

## Sicily: Welcome to the Revolution

Sicily has suffered a great deal throughout history, as producers have had to fight tooth and nail to overcome worldwide stereotypes of a region with massive cooperatives, low quality, overproduction, bulk wine, high alcohol, corruption, government control... you name it. For decades, I've watched with anticipation, following the works of my contemporaries, looking to the day that I could experience the wines that, we all somehow knew, Sicily could produce, yet simply didn't. Rumors of Etna's potential began to break internationally in the mid-2000s. The new wave of wines were released and suggestions were made about the potential here, yet there was still an overwhelming black mark that followed the entire island, lumping it into the greater "Southern Italy" category. Luckily, those initial views were correct, and Etna continued to win the hearts of readers and critics with the one-two punch of Nerello Mascalese and Carricante—Sicily's answer to red and white Burgundy. With that, interests were piqued, and, luckily, several of the island's top producers' work, not just on Etna, started to get noticed again. Quality continued to rise. New producers became inspired. Old producers began to shake off the cobwebs and start anew. Young winemakers, who were willing to travel the world to learn their craft, joined the mix. Experimentation was welcome. Research into clones became relevant. Terroir was recognized as important. And do you know what happened? Sicily, to a large degree, completely turned around their wine industry, and it is now one of the top producing regions in all of Italy.

Granted, readers still need to be very selective; as with any sudden rise in popularity within the wine world, there will be producers that still create an inferior product. Those that ride the wave of trends consider marketing and flashy labels to be more important than what they place into the bottle. The good news is that those wines no longer make up the bulk of what's available in today's market. In my current tasting lineups, I seldom see the repeated overuse of oak, Nero d'Avola that smells of coffee grinds and chocolate, sweet yet thin Catarratto, or just plain dirty wines. In fact, it's the opposite, as I find myself inspired by so much of what I'm tasting from a purity standpoint, a varietal standpoint and a focus on terroir. Sicily is going through a Golden Age. The best part is that, overall, the wines are still an amazing value.



*The Sallier de la Tour vineyards of Tasca d'Almerita.*

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*The white wines of Italy continue to impress, even beyond Carricante.*

### **And Then There's Etna**

The race to Etna started in the early 2000s and continues today. Due to the forward thinking of wineries such as Benanti, Frank Cornelissen, Passopisciaro and Tenuta delle Terre Nere, Etna now easily ranks amongst the popularity and quality levels of regions like Montalcino and Barolo. Their work brought to light the names of Giuseppe Russo (Girolamo Russo), Alberto Graci and Salvo Foti (i Vigneri). It also inspired the likes of Tasca D'Almerita, Planeta, Donnafugata and even Gaja to plant their stakes on this still-active volcano. Today the list goes on and on, with new names being introduced to me each year, as everyone wants a piece of Etna's wild terroir.

There were three things that drew the early pioneers to this location. Firstly, its cooler climate, a mix of elevations up to 1,000 meters (many producers are pushing even higher now), primarily on the northern slope, but also curling down to the east like a crescent moon. What's more is the proximity to the Nebrodi mountains to the north and their cooling effect. Secondly, it's the vines, their age and their history: Nerello Mascalese, Nerello Cappuccio and Carricante, along with a smattering of often-forgotten varieties that were interplanted long ago. The fact is that Etna was not discovered; it was rediscovered. Only two decades ago, a winemaker could literally uncover a forgotten vineyard that was planted over 100 years ago, along with stone palmenti, with wooden presses still intact. Reaching these locations, reviving these vines and rebuilding terraces was the kind of work that often scared many winemakers away, but now, these sights are practically considered holy ground.

Lastly, is the volcano itself, still active and looming in its presence, with lava flows and explosions that have been recorded since 1500 BC (yet go back much further). These explosions created a diverse mix of soil types across its surface and surroundings, allowing for a true system of "Crus" or Contrada (a term that is more closely translated to mean "neighborhood", but is interchangeable here). The differences vary so widely that one Contrada can mix topsoil-rich ash and stones, yet within, there can be an island of terroir to be found, mixing volcanic sand with pumice and basalt. This real-world analogy can be witnessed through the Contrada Bocca d'Orzo, with a five-hectare parcel within that wasn't touched by a 1981 lava flow, and as a result, has significantly older origins. The Terre Nere winery has begun bottling a wine named "Dagala (or Island) of Bocca d'Orzo" from said parcel. Currently, there are 133 recognized Contrade, of which 88 are on the northern slope. It's pretty easy to see why this is the hottest location in Sicily today, if not all of Italy, and has brought an onslaught of producers looking to cash in.

