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Sicilian Reds Harness a Volcano's Energy

By ERIC ASIMOV

I CAN'T imagine what it's like to live next to a volcano, much less root my family and my hopes for its future within spewing distance of one.

I've never seen Mount Etna, or even been to Sicily. I did spend a couple of days in Naples a few years back. I remember staring transfixed across the gulf at Mount Vesuvius, imposing and pregnant with lava and fire.

I did not have to dwell upon Pompeii to feel uneasy. The gaping cone of the volcano unnerved me, even as my friend, a Neapolitan, waved away the danger, reassuring me that the city had elaborate, detailed, well-organized evacuation plans. Having honked my way through the chaos of Neapolitan traffic, I had my doubts.

Yet vineyards have been cultivated on the foothills and slopes surrounding Mount Etna since Pompeii was still a thriving den of depravity. Despite regular smolderings, belching of ash and flows of lava, Etna is today one of the most exciting and remarkable wine regions in Italy.

That is because a legacy of eruptions has left copious deposits of rocky volcanic soils, the sort of easily draining, nutrient-poor earth that can be so conducive to good wine.

And because the variety of micro-terroirs at elevations ranging mostly from 1,000 to 3,200 feet offer so many possible articulations of the indigenous Etna grapes: mostly the sleek, graceful nerello mascalese, with a small assist from its pudgier sibling, nerello cappuccio, which together generally make up the blends for Etna Rosso, the officially approved term for Etna red wines.

But I prefer to think it's the edginess of a precarious existence that gives these wines their nervous energy.

Energy characterizes these wines. Prosaically, it's a freshness that comes from lively acidity. I prefer to think they are the tense expressions of a people ready to rise up and bolt at a moment's notice — though perhaps we can take heart that [the volcano has not spewed significant ash](#) for at least a few weeks now.

The combination of energy and the lightness and elegance of the nerello mascalese grape makes the evolution of Etna red wines in the last 15 years or so one of wine's most welcome trends. The whites, too, are worth exploring.

In an effort to immerse ourselves in Etna reds, the wine panel recently tasted 20 bottles from recently issued vintages. For the tasting, Florence Fabricant and I were joined by Liz Nicholson, the wine director at Maialino near Gramercy Park, and Shin Tseng, the wine director at Lupa in Greenwich Village.

If you haven't already guessed, I love these wines. I love the lightness of their textures, the purity of the red fruit and mineral flavors, their refreshing nature, their elegance and their subtlety. They have the weightlessness of good Burgundy, though not the complexity and the tradition (at least, not yet).

Despite the fact that Etna is an ancient source of wine, many of the leading producers today are newcomers, drawn there by the conviction that wines from Etna will be like no others. Marco de Grazia, an American importer of wines from Piedmont and Tuscany, decided Etna was where he wanted to settle down and make his own wine. He founded Tenuta delle Terre Nere, and since 2002 has been issuing multiple cuvées.

Andrea Franchetti of Passopisciaro made wine in Tuscany before adding vineyards on Etna to his holdings. Alberto Graci abandoned his career as a banker to make wine on Etna. And [Frank Cornelissen](#) came from Belgium to Etna, where he makes extreme wines unlike almost any others on earth, which people tend to love or hate.

Not everybody is a newcomer, however. Ciro Biondi's family has made wine on Etna for generations, as have the Calabrettas. Others like Murgo and Fattorie Romeo del Castello measure their time on Etna in decades.

With so many backgrounds, the wines came in an assortment of styles, from determinedly old school to frankly modern to quirky and idiosyncratic. Yet the wines were also bound together by their common features, the taut, graceful texture that speaks of the combination of Etna and the nerello grapes.

While many of these wines can be enjoyed young, our No. 1 wine, the 2002 from Calabretta, demonstrated how well they can age, and how time in the bottle can soften tannins and mellow the sometimes aggressive acidity. The lively, pure 2002, an old-fashioned wine with no evidence of new oak, is Calabretta's most recent release, making it one of very few producers of still wines in the world that offers the costly service of aging wines for years before releasing them.

