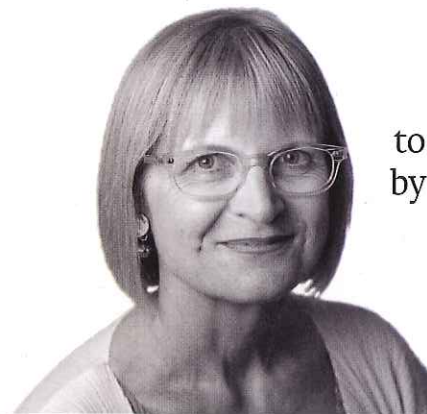


# Jancis Robinson



'Etna was about to be engulfed not by molten lava but by an influx of wine producers'

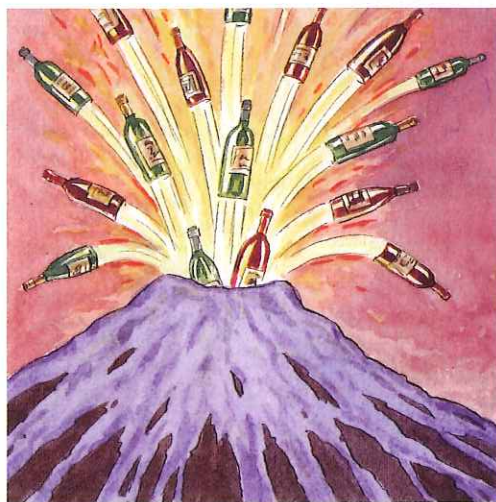
## A seismic shift

Italy has no shortage of wine denominations – 575 at the last count – but there is one that has recently been exciting more interest than any other: Etna in eastern Sicily.

The slopes of this active volcano constitute some of the strangest wine country in the world. Etna itself is omnipresent, whether via the dramatic lava flows, the warning booms that could be heard throughout this summer (heralding a great vintage for Etna, perhaps Italy's finest in 2014), the cone itself – snowcapped in winter and spring, plumed with cloud in summer and autumn – or the terrain. The land is dotted with strange dark crusts of dried magma, in shapes no designer could create, and with *torrette*, towers of lava stones amassed by smallholders after clearing space for a field or vineyard, between the outpourings of the volcano. The land has been so twisted and turned that large plots do not exist and there is massive variation between each small one. The best vineyards have been painstakingly terraced, often with lava stones. Many vines are centenarians. These vineyards demand workers who understand the special land that is Etna.

Michele Faro's grandfather owned two hectares of vines south of Etna and one of lemons – enough for a family to live on then. His father Venerando built up a business selling Mediterranean plants in this warm, wet corner of Sicily. But by 2004, Faro realised that Etna was about to be engulfed not by molten lava but by an influx of wine producers, and the Faros made their move. They managed to acquire some particularly favoured 40-, 80- and 100-year-old vines for their Pietradolce wine project in the late-ripening northern vineyards that are so suitable for red wine production. Their tiny Barbagalli vineyard in an amphitheatre almost at the upper limit of the Etna DOC is a haunt of butterflies, cactus, wild cyclamen and fennel.

Crossings on the single-track Circumetnea railway are still hand-operated by men who sit in cabins with their feet up, waiting for a phone call from the previous station. "Fifteen years ago," Michele Faro explained after pointing one of them out, "there was no reason to come here. There were perhaps five wine producers in total." Now, Etna wines have become so fashionable that he regularly shows representatives of the



### JANCIS'S ETNA PICKS

- Terre Nere, Calderara Sottana 2012, £110 for six bottles in bond, Justerini & Brooks
- Pietradolce, Archineri 2011, £167.94 for six, duty paid, Armit
- I Vigneri, Salvo Foti, Rosso 2012, £25.50, L'Art du Vin, Hedonism, Kensington Wine Rooms
- Graci, Contrada da Arcuria 2012, £29.95, Berry Bros
- Passopisciaro, single-contrada 2012s, £205 for six bottles in bond, Corney & Barrow

Many of the vines for Passopisciaro's individual village, or *contrada*, wines are higher than the upper limit of the Etna DOC so have to be sold as IGT Terre Siciliane and with only an initial rather than the name.

big northern Italian wine companies round his Etna vineyards. But they tend to retreat, shaking their heads at how hard it is to work the tiny plots of such uncompromising land, with ancient vines that might yield just half a bottle each. Nevertheless, most of Sicily's notable wine companies – Cusumano, Duca di Salaparuta, Firriato, Planeta, Tasca d'Almerita – have all recently invested in land on the mountain, some even building wineries. There are now about 60 growers of whom a good 20 also make wine.

