



Written by

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## Contrada clarity - Etna's very special 2014s

Sicily's Etna is regularly described as the 'Burgundy of the south', which I take as a reference to its parcellated, high-density vineyards rather than to its wine style. Some of the pale, fragrant reds currently being made on Europe's largest active volcano may resemble burgundy superficially, but a general Etna style that convincingly reflects its terroirs has yet to emerge. When, at the beginning of the 2000s, the first new-wave Etna reds started to make their appearance on international markets, it was the likes of Andrea Franchetti and Marc De Grazia who fuelled interest in the wines, helped by long-standing trade contacts and distribution channels forged by wines they had either successfully produced elsewhere or distributed previously. Franchetti's Passiopisciario and De Grazia's Tenuta delle Terre Nere became an overnight success, but at the beginning the wines were difficult to pinpoint, not least because of noticeable stylistic shifts in the first few years, almost independent of the vintage, as well as the preponderance of concentration and new oak over transparency in the wines.

Both were still miles off the elegant, vivid style now typical of their wines while they tried to come to grips with what exactly Nerello Mascalese, Etna's indigenous red variety, was supposed to be like. The soul-searching that followed may also have been related to the fact that both Franchetti and De Grazia were initially attracted to Etna's cool macroclimate - vineyards here are between 600 and 1000 m elevation - rather than a desire to produce true Etna wines based on indigenous varieties.

The ensuing hype around Etna was further kindled by Franchetti's ingenious idea to present the latest Etna vintage during an annual event to which he invited all Etna producers. The event was called Contrade dell'Etna [see [my notes on the inaugural one in 2008 - JR](#)], referring to the hamlets on Etna's north side, where most of the vineyards lie. (My picture above shows the road sign for the hamlet of Passopisciario, where Franchetti is based; someone has scrawled below in blue, 'I love you, poppet'.) The producer stands were grouped according to their contrada, suggesting an analogy to Burgundy's village system. It was trailblazing Franchetti again who went furthest with this concept of single-contrada wines, producing no fewer than seven singlevineyard

wines from as many different contrade. Tasting five of these wines side by side clearly revealed their individual characteristics, giving strong evidence that, indeed, each contrada has a unique expression.

During this year's Contrade dell'Etna held last March, the latest 2014 vintage was presented. It can be considered Italy's only true en primeur tasting as the wines were not anywhere near being ready, with quite a few still having to terminate their malolactic conversion. Incidentally, this is one of the very few tastings where producers are encouraged to taste each other's wines, which they do with great enthusiasm. This is highly unconventional in Italy (and, I guess, in many European wine regions), where producers tend to be suspicious of their competitors and zealously restrict their tasting samples to journalists and trade.

Not on Etna, though. Year after year the event draws so many local producers, oenologists and winemakers from all over Sicily and beyond, you could walk over their heads. This year's illustrious guests included Castello di Ama's Marco Pallanti, oenologist Luca d'Attoma, Bonavita's Giovanni Scarfone from Faro and Palari's Salvatore Geraci, who has just bought a slice of Etna himself. Trying to conquer the crowds and taste as many embryonic wines as possible verged on the insane and one truly had to resort to guerrilla tactics to beat a path to each stand and taste while people were smoking, chatting at the top of their lungs and spilling wine, making me fear for my laptop.

The event was ample proof of the fact that Franchetti's single-contrada concept has now very much become standard practice, with many if not all producers taking the potential differences between the contrade as their lead and Nerello Mascalese as their main vehicle. Most estates now make a generic Etna red, as well as one or more single-contrada wines, often based on 100% Nerello Mascalese, which has only recently been allowed, thanks to a change in the production rules. There is a tendency for lighter coloured wines, but by the same token you can still find the entire bandwidth side by side, from pale to impenetrable crimson. Regularly, the deepest coloured wines tend to be oaky, although a move away from small French casks to large oak vessels has pretty much become the norm.

Another indication that the contrade concept has firmly been established was a plenary meeting of all Etna producers in the week following the en primeur tasting with a vote on enlarging the boundaries of the DOC. The vote, aimed at including some of Etna's highest vineyards from some of its most revered producers that are currently outside the denomination, did not manage to get sufficient support. Not because, I was told, these vineyards didn't warrant their inclusion, but out of fear that it would open the door to enlarging the DOC to admit lower-lying parcels. This may be understandable, but the undesirable consequence is that, among others, Franchetti, who has been the motor for the Etna renaissance, is still unable to label his wines as Etna DOC.