The good news is that the classics are still overperforming, and much of the new blood is willing to learn as well as experiment. It was a pleasure to begin tasting the powerful but fresh 2019s and the supremely elegant 2020s; these two vintages are far superior to the 2018s from last year, a vintage where I question why certain producers even bottled their single-vineyard wines. As trends go, there's certainly more attention being placed upon Carricante, with some producers believing that it will one day be recognized as the true varietal star of Etna. Plantings on the volcano's southern slope are also starting to be taken advantage of. In this warmer and extra fertile location, readers can expect a more fruit focused Carricante, yet one that is still finessed. For me, the jury is still out on whether Carricante can outpace Etna's reds, mainly because success amongst these wines seems more producer-related than overarching.



The Chardonnay vines of Passopisciaro-Vini Franchetti planted in the volcanic soils of Contrada Guardiola.

### A Multi-Vintage Island

As if it wasn't difficult enough to begin wrapping our heads around the different results for both red and white varieties, by vintage, within each region of Italy, in Sicily, there's an added challenge: the diverse conditions from place to place. The 2014 vintage is a perfect example, as Mount Etna witnessed one of its greatest years ever, while the rest of the Island had simply a good year with severely reduced yields. Luckily, with the two vintages currently in front of us, 2019 and 2020, conditions were much more favorable and balanced. That said, as time goes by, more difficult years will warrant a breakdown for Etna (high-elevation north-slope volcanic soils) versus Noto (sandy beaches on the south shore with the hot Scirocco winds) versus Sclafani (the mountainous center of the island with diverse soil types and elevations between 450 and 850 meters), then Marsala, Menfi, Vittoria and, of course, the islands.

As more wines are released, it will be interesting to see how the 2021 vintage furthers this discussion, as conditions were warm and dry across nearly the entire Island, yet more rainy on Mount Etna and on the Island of Salina in the northeast. The silver lining to all of this is that the likelihood of any given vintage being a total failure is close to zero. This gives many of the bigger, quality-minded wineries that span multiple regions within the island, such as Tasca D'Almerita, Planeta and Donnafugata, the upper hand globally since they always have something in their portfolio worth talking about.



Mount Etna's reds just keep getting better and better.

## **The Sleek and Fruit-Filled 2019s and the Elegantly Harmonious 2020s**

Two thousand-nineteen seemed to be a year from the gods after the rain-drenched 2018 vintage. The year started cold and wet, yet with a healthy and timely bud break in the spring. Heavy winds and precipitation during flowering naturally reduced the crop by 20-30% overall; while on Etna, Carricante suffered drastic losses (40-50%) due to the combination of moisture and warmth. The summer was hot yet even, and it was balanced by the buildup of water reserves from the months prior. The weather cooled down through September and the first half of October, accompanied by timely precipitation, keeping harvest on track; and with a slight rise in temperatures and dry conditions at the end of October, even the late-harvested varieties reached peak physiological ripeness. Tasting the reds and whites from 2019 is a real treat. They are vibrant, sleek, fruit-filled, focused and ideal for medium-term cellaring.

The 2020 vintage was a nail-biter for producers in Sicily, yet it turned out some fantastic results. In the end, 2020 can be generalized as a moderately warm and dry year throughout the Island with the exception of Etna and Salina, which receive slightly cooler conditions. On Etna, comparisons are already being made to 2014 and 2016, which were marginally cooler in temperature. It was the diverse climatic conditions that caused producers to worry with temperature swings and sporadic rains throughout the season. It was only through the fall that the merit of the year started to become apparent, with a warm September, well-timed rains and a cool and dry October. In the end, both reds and whites were successful, with the whites benefiting from an extended season, and the reds finding a lovely balance through the cooler fall temperatures. Expect elegant wines with vivid fruit profiles, but also a balance of sweet tannins and elevated acidity that promise a steady and long evolution.

The wines for this report were tasted in our offices in New York through June of 2022.

