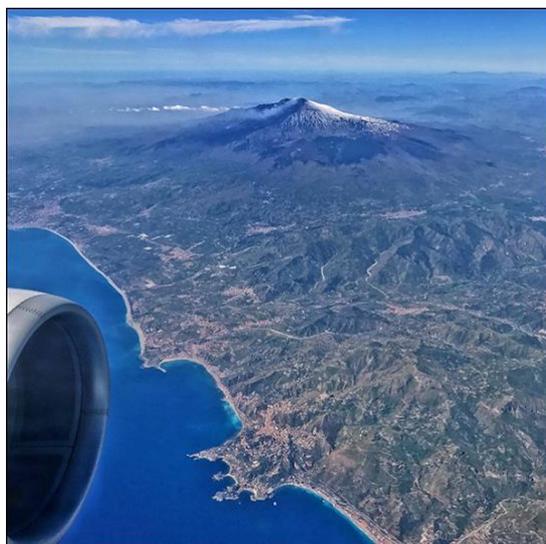


Italy, Sicily, Etna: Eruptions, Excitement, Elegance & Electricity

Etna is erupting as I write this, literally. My eye is drawn to a muted live stream of CNN that I keep open in a tiny window on my desktop. Thick plums of billowing ash and swells of smoke unfold into cloudless sky. Sicily's mighty Mount Etna is the tallest and most active volcano in Europe.

This year alone, Etna has erupted 50 times, and satellite images show that it has grown 30 meters in height (or 100 feet) in 2021, hitting a record 3,357 meters in elevation when last measured in July. The new southeast crater that became active again in 2018 is now the tallest part of the perfectly cone-shaped stratovolcano.

And to take one last stab at a tired metaphor, Etna is erupting figuratively as well. Excitement surrounding the volcano as a destination, investment in infrastructure, land prices and international media attention are gaining quickly in altitude. Much of that furious growth comes thanks to Etna's wines.



The north face of Etna as seen from an Alitalia flight a few years ago.

Etna's constant state of activity, its renewal of fertile volcanic soils, its unique microclimates, rains and sky-high elevations make it an agricultural and viticultural tinderbox. The volcano is a lifeline to some of the most explosive fertility seen anywhere in Italy, with twisted grapevines planted far up Etna's cone, oranges at the lower elevations that are redder in color and more pungent in flavor, olives that are fleshier and juicier and strange little neon pink wildflowers that love to grow in midnight black lava.

"Etna gives, and we take," winemaker Salvo Giuffrida told me while standing in the stunning Vico vineyard near Passopisciaro a few years back. Pre-phyllloxera vines are so ancient at this site that farmers have gently placed moss-covered volcanic rocks under the branches to prop them up like tired limbs. "Etna gives us new lava flows, and we use that soil and rock to build vineyards, drywalls and houses."

"Elegance and electricity are what we are looking for," winemaker Alberto Graci once told me. The landscape around him is painted in three colors: black from the lava and the volcanic stones used to build his winery, green from vineyards in the background and brilliant blue from the sky above. "Very few places can make wines with those qualities, and Etna is one of them."



Pre-phyloxera vines in the Vico vineyard rest their ancient limbs on lava rocks.

'A Muntagna

Etna is a female deity, "la montagna" in Italian or "a muntagna" in Sicilian dialect, and her generous flanks embrace much of Sicily. The winegrowing territory of Etna is shaped like a crescent moon or a backwards letter "C" that starts at the northern side of the cone, wraps around the eastern flank and ends at the southwestern side. It covers 45 kilometers in diameter at the base of the volcano. Vineyards are planted from about 500 meters in altitude to 1,000 meters (where the appellation's ceiling is set) and even higher. Fruit ripening becomes even trickier at these elevations and something of an extreme sport for the most daring vintners.

