

# Tornatore in Wine Spectator – Carricante



Tasca d'Almerita's Etna vineyards

## NERELLO MASCALESE

ALSO KNOWN AS: *Negrello, Nerello Calabrese, Niureddu*

**T**HE SUCCESS and attention given to Mount Etna's red wines over the past decade has led to the widespread use of Nerello Mascalese as the common name for this native Sicilian variety.

### Where is it grown?

Nerello Mascalese shines brightest as the star of the Etna DOC red wines, where it must be at least 80% of the blend. In that appellation, its usual blending partner is Nerello Cappuccio. Nerello Mascalese also has a strong presence in the far northeastern tip of Sicily, near Messina. It is the primary grape variety from the Faro DOC, which produces only red wines, with Nerello Mascalese accounting for 45% to 60% of the blend. Outside of Etna and Faro the grape is not dominant, but it is planted throughout the island. From these sources it is often blended with other varieties and bottled under the Terre Siciliane IGT.

### How is it made and what are its styles?

Nerello Mascalese is primarily produced as a red wine with a sense of finesse and restraint; it's well-defined and expressive without becoming muscular or exuberant. And with the desire to showcase the grape's restraint as well as its ability to express *terroir*, most producers limit the influence of oak, particularly new oak, when vinifying and aging it. Producers that do use oak during fermentation most commonly employ large-format vessels, neutral in character. At F. Tornatore, the winery's Etna reds are fermented in either stainless steel or cement tanks before aging in large oak *botti*.

"In the cellar, we follow the viticultural philosophy to respect our grapes without intervening too much and without influencing their character during winemaking," says Nawal Bouselham, export manager of F. Tornatore, a family estate owned by Francesco Tornatore and his wife, Nina Puglisi. Bouselham's husband, Giuseppe, is the next generation at the winery.

Nerello Mascalese also makes distinctive examples as bottlings of sparkling and still rosé. The still rosés are notable for their typically deeper hue—more of a light garnet or ruby color than the ubiquitous Provençal pink—and their lightly tannic structure, which recommends them to food.

### What does it taste like?

Nerello Mascalese is often compared to Pinot Noir, specifically from Burgundy, for its ability to express nuanced yet concentrated flavor and *terroir* in an elegant, light- to medium-weight frame. These wines are fruit



Nerello Mascalese

forward, with red cherry, raspberry, strawberry, cranberry and/or red currant notes. There's a notable herbal overtone, including dried medicinal, Mediterranean or balsamico herbs.

Nerello Mascalese is relatively high in both acidity and tannins, creating a taut, refined structure for the flavor profile. Another component of Nerello Mascalese is its minerality, which ranges in character from a subtle earthiness to salinity to ashy or tarry smoke notes and beyond. Today Nerello Mascalese is prized on Mount Etna for its ability to express the variegated *terroir* resulting from this active volcano.

"Surely the soil is what makes Nerello Mascalese from Mount Etna so special," says Bouselham. "These are mineral soils rich in obsidian, made up of layers of lava that alternate, with vineyards reaching up to 3,280 feet above sea level."

Etna's soils vary in consistency based on the site's elevation and the age of the eruption on which they are based. They range from fine, sandlike ash through to large pieces of deconstructed lava known locally *lapilli* or *ripiddu*. Vine roots dig through these porous soils to find water and minerals.

### Why is it produced almost exclusively in Sicily?

Nerello Mascalese has evolved to thrive in its birthplace. Factors associated with elevation are key components to its success. Mount Etna's vineyards, rising to about 3,300 feet, and the hillside sites of the Faro DOC, up to about 1,200 feet, provide an environment in which it flourishes. "It is on Etna that [Nerello Mascalese] found its natural habitat," says Bouselham. "In addition to the characteristics of the soils, Nerello Mascalese loves the temperature variations between day and night that characterize the volcano."

The grape's affinity for volcanic *terroir* and its difficult nature in the vineyard have contributed to its limited spread outside Sicily. In fact, many Nerello Mascalese vineyards were abandoned or pulled during the 20th century; it's a low-yielding variety that's costly in the vineyard, requiring hand-harvesting and other labors. And as with all late-ripening varieties, there's a greater threat of disease while waiting for ripeness.

### Recommended Wines

**Vini Franchetti-Passopisciaro** Terre Siciliane Contrada P 2019 (94, \$90)

**Tenuta delle Terre Nere** Etna Prephylloxera La Vigna di Don Peppino Vecchi Vigne 2019 (94, \$144)

**Tasca d'Almerita** Etna Tenuta Tascente Contrada Sciaranuova V.V. 2017 (93, \$120)

**Giovanni** Rosso Etna 2019 (93, \$51)

**F. Tornatore** Etna Pietrarizzo 2019 (93, \$60)

**Emanuele Scammacca del Murgo** Etna 2020 (90, \$22)

**Terra Constantino** Etna de Aetna 2020 (90, \$32)



Nina Puglisi and Francesco Tornatore of F. Tornatore

INSET: GRAPES: GETTY IMAGES; BOTTOM: MAZE ROW WINE MERCHANT



# CARRICANTE

ALSO KNOWN AS: *Catanese Bianco*, *Nocera Bianca*

**A**LMOST ubiquitously referred to as Carricante, sometimes with slightly altered spellings; occasionally called Catanese Bianco, and very rarely, Nocera Bianca. In the past, Carricante was sometimes confused with Catarratto.