In spite of the fact that at the en primeur tasting the wines were grouped according to their contrada, I wasn't able confidently to make out their communal characteristics. Yet Alessio Planeta, who knows so much more about Etna and its wines, did tell me he has started to notice certain contrada-related characteristics. Lacking his knowledge and experience, I have no reason to doubt him, but I am not alone in thinking that, in general, the wines still need clarity and transparency that allow for terroir characteristics to shine through more clearly, instead of producing a mere wine style.

One of the sceptics is Eric Narioo, known in the UK as a director of [Les Caves de Pyrène](#), the very successful import business specialised in organic and natural wines. Together with his partner Anna Martens, he runs the tiny Vini di Anna estate in the contrada of Solicchiata. Its black-soil terraces with 10,000 bush-trained Nerello vines per hectare resemble a bonsai garden more than a vineyard. Although their property is tiny in size as well as production, Martens and Narioo belong to a handful of producers searching for transparency, even if each one is doing so in a very different way. Narioo led me to his cellar, where Georgian qvevri are buried in the ground and covered with pebbles.

'We are not interested in just any clay vessel, and they must be buried in the earth because of the natural temperature and the absence of radiation', Narioo told me during my visit last March. 'You can leave the qvevri for months without topping up and the wine still smells fresh.' It is an effort aimed at getting as little as possible between the vineyard and the final wine in order to allow the terroir to shine through as clearly as possible. But some esotericism chimes in as well, almost contrary to Narioo's intention. 'The qvevri is rounder and bigger, a bit like...oh well, I am just going to say it: a womb.'

Martens and Narioo seem to follow, perhaps unconsciously, [Salvo Foti's](#) philosophy in which not only the vineyard, climate and vine are believed to put a firm stamp of terroir on the wines, but also the place where it is being made. In their tiny, beautiful palmento, the typical, thick-walled, cool stone buildings in which traditionally the grapes were foot-trodden in large stone basins prior to alcoholic fermentation, they make a pale, fragrant, wild red and label the result, justifiably, Palmento. Narioo (pictured below with his palmento) admitted he still doesn't see a real distinction between the various contrade, or, rather, there is no clear defining style yet according to him. 'It is just too early to say', he told me.

Partricia Toth of Planeta's Etna outfit at Feudo di Mezzo is searching for the same clear Etna message in the wines she makes here. She admits that she is still in the process of coming to grips with the local varieties, which means she applies the gentlest of methods while processing them. I asked her if she is able to see clear differences between the contrade. 'I cannot nominate one single vineyard being the best. Different vineyards allow for different components and, more than anything, they provide a risk spread, because in August and September you can

have single patches of hail which can destroy everything. Last year, for example, it destroyed the Nerello Mascalese at [the contrada of] Sciara Nuova', she told me. She vinifies all plots separately in order to see what component each can bring to the blend, 'and with ageing you also get additional information on the character of a single vineyard', she explained.

Toth just had her third vintage under her belt and was excited about the quality of the 2014s, with their vibrant fruit and ripe tannins. 'The fruit was so perfect at the beginning of the autumn that quite a lot of producers started to harvest early, but I waited until November, because I wanted the tannins to be perfectly ripe.' She admits that delaying the harvest for so long was more than a little nerve wracking. 'For us, who are still learning about the varieties, it was at least as stressful as 2013 [a cooler vintage in which it rained during September] to work out when to pick the grapes. The weather was good, but I didn't know what to expect and how far I could push the maturation without increasing the alcohol.'

Toth ages the wines in large oak casks, whereas initially she used barriques. 'The barriques will go out', she resolutely said. According to her the fruit does not build a unity with the oak, even if it is older. 'Nerello Cappuccio is rougher and can stand up to small oak casks, but Nerello Mascalese does not integrate the oak', Toth explained. Her 2014 cask samples vinified in stainless steel and tronconic oak vats are wonderfully elegant, fragrant yet firmly structured wines, and leave little to be desired in terms of clarity of fruit and character, but I sensed that Toth feels she is only halfway there. Watch this space.