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### **Passopisciario**

The sad news at Passopisciario is the passing of Andrea Franchetti in December of 2021. Franchetti was truly a visionary winemaker, both in Tuscany and Sicily, and one of the pioneers of Etna. He arrived over two decades ago, and along with a handful of other trailblazers, set out to prove the worth of this region to the world—he most definitely succeeded. My recent interview with the Passopisciario team revealed a deep-rooted respect and love of Andrea that has inspired them to continue on in his memory, with no foreseeable changes in sight. As for the Passopisciario portfolio, tasting through it is always an education, as the winery has holdings and produces single-vineyard wines from five of the most highly esteemed crus on Mount Etna (Sciara Nuova, Rampante, Porcaria, Guardiola and Chiappemacine). What adds further dynamic to this mix is that all five wines are vinified in the same fashion in the cellar; all refined in large oval-shaped oak barrels between fifteen to thirty-five hectoliters. The end result is the ability to truly study the differences of each individual terroir. Winemaker Vincenzo Lo Mauro stated to me quite eloquently, “Each contrada is like a single instrument.” To make things even more interesting, this year's lineup included both the 2019 and 2020 vintages, which provided fantastic insights into both years and how different each microclimate performed. For a broader understanding of Etna and the Passopisciario house style, there is the Passorosso, a blending of multiple crus, with a 45% core coming from Guardiola, and all from vines that are between 80- to 100-years-old. Collectors really can't look at this wine as an “entry-level” expression because, frankly, it overperforms in every possible way. I often think of the Passorosso the same way that I think of Vietti's Barolo Castiglione. It's all about blending for balance. For a more internationally-styled wine, it's the Franchetti that sits atop the pyramid on Etna. This blend of varying amounts of Petit Verdot and Cesanese D'affile is a permanent stamp that Andrea Franchetti has left upon Etna, having planted the vines in 2000. It has since become one of the top wines being made in Italy today. As for the whites, readers may be surprised to learn that both of the Biancos of Passopisciario are made with Chardonnay, and from locations that are some of the highest-elevation plantings of the variety in the world, at 1,000 meters. When Andrea Franchetti arrived on Etna, Carricante from this part of the region didn't impress him; and so, in 2002, he planted Chardonnay in the Guardiola and Passochianche crus. Now that these vines have come to age, the winery also produces a Cru Bianco, the Passochianche (PC). Plainly stated, for collectors with the resource to do so, the entire portfolio is worth hunting for.

## 2020 Franchetti

Color: Red

98

Drinking Window: 2024 - 2032 ^  
Eric Guido, June 2022

The 2020 Franchetti is gorgeous, bursting from the glass, spicy and intense, flaunting its Cesanese aromatics with a mix of blackberries, lavender, sage, white pepper and smoke that make this impossible to ignore. This is deeply textural, almost creamy in feel yet spry, with medium-bodied textures and a salty core of minerality that offsets its masses of ripe dark fruits and sweet herbal tones. The length here is astounding, as well as the harmony found within, finishing structured yet sapid, leaving violet florals and nuances of plum sauce to linger on and on and on. This is already so appealing, elegance personified, yet the best is surely yet to come. In 2020, the Franchetti is a blend of 60% Petit Verdot and 40% Cesanese d'Affile.

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## 2020 Contrada Sciaranuova (S)

Color: Red

96

Drinking Window: 2024 - 2032 ^  
Eric Guido, June 2022

The 2020 Contrada Sciaranuova (S) is deeply alluring, almost sultry, with an herbal tinged to its bright cherry-berry bouquet, along with hints of animal muskiness that keep me at the edge of the glass. The earth-inspired mix continues on the palate, yet blends with exotic inner florals, citrus-tinged red fruits and energizing acidity. There's simply so much going on here, and yet the balance is perfect, as the 2020 tapers off lightly structured with a burst of inner sweetness and hints of salted licorice that linger. Wow. While this will age evenly, it's also worth checking in on early to enjoy its primary nature. The vines of Sciar Nuova grow at 850 meters in soils of volcanic gravel.

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## 2020 Contrada Guardiola (G)

Color: Red

96

Drinking Window: 2024 - 2032 ^  
Eric Guido, June 2022

The 2020 Contrada Guardiola (G) is a showstopper; surprisingly floral, with masses of rose and violet tones giving way to blackberries and a dusting of spice. This flows across the palate with ease, silky at first with a salty core and tart red berries that drench the senses; yet throughout, it remains perfumed and finessed. Spiced citrus and herbal tones linger through the long finale, along with a coating of fine tannins that promise a long and even development. Frankly stated, this is one of the prettiest renditions of Guardiola fruit that I've ever experienced.

