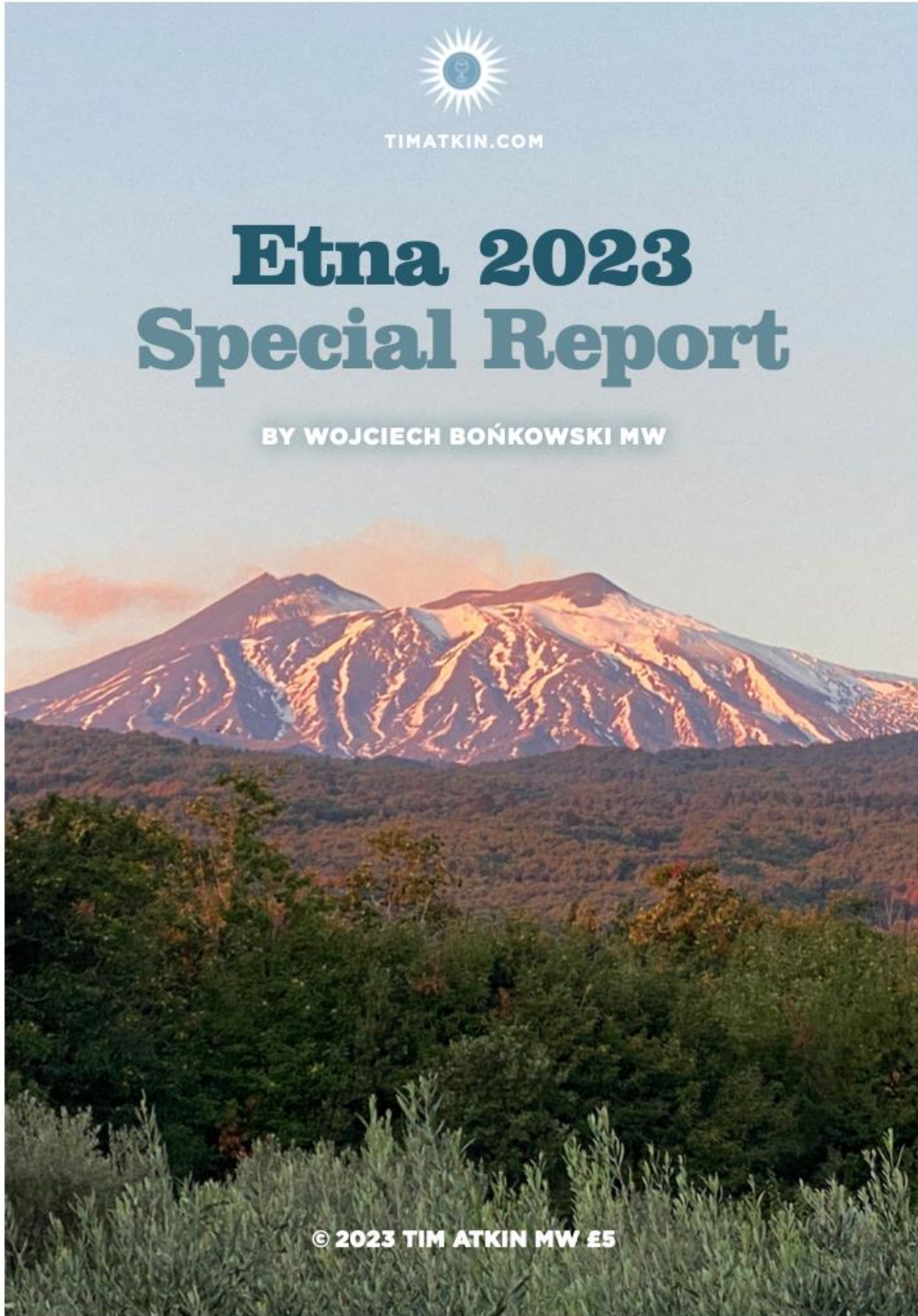


**Etna 2023  
Special Report**

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di W. Bonkowski**

**2023**



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# Etna at a glance

## 10 things you need to know



### Nerello Mascalese

In Nerello Mascalese, Etna has its signature grape to rival northern Italy's Nebbiolo. Also compared to Pinot Noir for its light colour, aromatic finesse, and the ability to transmit terroir, Nerello is a tricky grape, but in agile hands, it is undoubtedly capable of greatness.

