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# Italy, Sicily, Etna: “The Burgundy of the Mediterranean”



By MONICA LARNER (/AUTHOR/J5RTSGU2A5HCSXBTY) © Jun 30, 2023



Sicily's Etna is Italy's most dynamic wine region, and I say that based on the sheer number of new wineries I discovered in the span of just two years. This report contains many familiar faces and many new faces, some of which I have detailed below. It really is extraordinary to see the growth and excitement surrounding wines made under this very active volcano.

The reason for this influx of passion, new investment and know-how is because Etna is, to borrow the words of vintner Marc De Grazia, the “Burgundy of the Mediterranean.”



*The mighty Sicilian volcano*

The red wines from Nerello Mascalese are lithe, elegant and graceful when made in expert hands. The cellar-worthy Carricante-based wines are what I consider to be the most electrifying category of whites made in Italy today.

Here are a few producers I highly recommend.

### **Tenuta delle Terre Nere**

I love the way Marc De Grazia refers to the Sicilian volcano with a definite article in front of its name. To him, it is "the Etna," and he expresses his deference to the dangerous mountain with every mention.

"The Etna is the Burgundy of the Mediterranean," says the man whose career as an importer of fine Italian wines is legendary. Marc De Grazia is one of the original "Barolo Boys," and his beloved Tenuta delle Terre Nere was more than 20 years in the making. Today, he farms 29 parcels on the northern flank, and his portfolio of wines is the gold standard for Etna wine.





*Marc De Grazia*

"I am like a truffle dog when it comes to sniffing out vineyard potential," he says. In 1999, he traveled to Sicily and immediately recognized the unique qualities of Etna, with its lava formations and dusty, ashy soils. He set out to buy a summer home but instead purchased his first vineyard in the Contrada Guardiola. Knotted vines thrive on little terraces with religious shrines (meant to ward away volcanic eruptions) built into the lava walls.



*The latest creation at Tenuta delle Terre Nere*

De Grazia is now introducing his latest creation, the impressive Tenuta delle Terre Nere 2020 Etna Rosso Dagala di Bocca d'Orzo. Vines for this beautiful wine are planted at 750 to 800 meters in elevation in a little segment of land in the Contrada San Lorenzo that was cut off and isolated by molten rock in the 1981 eruption.

### **Monteleone**

Another newish Etna winery that is red-lava hot at the moment is Monteleone. It is owned by Giulia Monteleone, who makes wine with her talented husband Benedetto Alessandro. Giulia was a food and wine writer before founding this boutique estate in 2017 on the lower flanks of Etna near the Alcantara River in the Contrada Cuba.





*Giulia Monteleone*

This is a unique area on the northern side of the volcano with a microclimate that is heavily influenced by the river. The soils are mostly volcanic with sandy ash and anywhere from 5% to 15% clay soils. They are rich in minerals with quartz, basalt, chalk and slate. This contrada sees cool air currents that lift off the river that runs through pools and waterfalls shaped by black lava stone. (You can see a photo of the river in the banner image above this article).





*Nerello Mascalese*

The contrada is named after the Byzantine church, la Cuba di Santa Domenica, that Giulia sometimes uses as a tasting room. She volunteers to look after the site, and in exchange, the local town hall gave her the keys. I visited with her on a hot summer day, and the experience was unforgettable. The curious cube-shaped building is one of a kind, with Greek, Arab and Norman architectural influences.





*Inside and outside the Cuba di Santa Domenica*

Giulia and Benedetto are now working to restore an ancient *palmento* to convert it into a modern winery. They are also investing in new vineyards at higher elevations (perfect for the Carricante grape) to add to their portfolio. The wine bottles depict native Etna wildflowers on the front labels.

### **Maugeri**

Maugeri is a very exciting new addition to the Etna wine scene with an extremely relatable wine philosophy that zeros in on white and rosé wines. The concept is brilliant, and the wines are excellent. If you are not familiar with Maugeri, I enthusiastically recommend that you seek these bottles out.