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## 2020 Bianco Contrada Passochianche (PC)

Color: White

94

Drinking Window: 2024 - 2032 ^  
Eric Guido, June 2022

Baked apples and pears, laced with white flowers, are complemented by hints of raw almond as the 2020 Bianco Contrada Passochianche (PC) blossoms in the glass. It's elegant and silky in feel, with ripe melon and inner florals that cascade across the palate, as a core of minerality and hints of spice reveal themselves toward the close. The 2020 tapers off incredibly long with a bitter twang, as hints of young peach and inner herbal tones fade. The Passochianche is just a baby today, yet it's packed full of potential. The balance here is unreal. It hails from high-elevation vines (1,000 meters) planted in deep, sandy volcanic soils. The wine spends thirty-six hours macerating on the skins, and then refines for seventeen months in neutral fifteen-hectoliter barrels.

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## 2020 Passorosso

Color: Red

93

Drinking Window: 2023 - 2028 ^  
Eric Guido, June 2022

The 2020 Passorosso is spicy, showing dried flowers, hints of cardamom and white pepper before its dusty cherry fruit comes to the fore. Soft and enveloping, this impresses with a pure mix of red fruits and inner rose tones guided by cooling acidity. It finishes lightly structured and with a bitter twang of sour berry concentration. While the Passorosso is typically a more forward expression, the 2020 could use another year of cellaring before showing its best. That said, it's a very pretty wine that is packed full of potential.

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## 2020 Contrada Porcaria (P)

Color: Red

92

Drinking Window: 2024 - 2028 ^  
Eric Guido, June 2022

The 2020 Contrada Porcaria (P) is dark and inward, as crushed rocks and camphor blow off to reveal spiced cherries and hints of shaved cedar. It's silky and robust in feel, with bright acidity that adds thrust to its sour red berry fruits, as the 2020 displays an abundance of energy. Fine tannins saturate through the finale under an air inner florals, as a flourish of saline-minerality slowly fades.

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## 2020 Contrada Chiappemacine (C)

Color: Red

91+

Drinking Window: 2024 - 2032 ^

Eric Guido, June 2022

The 2020 Contrada Chiappemacine (C) is pungently floral, lifting from the glass with a display of sour cherries, dried strawberries and a cedar spice box of flowery perfumes. Its silky textures wash across the palate with ease, ushering in sweet herbal-tinged red fruits, as vibrant acidity maintains a juicy feel. The 2020 finishes structured yet long, leaving hints of licorice and inner violet tones. A year or two of cellaring is recommended, as there is an underlying power here that is not yet fully realized.

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## 2020 Passobianco

Color: White

90

Drinking Window: 2022 - 2025 ^

Eric Guido, June 2022

Crushed rocks, sea spray, lime skins and hints of nectarine create a savory and spicy bouquet as the 2020 Passobianco opens in the glass. It's lifted and finessed, focused on purity, with white pit fruits accentuated by saline-mineral tones. This leaves a salty flourish, along with nuances of lime, while finishing incredibly fresh. While I prefer the energy in the 2019 Passobianco, the 2020 impresses with more of a sultry nature.

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## 2020 Contrada Rampante (R)

Color: Red

89

Drinking Window: 2024 - 2028 ^

Eric Guido, June 2022

The 2020 Contrada Rampante (R) is youthfully inward and understated, showing hints of savory, curry-like spice, dried strawberries and tomato leaf. It's silky in texture and lifted in feel, with saline-mineral tones up front that give way to inner rose and tart berry fruit. The 2020 finishes structured and dry, yet also a bit short, as the slightest hint of hard red candies fades. Only time will tell if the 2020 Rampante will ever awaken from this slightly awkward state. I tasted this from two separate bottles with similar results.

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## 2019 Franchetti

Color: Red

96+

Drinking Window: 2026 - 2033 ^

Eric Guido, June 2022

The 2019 Franchetti is like a dark stallion, muscled and sleek. It opens slowly in the glass, inward yet viral, with dusty dried flowers giving way to nuances of plum, brown spice, cardamom, savory herbs and hints of cocoa. The textures here are like crushed velvet, prominent, almost weighty, yet with a balance of brisk acidity and tart fruits that add contrast. The 2019 leaves a subtle staining of harmonious tannins, along with dark inner florals and hints of black currant that linger incredibly long. The vines for the Franchetti were planted in 2000 within the Guardiola cru. In 2019, the blend is Petit Verdot-dominated, with only 3% Cesanese d'affile.

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## 2019 Contrada Sciaranuova (S)

Color: Red

95

Drinking Window: 2024 - 2031 ^

Eric Guido, June 2022

Nosing the 2019 Contrada Sciaranuova (S) is a total pleasure. Masses of rose petals, sour cherries, tangerine, cedar and smoke form its wonderfully perfumed bouquet. This is seamlessly silky without any hard edges, displaying a harmonious mix of ripe red fruits and sweet inner spice. It finishes structured, remarkably long, but also fresh, leaving the palate with a youthful concentration, but also residual acids that maintain a juicy persona. The 2019 is a stunning rendition of Sciaranuova.

