



Rolling hills of vineyards in Sicily.  
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## Going Native in Sicily

Christy Canterbury / December 2012

**Inspired by its renewed enthusiasm for indigenous grapes, Christy Canterbury offers a primer on Sicily's wines.**

The schedule read “Late, light lunch,” again. After three days of touring Sicily, I concluded this might be the only midday dining option on the Mediterranean’s largest island. Lunch was, indeed, always late. It often began around 2 p.m. However, in seemingly proper Sicilian contradiction, lunch was never, ever light.

It wasn’t the quantity but rather the food itself. Local cheese and home-cured sausage were de rigueur appetizers—delicious and filling. Their accompaniments were sun-dried tomatoes, every pore brimming with olive oil, and salt-cured olives. Baskets of thick-cut, faintly sweet bread stood by to soak up every drop of bright green olive oil post-first course before one—or two—pastas were scooped onto the same plate. Occasionally, a host pulled out all the stops and *pranzo* (lunch) included grilled lamb and pork. Thank goodness Sicilian wines rage with acidity and provide monumental refreshment!

Renowned consulting enologist Salvo Foti pointed out that this vibrant acidity is truer of Sicily’s native varieties than of international ones grown there. Conversely, Sicilian varieties are, generally, rather low in tannin. Otherwise, their resulting wines would be too aggressive to enjoy, even with the island’s substantial cuisine.

While Sicily has large plantings of international varieties, some several decades old, it is the autochthonous vines that are garnering more and more attention. Generally speaking, reds are produced in the east and whites in the west, but nothing in wine can ever be quite so simple. Here is a brief overview of Sicily’s most important, indigenous grapes and where they grow.

### WHITES

**Carricante** is cultivated almost exclusively on Mount Etna in the northeast. This aromatically neutral grape acquires greater flavor complexity as it ages, which it is well suited to do, but it shows distinct minerality from day one. Older Carricante even takes on petrol notes, much like Riesling. Carricante ages well because of its naturally high acidity. To my palate, Carricante consistently makes some of the most elegant and enticing whites in Sicily—in both sparkling and still forms.

**Catarrato** is the most widely planted variety, accounting for approximately one-third of all plantings. It is planted almost exclusively in the western province of Trapani. Capable of producing bumper crops, Catarrato receives much disdain and, not surprisingly, is required in only three DOCs. What doesn’t find its way into generally mediocre Marsala is usually sent to the distiller.

**Grillo** gives wines generous body and sturdy acidity, but it lacks aromatic forwardness. Grillo from lower yields, however, shows an attractive nutty character. Renato de Bartoli, winemaker at his family’s quality-driven Marsala estate, asserts that Grillo is the most historic white grape of western Sicily.

**Inzolia** is a moderately aromatic white grape. Along with Grillo, Inzolia can be found in top quality Marsala as well as in still wines, sometimes even in monovarietal bottlings.

**Zibibbo** Also known as Muscat of Alexandria, this impressively perfumed grape is famous for its sweet wines made from dried grapes on the island of Pantelleria. Occasionally, the

variety is also crafted into dry wines. Orange water and marmalade dominate the flavor spectrum. Acidity tends to be medium to medium-plus, and the color tends to gold with copper inflections.

## REDS

**Frappato** produces juicy, fruit-driven wines that are best enjoyed in their youth. Frappato joins Nero d'Avola in making the lovely, quaffable Cerasuolo di Vittoria (named for its cherry [*cera*] color) and is occasionally bottled on its own. Frappato often undergoes carbonic maceration to maximize its fruitiness.

**Nerello Cappuccio** How Nerello Cappuccio ended up on Mount Etna remains a mystery. However, Professor Attilio Scienza confirms that it is identical to Carignan. The connection can be seen in Cappuccio's thick and crunchy skin that is plentiful in both color and tannin and in its Morello cherry flavors with briar patch undertones.

**Nerello Mascalese** is thin-skinned and light in color. Its resulting wines teem with tannins. Its fruit profile is decidedly black in flavor. Scienza says that Mascalese is a "son" of Sangiovese, like many other Italian grapes. This is quite interesting, considering that this variety is planted only on Mount Etna and that Sangiovese is not a grape that takes well to the Sicilian habitat.

**Nero d'Avola** hails from southeastern Sicily's town of Avola, just south of Syracuse, but it is now grown all over. Nero d'Avola possesses some of the highest acidity of all native Italian grapes. However, it's also prone to reduction; wood aging reduces this tendency. Bright cherry fruit and sun-baked earth characterize this versatile variety.

With these native grapes in mind, let's consider Sicily's ge positioning and cultural mentality. Sicily sits near the heart of the Mediterranean basin. You can see Calabria while standing in Benanti's vineyards on Mount Etna, but Sicilians identify more closely with Africa than the European mainland. After all, the town of Ragusa shares the same parallel as Tunis, which is closer to Palermo than is Rome. The prevailing weather here arrives from the north, except when the Saharan sirocco blows. If it rains when the sirocco sweeps across the island, you'll find the vines' leaves covered in red, powdery sand.

Sicily knows change; its people have been forced to embrace it often. Throughout history, different conquerors have sailed through like the wind. However, its recent wine *rinascita* (revival) came from within. As Foti smartly commented, "The best ingredient for a wine is the honesty of the producer." Sicily has reevaluated and revolutionized an important part of its wine industry. Nonetheless, it still bottles less than 20 percent of its production. How much of its *vini* are still sold to "ameliorate" others made in Italy, France, and beyond is up for speculation. But, as Frederico Curtaz of Tenuta di Fessina remarked patiently, "We're not like God, who made everything in seven days." The Sicilian revolution has barely begun, but it has done so with a fiery start.

Once shipped to the United States, Sicilian wines show up on tables in many cities. Of course, just because they are available doesn't mean they sell easily or well. Those who throw themselves into Sicilian wines agree they are generally hand-sells. Every restaurant requires its own formula. Andy Fortgang at the diminutive Le Pigeon in Portland, Oregon, lists several Sicilian wines on his diverse wine list. It took much patience, but Fortgang now has a small but regular, even fervent, following for COS and Occhipinti. He says they'd never hit the table without his coaxing.

Francis Schott, co-owner of Stage Left and Catherine Lombardi restaurants in New Brunswick, New Jersey, offers a wine list deep in Italian selections and carries many wines from native Sicilian varieties. In his opinion, that's where the excitement lies versus with international varieties. Better yet, many of his Sicilian options are value wines, including his best-selling Calabretta Rosso 2000. Clients can't believe they can imbibe a fantastic, 12 year old red wine—in a restaurant—for just \$55.

Perhaps no one can speak more passionately about the hand-sell process than Melissa Muller Daka, whose restaurant, Eolo, features Sicilian food and wine. Eolo is located on a

busy corner in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood. Muller Daka focuses on two keys in selling her almost all- Sicilian list. First, she uses her large by-the-glass selection as a playground for palates. Everything can be tasted, and she verbally offers half glasses so that guests can experiment with the different varieties. Second, she has found that a large percentage of her in-the-know Manhattan clientele have already tried Nero d'Avola. They will have loved it or hated it, depending on its style. Still, it's a good basis for starting a conversation at the table. While Muller Daka is thrilled people are aware of the grape, she sometimes avoids it even when they love it so that she can turn guests on to other great Sicilian wines.

Find a tasting list of native Sicilian varieties at [FoodArts.com](http://FoodArts.com).