Etna's total vineyard area is quite small at roughly 1,000 hectares today. It is expected to reach 1,300 hectares in the next few years, but growth is limited by the physical agricultural constraints of the volcano. There are about 200 active wineries in the area (with 166 companies listed on the Consorzio Tutela Vini Etna DOC's website). Average annual production is about 3.6 million bottles. According to the Italian financial daily, *Il Sole 24 Ore*, one hectare of vines cost about 15,000 euros 15 years ago but can fetch as much as 150,000 euros today.

This report covers 167 wines from Etna. I'm happy to have been able to include many new names. For the first time, I reviewed wines from Aaron Montis (Salvo Giuffrida's latest wine project), Al-Cantàra, Gambino, Generazione Alessandro (an interesting up-and-coming winery) and Federico Curtaz (another exciting new find). I finally tasted Salvatore Geraci's new Rocca Coeli wines, after chasing those for a while. There are also a few new projects by non-Sicilians. Consulting enologist Emiliano Falsini now makes wine on Etna under his own name. Carlo Ferrini's [Alberelli di Giodo](#) has been reviewed before but is a relatively new addition. We even have some Californian energy behind the Etna brand Aeris.

Unfortunately, I am missing a few of my favorite esoteric Etna protagonists, like Frank Cornelissen, Eduardo Torres Acosta and *Vino di Anna* by Anna Martens and Eric Narioo. I'll get those on my next trip to Sicily.

Light, Lava and Elevation

Much attention is paid to the mineral-rich volcanic soils of Etna. In reality, soils are just one piece in a complicated puzzle that when put together makes a wine region unlike any other.

In fact, instead of soils, Etna's geology should be viewed in terms of lava flows. With active summit craters and a history of tension fractures and lateral fissures on the flanks of the volcano that have erupted over the centuries, Etna is covered and crisscrossed by hundreds, if not thousands, of lava flows that trend radially down the cone by gravity.

"My estate is on the southeast side of Etna at 450 to 550 meters in elevation," says Costantino Fabio Vincenzo of Terra Costantino based in Viagrande. "We have 10 hectares of vineyard on volcanic soils made by multiple lava stratifications of varying depth that are rich in iron, copper, phosphorus, magnesium and potassium with traces of calcium and nitrogen."

Giulia Monteleone runs the Monteleone estate on the northern side of the volcano. Her property is near the Alcantara River in the Contrada Cuba where some lava flows have terminated.

“We have more clay present here, with percentages that vary from 5% to 15%, and a whole mix of volcanic soils, ash, some basalt quartz, chalk and slate,” she says.

The content of each individual flow is different, with molten mixtures, magma and volcanic ash. The higher elevations with newer lava are richer in silicate minerals, whereas viscous lava that travels longer distances will change and pick up materials along the way. Some flows are thicker and wider and some are shallow and more easily broken down by time.

The age of a lava flow is also very important. I have heard vintners tell me that they prefer to farm on lava flows that were active during the 1500s, for example, because time and erosion has broken down the soils into a fine, compacted ash that is easy to farm. Others prefer well-draining topsoils that are blanketed by little volcanic pebbles called *ripiddu* in local dialect. Others still opt for newer soils that are rich in minerals and favorable to plant vigor.

Andrea Franchetti of Passopisciaro Vini Franchetti farms in various sites, including the Contrada Sciarra Nuova in Randazzo. The name of the site literally means “new lava flow,” as the soils were created 200 years ago.

Chiara Vigo of Fattorie Romeo del Castello has a massive wall of molten rock running through her vineyard. That lava flow occurred in 1981 and only by miracle missed the old family farmhouse she lives in now. The heat of the lava radiating underground actually moved the foundations of her stone home; however, it did not kill the vines smothered below the molten rock. Today, forty years after that eruption, grapevine tendrils and green shoots break through the black stone.

(...)

The 2018 Vintage

Many of the red wines in this report are from the challenging 2018 vintage that saw cooler than normal temperatures and lots of summer rain. Ripening was an issue at the higher elevations, and fruit selection was key across the Etna wine region.

