side of the volcano offers a different expression of the terroir, adding to the diversity of Etna's wine portfolio.

Amidst the vineyards of Etna, some ancient vines, over a century old, continue to produce exceptional grapes. These gnarly, resilient bush trained vines, deeply rooted in the volcanic soil, yield wines of remarkable intensity and depth; each bottle, a testament to their enduring spirit. The old vines' ability to survive and thrive in such a challenging environment is a testament to the unique viticultural heritage of Etna. Some old vines date prior to phylloxera.

The influence of Mount Etna on winemaking is profound and multifaceted. Each vineyard has its own story, shaped by its location on the mountain and the vision of its winemaker. Etnean winegrowers share a deep, symbiotic relationship with the volcano. 'A Muntagna' (the mountain) or 'Idda' (Etna is female) is revered and respected for its power and unpredictability, understanding that the same forces that pose a threat, also enrich their soils and define their wines. The periodic lava flows and ash deposits rejuvenate the vineyards, creating a dynamic and ever-evolving terroir. The high elevation of the vineyards means that harvest times can vary significantly. In some areas, grapes are harvested as late as October or November, allowing for a long growing season that contributes to the development of complex flavours.

A brief flashback in time shows that Etnean wine production was far more prominent in the 1880s and seen as an important part of



Alta Mora terraced vineyards on the slopes of Mount Etna which rises over 3,300 metres (10,827 feet) | Photo: Valerio M. D'Urso

the agricultural economy, covering some 50,000 hectares of vines and producing some 100 million litres of wine, most of which was transported to mainland Italy or exported further afield. Towards the end of the 19th century, as the industrial revolution took off, Etna's agriculture suffered a heavy setback due to the abandonment of the countryside in favour of the growing industrial cities.

Since Etna DOC was established in 1968, it has witnessed a steady growth of producers from Sicily and Italy's mainland moving back to Etna, taking over existing 'abandoned' vineyards and *palmentos* (local traditional winemaking facilities) giving its wines a more vibrant and cleaner expression and style of winemaking. Current DOC production covers just over 1,200 hectares and some 5.5 million bottles of Etna DOC, with a small amount of production which is outside the official appellation area.

Over the past 10 years winemaking on Etna has exploded with new producers. Currently there are 209 wineries on Etna of which 35 represent large wineries with over 50,000 bottle production – 64 represent medium wineries with 10,000 to 50,000 bottles and 110 smaller estates with under 10,000 bottles.

There have always been backbench historic

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Etna wineries, such as Barone Villagrande and, most notably, Benanti who started bottling and labelling its wines back in the 60s, and exporting them globally in 2011. They were followed by outsiders such as Andrea Franchetti of Passopisciaro, a visionary winemaker originally from Tuscany. Marc de Grazia of Tenuta delle Terre Nere, an American wine importer and Sicilian wine enthusiast, exported his wines to global markets, opening the path for others like Alberto Graci and many more.

Mount Etna is more than just a volcano; it is the heart and soul of a vibrant wine region that captivates the senses and stirs the imagination. Its national park offers hiking, bike tours or walking tours. It's enough to be there to breathe in its evocative beauty. For wine enthusiasts, a journey to Etna is a journey into the essence of volcanic wine, where the power of nature and the artistry of winemaking come together in a spectacular fusion. Each bottle tells the story of resilience, tradition, and the indomitable spirit of the people who make their living on this fiery mountain. Whether you are savouring a glass of Etna Rosso with its earthy elegance or a crisp Etna Bianco brimming with minerality, you are tasting the spirit of Etna – a testament to the enduring bond between the land and its people. ❖

IF YOU GO...



