



12 Etna wines to get while you can

Sicily's Etna is continuing to draw attention from winemakers and connoisseurs further afield. Adam Lechmere visits the 'other-worldly' region on the rise and tastes through its wines to identify its must-try bottlings

Nothing can prepare you for the otherworldliness of Etna. As you approach the northern foothills, through Passopisciaro and past a cluster of renowned wineries – Planeta, Donnafugata, Terre Nere, Tascante, Graci, Girolamo Russo – the colour palette changes, from the golden wheat fields of central Sicily, to gunmetal grey. Every wall is built of volcanic rock (they set great store by their dry stone walls on Etna); volcanic ash, the residue of Etna's spectacular eruptions this year, forms sooty drifts on the pavements and blackens any unprotected surface.

The volcano dominates the region both literally and figuratively. A snow-capped mountain on the shores of the Mediterranean, it's a 'synthesis of two excesses at once: hot and cold, fire and ice – southern sun and mountain weather', as Alberto Graci, one of Etna's most dynamic producers, told Club Oenologique earlier this year.

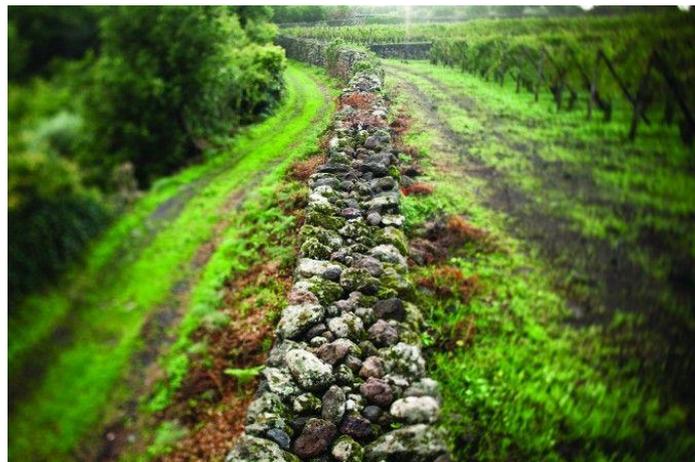
Wine has been made on Sicily for millennia, and it's worth remembering that the Etna DOC, formed in 1968, is the island's oldest. But although the ancient stone wine presses called *palmenti* are a common sight in winery buildings, and many vineyards, such as Andrea Franchetti's Contrada C and G Passopisciaro holdings (recommended below), are more than 100 years old, it's only recently that viticulturalists and winemakers have started to seriously study their land.





Etna's volcanic soils are packed with minerals, giving both red and white wines a vital snap of freshness. The Tasca family has been making wine in Sicily since the 1950s, but started Tascante as an experimental winery in 2001 in Passopisciaro. Their first vineyards were bought in 2007 in two *contrade* (as Etna's single-site denominations are called), Sciaranuova and Pianodario, and most recently in Contrada Rampante in 2015.

The process of understanding the terroir is a matter of 'experience, experiment and patience', estate manager Giulio Bruni says. In practice this means working out exactly what newer and older volcanic soils contribute. The different *contrades'* soils were laid from different eruptions – there might be 40,000 years between them – and depending on their age they have different properties. Over millennia, rocks are eroded and broken down by lichens and roots. They retain a rich cocktail of minerals; because of their porosity they are well drained but can also retain water.



One of Etna's famous dry stone walls running through a vineyard belonging to the Tascante estate. As to the character that the different *contrade* bring to the wines: 'At present, you can't say one is better than another – everything is slowly getting established,' Tascante winemaker Stefano Masciarelli says.

As in any great terroir there are dozens of variables, from climate to soil to altitude. Etna has some of the highest vineyards in Italy but still it sits on the Mediterranean. This means long, hot summer days and very cool nights; at the same time, the northern slopes of the mountain (where winemaking is concentrated) attract about five times the rainfall of the rest of Sicily.

Etna's ethereal terroir produces wines of exceptional elegance

This conjunction of features can be discombobulating – there's nothing Mediterranean about that rainfall, for example. The woods at the Tascante *contrade* of Sciaranuovo are lush and green; among the grand oaks and chestnuts there is fern, rosehip and blackberry, and cyclamen poke up through leaf mould at the base of the trees. You might be in an English landscape.

This ethereal terroir produces wines of exceptional elegance. Time and again the words 'Burgundian' and 'Chablis-like' come into my notes, from Terre Nere's Calderara Sottana 2018, to Tascante's Buonora Carricante. The reds (nearly all from the native Nerello Mascalese) marry the lightness of body and fine acidity that are the holy grail of the cool-climate winemaker. The whites, made with another indigenous grape, Carricante, can reach Chablis-like levels of mineral freshness.

'The people down here, they live the volcano,' Giulio Bruni told me. 'It has an impact on their identity.' It has an equal impact on the identity of its wines: there are few other terroirs that are so eloquently expressed in the glass.

12 OF THE BEST ETNA WINES TO TRY



RED WINE

Vini Franchetti, Contrada C 2019

RRP £55.85

Elevated expressive nose and a palate of bright fresh crunchy fruit: black cherry and cassis, blueberry, and an amazing tannic weight throughout with luscious acidity. Opulent yet with delicacy, with no hint of the high alcohol. It's only been in bottle a few months (the label notes it was 'bottled at the waning moon April 2021'). It's fresh and bright and young and will last a decade at least.

SCORE

93

100

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RED WINE

Vini Franchetti, Contrada G 2019

RRP £55.85

Wonderful. Intense, rounded sweet cherry fruit bolstered by fine acidity, dense, soft silky tannins, quite tightly wound at the moment, an excellent marriage of power, grip and finesse. Accomplished modern winemaking.

SCORE

93

100

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