The latest arrival on Etna's flanks is Cusumano (see [The great Etna land grab](#)). Their original home base is Partinico near Palermo, where, since the 1990s, they have successfully turned out huge amounts of best-selling wines mostly based on international varieties. The announcement of their arrival initially spread fear among Etna producers that they had come to produce Etna wine for the mass market. These fears largely subsided when the company painstakingly began restoring 7 ha of dilapidated terraced vineyards in the contrada of Guardiola and planted them at 10,000 vines per ha, rendering a stunning visual perspective, as shown below. The huge investment involved just doesn't allow for heavy discounting.

They have also rented an adjacent 3-ha plot of 80-year-old vines from which they intend to produce their future Cru Guardiola. But size matters and Cusumano's ambition goes further. They acquired 3 ha in the contrada Porcaria and rented an additional 3 ha in Feudo di Mezzo and another 3 ha in Solicchiata. To accommodate production of the white wine grape Carricante they also bought 2 ha in Pietramarina and Verzella, important acquisitions that would not have been possible in such a short time unless established producers such as Benanti were willing or forced to sell. Whether Cusumano were inspired by the search for terroir or their more usual desire for volume remains to be seen, but, having tasted their first efforts, I have high expectations.

### **The wines**

While in 2014 Italy as a whole had to deal with a very cold, wet and short growing cycle resulting in a loss of yields in many regions, Sicily largely escaped the summer rains and growers were able to delay harvest for as long as they liked due to the absence of early autumn rains. The vintage is hailed as one of the best, and the wines in general show great acidity paired with very good levels of extract. Lots of ripe tannins will enable the 2014s to age gracefully.

The wines below are presented in the order they were tasted, both at the estates and during the en primeur, because I do believe that tasting order has an impact.

### **WINES TASTED AT THE ESTATES**

NB some of the tasting notes below do not have scores or drinking dates and are not in the tasting notes database because they describe unfinished wines.

PASSOPISCIARO

Passopisciaro 2014 IGP Terre Siciliane Cask sample. Serious and concentrated, full fruit nose. Still very closed and undefined on the palate with minerally notes and streamlining acidity on the finish. (WS) Drink 2017-2024

17

Passopisciaro, Contrada R 2014 IGP Terre Siciliane *From the Contrada Rampante at over 1,000 m. 100-year-old vines.*

Minerally, chalky, red fruit. Super-elegant, fresh and perfumed and will take on weight with age. Fine, gripping tannins. Lovely stuff. (WS) Drink 2018-2026

17+

Passopisciaro, Contrada S 2014 IGP Terre Siciliane *From the Contrada of Sciara Nuova at 900 m elevation. 80-year-old vines.*

Pale crimson. Lifted, pure nose. Ripe fruit palate, but with a juicy, lively finish and crunchy tannins. Truly elegant and long and although it hardly has begun its *élevage*, it is already a stunner. (WS) Drink 2018-2028

17.5+

Passopisciaro, Contrada C 2014 IGP Terre Siciliane *From the Contrada of Chiappemacine, 80-year-old vines.*

Partly white, chalky soils. Minerally, fine fruit nose with chalky notes. Compact palate with brisk acidity, but the fruit really fills it out. Lots of depth on the finish and with rich coating tannins framing the whole. (WS) Drink 2018-2028

17++

Passopisciaro, Contrada G 2014 IGP Terre Siciliane *From the Contrada of Guardiola. 80- to 100-year-old vines planted at a density of 8,000 plants per ha. Yield is 14 hl/ha (!).*

The richest of the 2014 Passopisciaro wines on the nose and with hints of garden herbs. Juicy and vibrant with lots of fine fruit and an intense, perfumed, lifted finish. Lots of fireworks here. (WS) Drink 2018-2028

17.5

Passopisciaro, Contrada P 2014 IGP Terre Siciliane *From the Contrada of Porcaria.*

Stalky and a little reductive. Sweet fruit on the attack and supported by coating tannins. Concentrated without being heavy and the load of fruit has found the perfect match in the rich, coating tannins. (WS) Drink 2018-2026

17