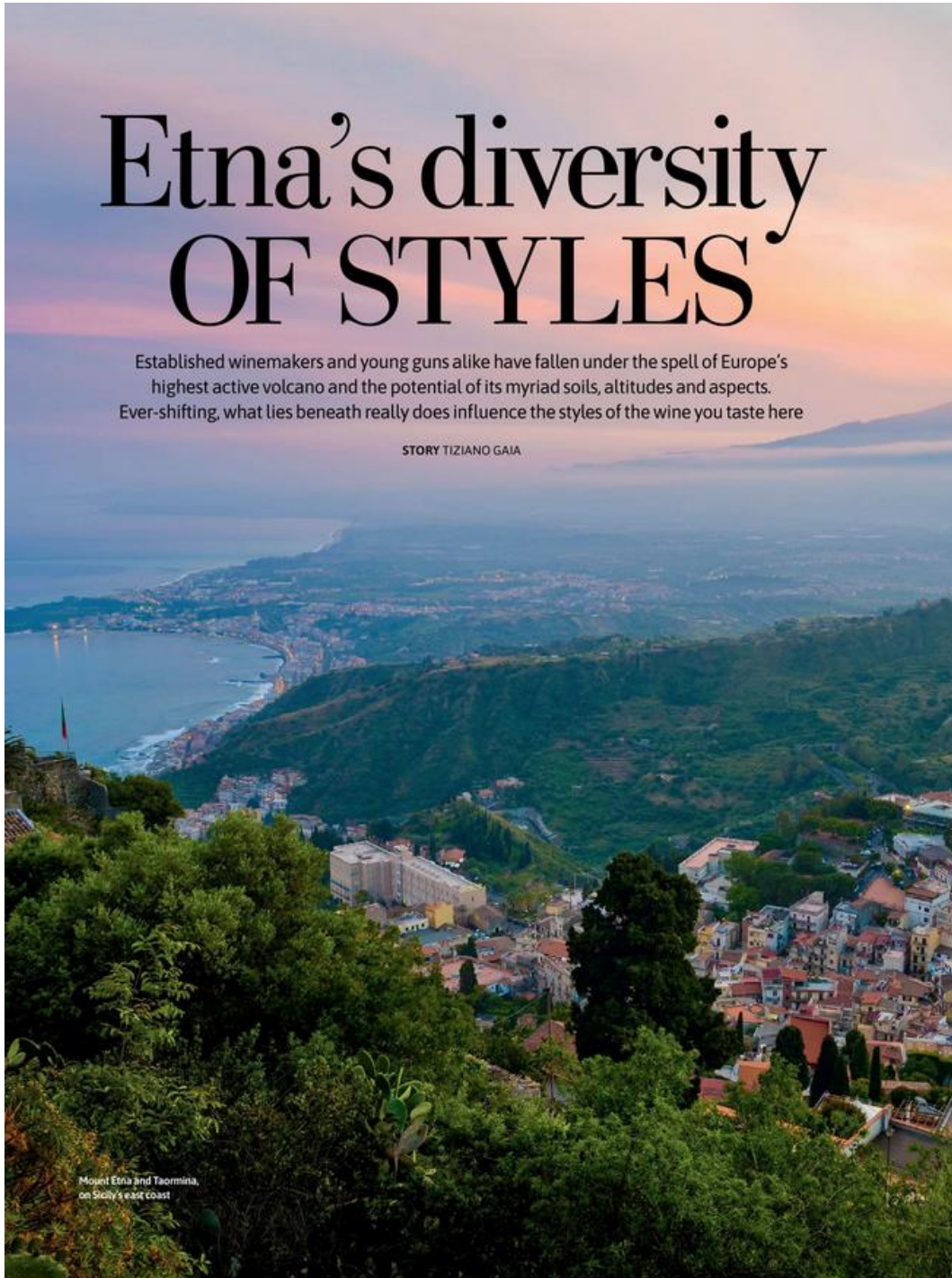


Etna's diversity OF STYLES

Established winemakers and young guns alike have fallen under the spell of Europe's highest active volcano and the potential of its myriad soils, altitudes and aspects. Ever-shifting, what lies beneath really does influence the styles of the wine you taste here

STORY TIZIANO GAJA



Mount Etna and Taormina,
on Sicily's east coast



Homer's *Odyssey* tells of a place on Earth where the inhabitants 'plant nothing with their hands nor plough; but all these things spring up for them without sowing or ploughing, wheat, and barley, and vines, which bear the rich clusters of wine, and the rain of Zeus gives them increase'.

According to Odysseus, this place, the home of the Cyclopes, is in Sicily, on the slopes of Mount Etna. Europe's highest active volcano lies in the province of Catania, and, leaving legend aside, the fact remains that at the end of the 19th century the province had the most vines on the island, with about 90,000ha. That's not much less than the total area under vine across all of Sicily today – back then, a flourishing economy revolved around wine. In the 1890s, a railway, the Circumetnea, was even built to transport the precious product to the port of Riposto (which, in local dialect, means 'cellar') from where it was shipped around Europe. But phylloxera and post-war agricultural reforms led to the abandonment of the volcano's vineyards in favour of other crops. All traces of the Cyclopes' paradise were lost.

STARTING OVER

'Many of us came to Etna in a short time. But there's a reason: there was nothing left here, so there was space to start over.' Marc de Grazia speaks with a pioneer spirit. His Tenuta delle Terre Nere is now 20 years old – an age that, around here, gives it 'historic winery' status. As he talks, de Grazia is looking through his home library for old texts that mention Etna's viticulture, knowing full well that they are few and far between. Unlike other renowned terroirs, there are no sources to draw on with regard to style or tradition. 'We have to start from this aspect in order to understand the strong push towards experimentation that characterises this area,' he says.

While the Italian-American de Grazia belongs to the romantic wave that also carried the late [Andrea Franchetti](#) (of Tenuta di Trinoro in Tuscany) and Belgian-born natural wine exponent Frank Cornelissen to Etna's slopes in the early 2000s, Antonio and Salvino Benanti represent a generation born and brought up in the volcano's shadow. Their family winery was founded by their father, Giuseppe Benanti, in 1988. Benanti wines, refined and of great character, are considered 'classics' today, but in the 1990s they were perceived as surprisingly new.

Innovation is a distinctive feature of everyone who engages with Etna's diverse terroir. Those rare wineries of long standing, such as Scammacca del Murgo and Barone di Villagrande, with their austere wines, seem to have come ▶