Il Picciolo Etna Golf Resort & Spa set against the backdrop of Etna's volcano | Photo: Valerio M. D'Urso

Where to stay

Il Picciolo Etna Golf Resort & Spa is set against the backdrop of Etna's volcano, the resort offers comfortable accommodations, an 18-hole golf course, a rejuvenating spa experience and a good on-site restaurant. Great location to explore nearby vineyards, or embark on guided hikes to witness the natural wonders of Mount Etna. Whether seeking relaxation or adventure, this resort promises an unforgettable stay in one of Italy's most stunning landscapes. www.ilpiccioloetnagolfresort.com/en-GB

Shalai Resort is situated in the picturesque town of Linguaglossa. This boutique (villa) hotel features stylish rooms and traditional charm. Guests can indulge in locally inspired cuisine at the in-house Michelin starred restaurant, unwind with a spa treatment, or explore the nearby hiking trails and

vineyards. With its tranquil ambience and personalized service, Shalai Resort provides the perfect retreat for those seeking relaxation and adventure in Sicily's volcanic region. www.shalai.it/en/

Nestled amidst the vineyards of Mount Etna, **Zash Country Boutique Hotel & Spa** offers an enchanting retreat curated by renowned wine producer, Carla Maugeri. Combining rustic charm with modern elegance, the hotel features luxurious accommodations, exquisite Michelin-

Benanti wines | Photo: Valerio M. D'Urso



starred dining experiences, and breathtaking views of the volcano. Guests can indulge in wine tastings and vineyard tours, or relax by the outdoor pool surrounded by lush gardens. www.zash.it/en/

Wines to try

Etna Rosso DOC and Riserva

Red wine made from a minimum of 80% Nerello Mascalese grape variety. Up to a maximum 20% of Nerello Cappuccio or up to 10% maximum of white Etna varieties are permitted in the blend.

Etna Bianco DOC

White wine, composed of at least 60% Carricante, backed up by Sicily's most widely planted white grape, Catarratto, and other minor additions like Trebbiano and Minnella.

Etna Bianco superiore DOC

White from 100% Carricante only from the area of Milo.

Etna Rosato DOC

Rosé wine made from a minimum of 80% Nerello Mascalese grape variety. Up to a maximum 20% of Nerello Cappuccio or up to 10% maximum of white Etna varieties, permitted in the blend.

Etna DOC Spumante

A sparkling which can include local varieties such as Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Cappuccio for the red grapes, and Carricante and Catarratto for the white grapes.



Animaetnea wine estate captures the spirit of the mountain | Photo: Valerio M. D'Urso

Wine estates to visit with century old vines

Animaetnea A rising star on Etna, Animaetnea produces wines that capture the spirit of the mountain. Their focus on indigenous varieties and minimal intervention winemaking results in expressive and terroir-driven wines.

www.animaetnea.it/en/portfolio/animaetnea/

Benanti A historic estate and one of the pioneers of modern winemaking on Etna, Benanti's wines are a benchmark for the region. Their long-standing relationship with the

The Custodi vineyards | Photo: Valerio M. D'Urso



mountain and dedication to excellence make their wines highly sought after.

www.benanti.it/en/

Cusumano's Alta Mora Known for their modern approach and commitment to quality, Alta Mora's wines showcase the purity and elegance of Etna's grapes. Their terraced vineyards, situated at high altitudes, produce wines with vibrant acidity and complexity.

www.altamora.it/en/home-2/

I Vigneri - Salvo Foti A visionary winemaker, Salvo Foti has been at the forefront of Etna's viticultural renaissance. His dedication to

traditional methods and respect for the terroir shine through in his wines, which are celebrated for their authenticity and character. Some of the most extreme vineyards sit at 1300m.

www.ivigneri.it/en/

I Custodi This estate champions sustainable

practices and the preservation of Etna's viticultural heritage. Their wines are crafted by Salvo Foti with meticulous care, reflect the unique qualities of their volcanic terroir.

www.icustodi.it

Passopisciaro is the brainchild of Andrea Franchetti, drawn to the unique terroir and potential of Etna's vineyards in Passopisciaro in the early 2000s with the goal of crafting wines



The Vigneri vineyards are part of Etna's viticultural renaissance | Photo: Michèle Shah

that express the distinct volcanic soils and microclimates of the area.

www.vinifranchetti.com/passopisciaro/

Tenuta delle Terre Nere: founded by Marc De Grazia who recognized the potential of Etna's terroir and began acquiring vineyards in the early 2000s producing unique volcanic soils and high-altitude vineyards of the region.

www.tenutaterrenere.com/en/home-english/