How do they decide when the wines are ready? Calabretta's importer, Douglas Polaner, described its release policy as "shrouded in mystery."

Our No. 2 bottle, the 2009 Santo Spirito from Terre Nere, was far more modern, touched by the polish and aroma that comes from aging in new oak barrels, yet well balanced. With aromas and flavors of flowers, red fruit and herbs, it was one of the more complex wines in the tasting. It was \$40, while a less expensive Terre Nere, the \$17 2010 Etna Rosso, was our No. 4 bottle. It was a

delicate, light and easygoing pleasure.

By contrast, the 2008 Terre Nere Vigna di Don Peppino, an \$80 bottle, was overpowered by oak and did not make the cut.

The most expensive bottle in our top 10, the 2008 Il Musmeci from Tenuta di Fessina, No. 5, also had a touch of oak, but it seemed much more integrated. Meanwhile, at \$16, the 2009 Murgo was our No. 3 wine and our best value, zesty, energetic and perfumed.

Others worth mentioning include the '08 Romeo del Castello, which will need time to knit together, and the '08 Outis from Vini Biondi, a fresh, delicious wine that puts on no airs.

And, of course, the Cornelissen. I have my own love-hate relationship with these wines. Like some wines made without the preservative qualities of sulfur dioxide, they are extremely delicate and must be handled carefully and kept cool. Yet even in perfect condition they are polarizing.

The pale-ruby Cornelissen MunJebel No. 7 (the wines are not vintage dated) combines the lithe cherry fruit characteristic of the nerello mascalese with sweet-and-spicy flavors that will surprise.

Yet the wine was vibrant and alive. If you are curious about the limits of even natural wines, the Cornelissens are well worth trying. After all, life is fleeting, and can be especially so on Etna.

Tasting Report

Calabretta Etna Rosso, \$27, ***

2002

Lively, energetic and pure, with deep, rich fruit and mineral flavors, mellowed by age and underscored by a touch of funk. (Polaner Selections, Mt. Kisco, N.Y.)

Tenuta Delle Terre Nere, \$40, ***

Etna Rosso Santo Spirito 2009

Balanced and complex with aromas and flavors of flowers, red fruit and herbs, and well-integrated oak. (Michael Skurnik Wines, Syosset, N.Y.)

BEST VALUE

Murgo Etna Rosso, \$16, ***

2009

Light-bodied, elegant and perfumed, with plenty of zest and verve. (Domaine Select Wine Estates, New York)

Tenuta Delle Terre Nerre, \$17, ** 1/2

Etna Rosso 2010

Delicate, silky texture with spicy, persistent flavors of flowers and red fruit. (Michael Skurnik Wines)

Tenuta di Fessina, \$70, ** 1/2

Etna Rosso Il Musmeci 2008

Balanced and inviting, with lively, lingering fruit and earth flavors, underlined by a touch of oak. (Winebow/Leonardo LoCascio Selections, New York)

Fattorie Romeo del Castello, \$43, ** 1/2

Etna Rosso Vigo 2008

Light-bodied but well-structured and substantial with deep, resonant flavors of fruit and earth; needs time to develop. (Louis/Dressner Selections, New York)

Tenuta Scilio di Valle Galfina, \$21, ** 1/2

Etna Rosso Phiale 2009

Fresh and energetic, with savory flavors of spices and red fruit. (John Given Wines, Stanfordville, N.Y.)

Vini Biondi Etna Rosso Outis, \$30, **

2008

Light-bodied and delicate, with pure, fresh fruit flavors. (Selected Estates of Europe, Mamaroneck, N.Y.)

Frank Cornelissen MunJebel 7, \$45, **

NV

Thoroughly unconventional and polarizing; pale red and cloudy with flavors of cherries and spices, yet energetic and alive in the glass. (Zev Rovine Selections/Bon Vivant Imports, Boise, Idaho)

Tenuta di Fessina, \$38, **

Etna Rosso Erse 2008

Densely colored and tannic, with flavors of black fruit, herbs and oak. (Winebow/Leonardo LoCascio Selections)



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