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## 2019 Contrada Guardiola (G)

Color: Red

94

Drinking Window: 2024 - 2030 ^

Eric Guido, June 2022

The 2019 Contrada Guardiola (G) lifts from the glass in classic form: dark, smoky, ashy even, with a burst of spiced black cherries that evolves with coaxing. This is lifted in feel, impressing with a core of salty minerality and bright acids before releasing its ripe red fruits and inner rose tones. The 2019 maintains amazing energy while tapering off structured and savory, with hints of sage and fresh plum that linger. The Guardiola is a selection of old vines from within the vineyard, growing between 800 to 1,000 meters in elevation.

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## 2019 Contrada Chiappemacine (C)

Color: Red

92

Drinking Window: 2023 - 2029 ^  
Eric Guido, June 2022

The 2019 Contrada Chiappemacine (C) wafts up with a dark blend of black cherries and shaved cedar in an air of ashen smoke. It's round and soothingly textural, with cooling acidity that enlivens the mineral-tinged red berries and hints of brown spice within. This finishes with a mentholated freshness, while leaving silty tannins to linger, which also keeps the mouth watering for more. It will only require minimal cellaring to show its best. The Chiappemacine cru lies at around 550 meters in elevation with a thin layer of volcanic soils over a bed of limestone.

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## 2019 Contrada Rampante (R)

Color: Red

91

Drinking Window: 2024 - 2028 ^  
Eric Guido, June 2022

The 2019 Contrada Rampante (R) wafts up with a dramatic yet incredibly pretty display of dried flowers, exotic spices, smoke and sour cherries. This is softly textured and finessed, with bright acidity further enlivening the tart red berries found within. It leaves a staining of minerality, along with fine tannins that emerge only at the very end, as hints of sour citrus and inner rose tones fade. The Rampante vineyard is the highest-altitude site where Passopisciaro farms Nerello Mascalese, at 1,000 meters.

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## 2019 Passobianco

Color: White

91

Drinking Window: 2022 - 2025 ^  
Eric Guido, June 2022

The 2019 Passobianco is pretty and perfumed, wafting up with vivid notes of crushed apples, white flowers and fresh mint. This is round with a pleasant inner sweetness, as citrus-tinged, ripe orchard fruits are nicely contrasted by savory herbal nuances. It leaves notions of kiwi and young peach to linger while finishing remarkably fresh and with admirable length. There is so much balanced pleasure to be found within this varietal Chardonnay.

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## 2019 Contrada Porcaria (P)

Color: Red

93

Drinking Window: 2023 - 2029 ^  
Eric Guido, June 2022

A dusty and inviting mix of dried roses and cherries is contrasted by hints of ash and smoke as the 2019 Contrada Porcaria (P) blossoms in the glass. This is undeniably elegant in feel, with velvety textures that coast across its medium-bodied frame, delivering mineral-tinged red berries and sweet herbal tones that arch across the palate. It's lightly structured with grippy tannins that tug at the cheeks, yet the mouth is left watering for more, as hints of pomegranate and plum slowly fade. The Porcaria vineyard stands at 650 meters, with soils that are described by Passopisciaro as, "A frail sheet of lava that splinters under one's feet." Give this beauty another year of cellaring to come fully into focus.

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## 2019 Bianco Contrada Passochianche (PC)

Color: White

92

Drinking Window: 2023 - 2029 ^  
Eric Guido, June 2022

The 2019 Bianco Contrada Passochianche (PC) opens slowly in the glass, with dusty florals and hints of smoke giving way to a vivid note of fresh slices of Granny Smith apple. It's savory on the palate with textures like pure silk and a cool-toned freshness and salty mineral core. This leaves nuances of raw almond and hints of green melon while tapering off lightly structured. The 2019 PC is an understated beauty.

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## 2019 Passorosso

Color: Red

92

Drinking Window: 2022 - 2027 ^  
Eric Guido, June 2022

Roses and cherries galore waft up from the 2019 Passorosso with ease. This is silky-smooth and cool-toned in feel, mixing juicy acidity with a pleasant inner sweetness that creates a seductively vibrant yet fruit-forward expression. The 2019 cleans up beautifully, leaving a coating of round tannins that create a classically dry feel, as hints of spiced citrus and hard red candies slowly fade. The pleasure factor is turned up high here, and the balance is on point.

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