Andrea Franchetti of Passopisciaro Vini Franchetti says, “The 2018 vintage was one of the rainiest we’ve seen in the past eight years, especially during the summer months. We usually have a more tropical climate with heat and humidity. In 2018, we were required to make many more passes in the vineyards to remove leaves gradually, without leaving the clusters too exposed or risk burning the skins. After each passage, the wind blew between the rows to dry the clusters that were wet with rain. Before and after our red grape harvest, we had rain, humidity and even fog that we still remember today. We are now on our 18th harvest, and we had to interpret the vintage in the best way possible.”



New vines on Etna planted with chestnut wood posts

Federico Graziani of Fedegraziani adds, "The 2018 harvest was humid, cold and especially challenging for the ripening of red grapes. The cool temperatures during harvest resulted in lower sugar concentration. The wines are low in alcohol content but are very fine [in texture] due to limited extraction and short macerations lasting seven or eight days."

I have also reviewed wines from the 2019 vintage that saw excellent growing conditions over a long harvest. The wines show beautiful purity and concentration.

(...)

2018 Passopisciaro Vini Franchetti • Contrada C

[View Wine](#)

Rating: 91

Price: [View Prices](#)

Drink Date: 2021 - 2028

Reviewed by:

 [Monica Lerner](#)

Issue Date: 29th Oct 2021

Source:

[Issue 257 End of October 2021, The Wine Advocate](#)

From the Contrada Chiappemacine that is lower on the Etna elevation scale at just 550 meters above sea level, the 2018 Contrada C offers a fine and floral interpretation of Nerello Mascalese. This delicate and graceful wine has underlined aromas of wild rose and pressed violet. There are plenty of earthy and ashy aromas as well that frame a core of sour cherry and tart cassis. But like these other Franchetti wines from the challenging 2018 vintage, the mouthfeel is leaner, lighter and ultimately shorter in this edition of 3,990 bottles.

Producer: Passopisciaro Vini Franchetti

From: Italy, Sicily, Terre Siciliane

Color: ● Red

Type: Table

Sweetness: Dry

Variety: Nerello Mascalese

2018 Passopisciaro Vini Franchetti • Contrada G

[View Wine](#)

Rating: 92

Price: [View Prices](#)

Drink Date: 2021 - 2030

Reviewed by:

 [Monica Lerner](#)

Issue Date: 29th Oct 2021

Source:

[Issue 257 End of October 2021, The Wine Advocate](#)

A release of 3,860 bottles, the Passopisciaro Vini Franchetti 2018 Contrada G draws its Nerello Mascalese from the Guardiola vineyard, located in the village of Castiglione di Sicilia, with vines at 800 meters in elevation. This site is walled off by a much newer lava flow that formed in 1947, but it stopped before damaging the ancient vines. The wine is lean and streamlined with a mild and pretty bouquet focused on wild berry, rose potpourri, ash and hints of tarry spice and smoke. Some dustings of white pepper also appear. Its polished tannins are fully integrated into the wine's light texture. You might enjoy it with a Sicilian minestra with lentils.

Producer: Passopisciaro Vini Franchetti

From: Italy, Sicily, Terre Siciliane

Color: ● Red

Type: Table

Sweetness: Dry

Variety: Nerello Mascalese

2018 Passopisciaro Vini Franchetti • Contrada P

[View Wine](#)

Rating: 93

Price: [View Prices](#)

Drink Date: 2021 - 2030

Reviewed by:

👤 [Monica Lerner](#)

Issue Date: 29th Oct 2021

Source:

[Issue 257 End of October 2021, The Wine Advocate](#)

From the Contrada Porcaria (a 1.5-hectare plot at 650 meters in elevation), the 2018 Contrada P shows more intensity and maybe a small degree more concentration and fruit weight compared to some of the other Nerello Mascalese bottles in this contrada-specific series from Andrea Franchetti. This wine sports slightly broader shoulders with tart cherry, dried currant and bitter almond. I also taste the delineation of the wine's tannic structure with more clarity in this release of 2,750 bottles from Porcaria.