*Renato and Carla Maugeri at Zash*

The Maugeri family is dad Renato and his daughters Carla, Michela and Paola. They work with the very talented consulting enologist Emiliano Falsini (who collaborates with some of my favorite Sicilian and Tuscan wineries). The vineyards are visually dramatic, with 83 stone terraces in the Contrade Praino and Volpare on the Milo side of the volcano (or the eastern flank) at 700 meters above sea level. The vines, planted with chestnut wood posts, cover seven hectares, and if you were to line up those stone walls, they would measure 2.8 kilometers in length.

Carla Maugeri is an architect, and her aesthetic choices can be seen in the clean label designs and marketing of the family wines. However, if you visit Etna, I absolutely recommend that you book your stay at the Maugeri family's boutique hotel nestled within an enormous orange grove. **Zash** (<https://www.zash.it>) offers gorgeous accommodation with a Michelin-starred restaurant run by chef Giuseppe Raciti.



**Federico Graziani**

Federico Graziani started his career as a sommelier and was named Italy's Best Sommelier by age 23. He would go on to work with chefs Gualtiero Marchesi, Stefano Cavallini, Carlo Cracco and Aimo & Nadia Moroni. He also earned a degree in viticulture and enology and worked in the cellars of various wineries to gain hands-on experience.





*Federico Graziani*



His passion for wine culminated with a desire to make his own, and after deciding that land in Piedmont's Langa region was too expensive, Graziani set his sights on Etna, where buying vineyards in excellent sites was more realistic. That was 15 years ago, and today Graziani has created one of the most exciting portfolios from the volcano.

"My biggest influences are still Burgundy and Barolo," he says under the shade of an ancient olive tree in his outdoor tasting room set among his vines. "This is an incredible territory."





*Outdoor tasting room*



Following the philosophy used to make traditional Barolo (which was always a blend of fruit from different cru sites), Federico Graziani's Etna reds are also blends from various contrade. Taking this road, he argues, is also one way of facing the challenges of changing weather patterns because you are not married to a single site.

He is also working toward a goal of making wine from own-rootstock vines, and his newest vineyards in the Contrada Feudo di Mezzo (in Passopisciaro) are indeed planted without foreign rootstock. A massal selection was collected from 100-year-old vines that Graziani also farms.

He prefers stainless steel as a way of maintaining the aromatic profiles of the grapes he farms, and he enthusiastically embraces stems and whole cluster. "I do this to take advantage of the harmony found with vines on their own roots," he says.





Graziani recently acquired one hectare in Pianodario with Carricante vines at 950 meters above sea level. He also released a Riesling from the Mareneve Vineyard located at a very high 1,200 meters above sea level. That excellent wine (reviewed [here](#)) is called AG47. He is especially happy with results with his white wines in 2019.

"A wine does not need to be perfect; it must be real," is Graziani's motto.

### **Frank Cornelissen**

Belgium-born Frank Cornelissen is an Etna pioneer, and his contributions to the success of this special Sicilian wine region are immeasurable. His influences on Italy's natural wine movement are equally important, and he was alone in embracing both concepts (Etna and natural wine) simultaneously. His winemaking experiments on the volcano started in 2001, and Cornelissen emerges as a major figure today.



*Frank Cornelissen*

In the early 2000s, I remember visiting his winery at the back of the first floor of a small building on Solicchiata's main road. He had terracotta jars for making wine buried into the floor. He has since moved into a large space but his non-interventionist winemaking approach remains the same. He sources fruit from a half dozen micro-parcels spread all over the north side of Etna from 580 to 980 meters in elevation. He focuses on a wide collection of indigenous grapes, including Nerello Mascalese, Nerello Cappuccio, Carricante, Minnella (white and red) and Grecanico. His production today stands at about 150,000 bottles annually.

Cornelissen is pushing toward the top of his dramatic arc, as I discovered during a recent visit with him. His wines have never been better.