There have always been smallholders and vine growers who would either make wine for themselves or sell to the small local co-op or one of the region's few wine producers: the old Barone di Villagrande family based in Milo, on the eastern slopes of Etna, Murgo and Benanti. The Etna revolution began with 2001, the first vintage for Passopisciaro, a ground-breaking estate founded on ancient, high-altitude vines by Andrea Franchetti of the Tuscan estate Tenuta di Trinoro; for the Belgian wine broker and wine fanatic Frank Cornelissen, who makes small quantities of defiantly natural wines; and the first bottled vintage of I Vigneri, a loose association of Sicilian growers whose wines are made by the quintessentially indigenous Salvo Foti. Italo-American wine broker Marco De Grazia followed hard on their heels and his Terre Nere is now one of the best distributed Etna labels.

Until three years ago, Foti was Benanti's oenologist but, helped by Gino the old mule, he has long tended his own small patch of lovingly raised, geometrically planted gnarled vines, a field blend of traditional Etna varieties Nerello Mascalese, Nerello Cappuccio and Grenache, their leaves orange and yellow in the autumn sun. (Most producers concentrate on the first of these today but few of them can boast 200-year-old vines.) As we picked our way between vineyard plots along the rough, stony paths on top of carefully built walls, he pointed dismissively at the bright green vines of a neighbour advised by a Tuscan oenologist, the last two words pronounced as though profane. Black irrigation tubes snaked along the wired rows of vines. Rainfall is high on Etna but the water runs off rapidly into the fertile loams on top of the volcanic rocks. Irrigation keeps roots close to the surface. Not the Etna way, said Foti.

There could hardly be a greater contrast between the vineyards of the old hands and ►





◀ those of Duca di Salaparuta, owners of the Corvo brand. They bought a nine-hectare vineyard just over the hill from Pietradolce's most favoured vines, at the propitious altitude of 700m, and re-landscaped the terrain so that it is now virtually flat with high-trained rows of Pinot Noir vines looking as though they had mechanisation in mind. I was assured all grapes are picked by hand but found it hard to see much Pinot character in the result. The warm, earthy, tangy traces of the mountain impose themselves in most Etna reds – whatever the variety – although some oenologists seem determined to smother these characteristics with new oak.

In stark visual contrast to this was what Cusumano, another big producer from central Sicily, had done to a top-quality vineyard they bought from Benanti, who had pulled out its vines two years ago. Here they had painstakingly reconstructed the terraces and planted a forest of individually staked vines on them – perhaps helped by a government grant and access to workers on their other 600 hectares of vines on the island. The vines looked ultra-traditional to me but Foti pointed out that they do not conform to the traditional pattern known as quincunx. He insisted that only local Etnese really understand how to grow vines here. "But Etna people don't understand that they have their fortune at their feet," he added. **FT**

See "Buying & Investing in Wine", separate section



Colony Grill Room

## Quick bites Brunch at the Colony Grill Room

Luxuriant wood, brass and leather decor combine with brunch classics from both sides of the ocean to create an elegant Manhattanesque experience in London.  
By Natalie Whittle

The stolid American grill room – where a man could have "an excellent dinner, just as long or short as he likes, served quickly, in luxurious surroundings" – is the paradigm cited from the 1914 *Gourmet's Guide to London* for the Colony Grill Room, in-house restaurant for Corbin & King's new Beaumont hotel, minutes from the shopping pandemonium of Oxford Street.

Like the hotel, which rises like an art deco prow, more elegant than everything else on the horizon, the Colony has an air of unimprovable design: polished dark wood, shining brass and firm leather banquettes, the walls frescoed with 1920s skyscrapers and thigh-suited bathers. A sloping typeface graces the menu and the napkins like a trail of movie-star smoke. (The neroli-scented bathrooms, meanwhile, are like just-so dressing rooms.)

It's an excellent, nearly Manhattan setting

for brunch, though a little quieter and more hushed-toned at 11.30am on a Sunday than other brunch spots might be (it warms up towards lunchtime). There is a full cast of waiting staff, friendly and costumed smartly in black and white.

All the trimmings are grander than is strictly necessary, so the good, strong coffee is poured from heavy silver pots. The menu itself has everything from the Anglo-American brunch-book: the classics (Arnold Bennett omelette, grilled steak and eggs, kedgeree, hamburgers, Iceberg and blue cheese wedge), a choice of just-greasy-enough duck-egg hashes (black pudding, smoked haddock, corned beef) and hors d'oeuvres for your inner Mad Man such as oysters, steak tartare and a punchy, peppery Clamato juice (£3.95).

Perhaps the best part of brunch comes after the savoury dishes, with the Colony Grill Room's

"bespoke" ice cream sundae. This menu choice, quite thrillingly triggers the arrival of special order notes and pencil, on which tick your way through ice cream and sorbet flavours (strawberry, hazelnut and other classics), toppings fruit: think marshmallow, peanut brittle, crumble, meringue) and sauce (such as salted caramel, raspberry, bourbon, anglaise), until you've reached your choice of greed (two scoops £5.50, three for £7.50). It's worth leaving for this: rumour has it that some people have all 12 toppings and for good measure, a gentleman of old probably shudder thought.

Brunch 11am-5pm  
Saturday and Sunday  
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