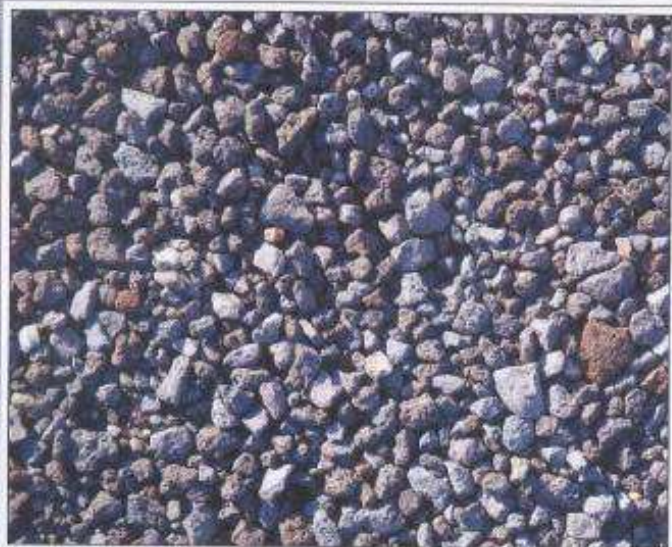


MT. ETNA GETS HOT

SURPRISINGLY DELICATE WINES FROM ITALY'S FIERY MOUNTAIN ARE POISED TO BE THE NEXT BIG FIND FOR FANS OF THE ELEGANT BUT OFFBEAT.

BY MONICA LARNER

Vintner Andrea Franchetti stands in a torrent of frozen wind blasting down the steeply conical flank of Mt. Etna, the still-active volcano along Sicily's eastern coast. At his feet are the blackened deposits of a recent lava flow, which stopped miraculously short of a prized vineyard. A white statue of the Virgin Mary with outstretched arms faces the menacing volcano and marks the end of the lava's destructive path. Local farmers believe only she has the power to prevent the next lava flow from descending even closer to Sicilian farms, vineyards and towns.



Left: Andrea Franchetti. Among the original Etna pioneers, this eccentric Tuscan has brought credibility and prestige to winemaking on the volcano. He owns stunningly beautiful high altitude vineyards near Passopisciaro and organizes Contrade dell'Etna, a consumer wine exhibit held each year that has helped garner international exposure. Above: Mt. Etna is a stratovolcano, meaning each new eruption adds a new layer of virgin soil that is rich in minerals and chemicals needed for agriculture.

Franchetti remembers that 2002 eruption with focused precision: "At 3 a.m. I was knocked out of bed by thunder and earth tremors. In the black night I saw five or six flaming mouths and from each spewed a column of light. I could hear the molten rock crunching and crackling in the forest, snapping tree trunks. It sounded like the footsteps of a giant beast."

Despite the incredible violence of this active volcano—the second largest in Europe—Franchetti has fallen in love with the monster, which often goes by its Arabic name, *Mountain of Fire*. Says the awe-struck Tuscan nobleman, whose acclaimed Tenuta di Trinoro has cemented his high ranking in the competitive world of super Tuscans: "Sometimes I think of leaving Tuscany behind and moving full time to Etna." He is but one in a growing number of Etna-enamored winemakers.

No other wine region in Italy is as exciting as Mt. Etna right now. In just a few years, the number of winemakers on the volcano has doubled.