Producer: Passopisciaro Vini Franchetti

From: Italy, Sicily, Terre Siciliane

Color: ● Red

Type: Table

Sweetness: Dry

Variety: Nerello Mascalese

2018 Passopisciaro Vini Franchetti • Contrada PC

[View Wine](#)

Rating: 93+

Price: [View Prices](#)

Drink Date: 2021 - 2028

Reviewed by:

👤 [Monica Lerner](#)

Issue Date: 29th Oct 2021

Source:

[Issue 257 End of October 2021, The Wine Advocate](#)

Here's an exciting new wine from Etna's great Tuscan interloper, Andrea Franchetti. His Passopisciaro Vini Franchetti 2018 Contrada PC is an IGT Terre Siciliane wine, much like many of the others in this portfolio, only this time we are faced with a pure expression of Chardonnay made after many years of experience and experimentation with this grape on volcanic soils. This pretty wine reveals a light golden color with medium color saturation. The bouquet is rich and generous with candied fruit, honey, apricot, cumin and a pinch of sweet cinnamon spice. This verges on being an all-out full-bodied wine (thanks to 10 months' aging in oak casks on the fine lees), but it holds back just a bit thanks to an elegant and more slender mid-palate. This release of 2,660 bottles represents a nuanced, age-worthy white, the product of arduous labor from steep, terraced vineyards in the Contrada PC (Passochianche) at 870 to 950 meters in elevation.

Producer: Passopisciaro Vini Franchetti

From: Italy, Sicily, Terre Siciliane

Color: ● White

Type: Table

Sweetness: Dry

Variety: Chardonnay

2018 Passopisciaro Vini Franchetti • Contrada R

[View Wine](#)

Rating: 91

Price: [View Prices](#)

Drink Date: 2021 - 2028

Reviewed by:

👤 [Monica Lerner](#)

Issue Date: 29th Oct 2021

Source:

[Issue 257 End of October 2021, The Wine Advocate](#)

Here's a classic "old school" Etna red. From the Contrada Rampante in Castiglione di Sicilia, the Passopisciaro Vini Franchetti 2018 Contrada R opens to a lean garnet color and light ruby highlights. There is a lot of energy and punchy brightness in this wine, mostly fueled by those distinctive white pepper aromas that come across strongly in this bottle. Carrying a shy 12.5% alcohol content, this red is lean and delicate to the palate, with more spice, ash and savory flavors than fruity tones. In fact, the wine's dark currant and tart berry tones take a back seat in this vintage of 3,240 bottles. Contrada Rampante is located at 1,000 meters altitude, which is the highest elevation allowed in the official appellation (although many vintners are aiming to make wines even higher up the volcano). This estate farms a 1.7-hectare parcel here, and like the other wines in this series, winemaking starts off with a quick fermentation in steel (usually 15 days) and ends with 18 months in oak casks.

Producer: Passopisciaro Vini Franchetti

From: Italy, Sicily, Terre Siciliane

Color: ● Red

Type: Table

Sweetness: Dry

Variety: Nerello Mascalese

2018 Passopisciaro Vini Franchetti • Contrada S

[View Wine](#)

Rating: 92+

Price: [View Prices](#)

Drink Date: 2021 - 2032

Reviewed by:

👤 [Monica Lerner](#)

Issue Date: 29th Oct 2021

Source:

[Issue 257 End of October 2021, The Wine Advocate](#)

The fruit in this release of 2,165 bottles is drawn from the Contrada Sciaranuova, located in the village of Randazzo, known for its excellent vineyards and pistachio groves. We're climbing up the volcano here with vineyards at 850 meters in elevation and planted in much newer soils created with a lava flow that occurred two centuries ago. In fact, "Sciaranuova" means "new lava flow." These vineyards are positioned toward the northern side of the volcano and are associated with delicate and elegant expressions, which is definitely the case with this Nerello Mascalese. The Passopisciaro Vini Franchetti 2018 Contrada S reveals tight cherries and berry fruits framed by ash, smoke and tarry spice. It is streamlined and lean to the palate with very finely polished tannins. This wine should flesh out nicely with more time in bottle.