## Tornatore

No one embodies the ambition of Etna more than Francesco Tornatore. This man does so thanks to the size of his vineyards (probably the largest private holdings on the northern side of the volcano), the volume of his winery and the fervor with which he discusses his new ideas.



*Francesco Tornatore*

A native son of Castiglione di Sicilia, the perched village that lends its name to the entire municipality where some of the best vineyards are located, Tornatore is part of a newer, second wave of wineries on the volcano. (Castiglione di Sicilia, by the way, is adorable and is one of the locations of Italy's so-called one-euro houses that you may have heard of).



*Wine, dog and swordfish steak at Tornatore*

Francesco Tornatore amassed a fortune building digital components for telephone and communication lines, but he hoped for a return to his roots. His family had been making wine for generations, but he decided to build a new, technologically advanced winery in the 2000s. Today, he farms 60 hectares of young vines on huge stone terraces (which he painstakingly built) in Castiglione di Sicilia, with 40 additional hectares of vines.

The team at Tornatore is introducing a new wine that you will find reviewed here. The 2019 Etna Rosso Calderara is produced with fruit from old vines. All of their wines were tasted at the estate in the company of Francesco Tornatore, his gracious wife and key members of his winemaking team.

### **Pietradolce**

I met Michele Faro last summer at his estate, and although I have visited the winery many times in the past, there always seems to be something new to admire in terms of winery equipment or art installations.





*Ancient vines in the Barbagalli Vineyard*

What doesn't change is the beauty and majesty of the high-elevation vineyards located just above the modern winery on a dusty path. Michele Faro farms some of the most beautiful vineyards on the volcano with ancient, pre-phylloxera vines protected in a little amphitheater surrounded by lava rock walls.





*Michele Faro (top left) with images from his winery and a water-themed fountain. Bottom left are meat involtini cooked in lemon leaves.*

This is not an old winery, but it is entering a chapter in which it can present some older vintages from the library. We tasted four wines to get a better sense of the aging potential of Carricante and Nerello Mascalese. Specifically, we tasted the 2014 and 2016 Etna Bianco Archineri, the 2007 Etna Rosso Archineri and the 2010 Etna Rosso Barbagalli. You will find my notes in this article.





*Where vines and lava meet*

Pietradolce is also introducing a new wine, the 2019 Etna Rosso Feudo di Mezzo.

### **Cottanera**

The Cambria family makes some of my favorite Etna wines, and it is an estate that I have had the privilege to watch grow after an important generational change. My contacts are Francesco and his sister Mariangela. They can be credited with growing the Cottanera portfolio to include three white wines (Etna Bianco, Barbazzale Bianco and Etna Bianco Contrada Calderara), one rose (Etna Rosato) and six exciting reds (Barbazzale Rosso, Etna Rosso Contrada Diciassettesalme, Etna Rosso Contrada Feudo di Mezzo, Etna Rosso Riserva Contrada Zottorinoto, Sole di Sesta and L'Ardenza). They also make an Etna Spumante Brut.





*Francesco Cambria*

A couple of changes are coming up. First, starting with the 2022 vintage, Cottanera will reintroduce a classic Etna Rosso made only with Nerello Mascalese. Second, they will release a 2021 Etna Bianco Cottanera that undergoes three or four years in cement before it is released. Cottanera is not alone in experimenting with a late-release Carricante, and I can't wait to taste the result when the wine is ready. Lastly, they plan to release a new Etna Rosso called Iannazzo from a 3.5-hectare site just above Feudo di Mezzo with 32- to 35-year-old vines.





*Yours truly hiking near the summit of Etna*



**MONICA LARNER (/AUTHOR/J5RTSGU2A5HCSXBTY)**

Delivered to Italy at age 11 by The Winds of War, Monica Larner has lived most of her life in her adopted home. A Los Angeles native, her family moved to Rome for filming of the 1983 World War II TV mini-series thanks to her father, Director of Photography Stevan Larner (Badlands, Roots, North and South and Caddyshack...).



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