## Where is it grown?

The world's plantings of Carricante are found almost entirely on the slopes of Sicily's Mount Etna, where it has thrived in the mountain's volcanic soils since ancient times. Based on the star power of wines from Etna and the intriguing results from this distinctive grape, vineyard acreage for Carricante has surged in the past decade. The number of Etna and Etna Superiore white wines bottled increased 37% in the first half of 2022 versus the same six months in 2021, according to the Etna consortium.

Carricante excels in Etna's high-altitude vineyards, with many of the best examples from sites beginning at about 1,900 feet above sea level and rising to roughly 3,300 feet. Wines labeled as Superiore, the top category for Etna whites, are produced entirely from grapes harvested in the commune of Milo, with vineyards from roughly 2,400 feet to 2,950 feet above sea level.

## How is it made and what are its styles?

Wines labeled as Etna or Etna Superiore account for the majority of bottlings from Carricante. For the basic Etna white category, Carricante must make up at least 60% of the blend; for the Superiore category, 80% is required. If a blend, Catarratto is a traditional partner for Carricante, but other white varieties such as Minella Bianca or Trebbiano are also allowed, choices that affect the resulting wine style.



Brothers Antonio (left) and Salvino Benanti with their father, Giuseppe

"Other schools of thought differ," says Benanti, "including blending Carricante with Catarratto and even using oak in parts of the vinification process. Obviously these choices will result in more fruity, powerful wines, with some toasty notes."

## What does it taste like?

Racy acidity and minerality are the two characteristics that most impact the perception of Carricante on the palate. These components work within an overall citrusy profile—Meyer lemon, orange and grapefruit—with some stone fruits and notes of orchard blossom, fennel seed, eucalyptus and other herbs.

Depending on the *terroir*, minerality in the wine shows as an underlying flintiness or persistent streak of salinity, petrol or lanolin. "[These are] wines that may resemble a Chablis when they are young, but which acquire Riesling-like petrol and flint notes as they evolve," says Benanti.

Tóth says Carricante can also show considerable differences based on vine-

yard elevation and soil. "Starting from [1,950 to 2,300 feet] we find deeper, darker soils, with a softer, rounder, more complete profile [for Carricante] in its youth," she says, describing a warmer range of fleshy yellow fruit flavors with wild herb and floral notes. At higher elevations, with poorer soils, Tóth finds examples to be: "Linear, sharp, compact ... a real mountain white."

## Why is it produced almost exclusively in Sicily?

Parts of Mount Etna are among the rainiest in Sicily, a contrast to the arid conditions found elsewhere on the island much of the year. Yet the mountain slopes receive ample sunlight, good

ventilation and dramatic temperature swings between day and night, factors tailored to Carricante, a slow-ripening variety that's high in acidity.

It's also a grape with the ability to reflect Etna's various soils.

"Carricante from Mount Etna is capable of delivering vibrant, pure, ageworthy wines with a very clear volcanic sense of place," says Benanti.

## Recommended Wines

**Benanti** Etna White Superiore Pietra Marina 2017 (93, \$128)

**Tenuta delle Terre Nere** Etna White Calderara Sottana Cuvée delle Vigne Niche 2020 (92, \$48)

**F. Tornatore** Etna White Pietrarizzo 2021 (92, \$60)

**Idda** Sicilia White 2020 (91, \$54)

**Planeta** Carricante Sicilia Eruzione 1614 2018 (91, \$27)



Planeta's Feudo di Mezzo winery



Carricante

Today, many producers choose for Carricante to dominate their Etna white blend, or eschew other varieties altogether. "We at Benanti have always produced Carricante as a varietal wine. We believe this allows us to present the most typical, finest and purest wine possible," says Salvino Benanti, co-owner with his brother Antonio and father, Giuseppe, of their family winery.

With the renewed interest in Carricante, Etna's producers are utilizing a variety of winemaking techniques to explore the grape's stylistic range. But most avoid new and/or toasted oak, especially small-format oak *barriques*. Stainless steel and larger, neutral oak containers are common. "In the cellar, we feel that less is more," says Planeta winemaker Patricia Tóth. Like Benanti, Planeta prefers stainless steel fermentation and aging, working carefully with the lees to ensure complexity. These versions are minerally and graceful.