Producer: Passopisciaro Vini Franchetti

From: Italy, Sicily, Terre Siciliane

Color: ● Red

Type: Table

Sweetness: Dry

Variety: Nerello Mascalese

2018 Passopisciaro Vini Franchetti • Etna Rosso Passorosso

[View Wine](#)

Rating: 90

Price: [View Prices](#)

Drink Date: 2021 - 2026

Reviewed by:

👤 [Monica Lerner](#)

Issue Date: 29th Oct 2021

Source:

[Issue 257 End of October 2021, The Wine Advocate](#)

This is the only Etna denomination wine in the Franchetti portfolio, and it is made with a selection of fruit from various vineyard sites on lava flows of different epochs. The 2018 Etna Rosso Passorosso opens to a lean garnet color with faded color intensity. Like the other wines from this vintage that saw problematic rain on some parts of Etna, this wine is thinner and tighter than some of the more generous vintages of the past. There are tart cherry flavors followed by ashy smoke and tar. Some 35,000 bottles were made.

Producer: Passopisciaro Vini Franchetti

From: Italy, Sicily, Etna

Color: ● Red

Type: Table

Sweetness: Dry

Variety: Nerello Mascalese

2018 Passopisciaro Vini Franchetti • Franchetti

[View Wine](#)

Rating: 94+

Price: [View Prices](#)

Drink Date: 2022 - 2035

Reviewed by:

👤 [Monica Lerner](#)

Issue Date: 29th Oct 2021

Source:

[Issue 257 End of October 2021, The Wine Advocate](#)

A blend of 50% Petit Verdot and 50% Cesanese d'Affile planted in the Contrada Guardiola at 820 meters in elevation, the 2018 Franchetti is the feather in vintner Andrea Franchetti's Etna cap. The wine is saturated and thick, boasting a dark, rich appearance and carrying a 14.5% alcohol content. It shows medium-rich concentration with aromas of blackberry, black plum, spice and tar. There is some fruit softness here, but not very much, as the wine is more etched and sharp in personality. There are end notes of pencil shaving and crushed granite stone. Again, this 2018 vintage is naturally thinner and shorter compared to previous editions. It should be interesting to see how it fleshes out with more time in the bottle. Production is 3,930 bottles.

Producer: Passopisciaro Vini Franchetti

From: Italy, Sicily, Terre Siciliane

Color: ● Red

Type: Table

Sweetness: Dry

Variety: Proprietary Blend

2018 Passopisciaro Vini Franchetti • Passobianco

[View Wine](#)

Rating: 92

Price: [View Prices](#)

Drink Date: 2021 - 2026

Reviewed by:

👤 [Monica Larner](#)

Issue Date: 29th Oct 2021

Source:

[Issue 257 End of October 2021, The Wine Advocate](#)

A pure expression of Chardonnay, the Passopisciaro Vini Franchetti 2018 Passobianco is a generous wine with lots of honey, dried apricot and apple baked in butter. Ultimately, this expression from the volcanic soils of Etna stands apart from other great renditions of this versatile grape thanks to those dusty or ashy mineral notes as well as those slightly exotic hints of saffron and ground cumin. It is aged in oak casks and cement for 10 months. The wine's appearance is golden and bright, and the palate carries generous fruit weight and concentrated flavors. Grapes come from high-density vineyards at an impressive 850 to 1,000 meters in elevation from the terraces of Contrada Guardiola and Monte Dolce. Some 40,000 bottles were made.

Producer: Passopisciaro Vini Franchetti

From: Italy, Sicily, Terre Siciliane

Color: 🍷 White

Type: Table

Sweetness: Dry

Variety: Chardonnay