The main challenge is its extremely late ripening. When I visited Etna in mid-October 2021, all the best Nerello was still hanging on the vine. Producers finally picked it on 23 October—only because of a massive medicane storm approaching. And 2021 was an early harvest, with August setting historic records of heat: Etna registered 47.4° on 11 August, just shy of Syracuse's 48.8°, the highest temperature ever recorded in Europe. In milder years, Nerello can be harvested well into November—Italy's last grapes to be picked. This prolonged hang time is required to ripen Nerello's polyphenols, lest vintners risk wines with green notes and dry tannins.

Even when fully ripe—the last few vintages, notably 2016, 2017, and 2019, have been kind in that regard—those emphatic tannins position Nerello much closer to Nebbiolo than Pinot. Etna reds have grit—and plenty of it. They open with a haunting floral, spicy aroma of Oriental nights, but close with an iron kiss of volcanic stone and fiery might. At the same time, they have less flesh at mid-palate and less poise than modern Nebbiolos, and are more prone to oxidation and brett, bringing another reference point into the picture: southern Rhône Grenache. The key to top-quality red wines is handling Nerello with the utmost care and control to catch its aromatic finesse and allow the tannins to show their best bittersweet expression.



### Winemaking styles

Much is up to the winemaking style. The Anglo-Saxon vision of Italian red

wine has always been of "oxidative winemaking." True, in the past many wines have sat in oak for two or three years, losing primary energy and acquiring a familiar—and uniformising—oxidative gloss. Etna has seen some of that style, too, in some older bottlings of Benanti or Ciro Biondi, though remember very little wine was bottled until the 1990s so the dinosaur casks ubiquitous in Barolo or Montalcino are a rarity here.

In fact, Etna started its modern Renaissance with a take on the French style: grape selection, intense extraction, and eighteen months in oak barriques of varying age. This was the protocol implemented by Andrea Franchetti of Passopisciaro (who also planted Chardonnay at 900 metres asl to make an Etna "Burgundy") and Marco De Grazia of Tenuta delle Terre Nere. Even before them, Cottanera had pioneered French grapes such as Merlot, Syrah, and even Mondeuse, making modern-style wines with a strong sense of place, if not local identity. Such was the dominant narrative of the 1990s: Italy could get Oscars only if it spoke French, the universal language of wine. Even an extraordinary terroir such as Etna was subjected to the "improvements" of the French style.

Today, there is a plethora of winemaking approaches, from the classic stainless-steel fermentations with punching-downs to gentle microlot infusions in open plastic tubs as practiced notably at Girolamo Russo. There are Ligurian concrete eggs and Slavonian oak casks from star cooper Pauscha. There are amphorae of many types: "reductive" high-fired clay jars from Tuscany and more porous, "oxidative" Georgian qvevri, used by natural winemaker Anna Martens. Martens is also pioneering a return to chestnut, widely used well into the twentieth century because it was cheaper and easier to obtain locally than oak (her 150-hl casks come from Alfredo Sannibale, a revered traditional cooper in Lazio).





Alberto Graci favours concrete tanks and large oak vats, opting to macerate for 20–30 days, like for classic Barolo. Frank Cornelissen, on the other hand, argues that Nerello Mascalese evolves faster than Nebbiolo does, losing fruit to leave its tannins more exposed, and is now taking a step or two back from the Barolo-like oxidative winemaking: “we should vinify Nerello more like Pinot Noir,” he observes. The new wines made at Donnafugata surely have a very lithe, Burgundian feel to them, as do those of Terra Costantino.

Appreciation of Nerello’s fragility is a new trend; Giuseppe Russo goes as far as saying, “the old Italian concept of Riserva wines [longer oak ageing for higher quality] makes no sense.” Oak, maturity, and to an extent even tannins lose their relevance as defining factors of Etna red wine, replaced by precise origin, minerality, and a fresher, lighter expression of fruitiness. This is the true “Burgundisation” of Etna: when presented with five or six different “contrade” bottlings of Nerello at Passopisciaro, Terre Nere, or Cornelissen, differentiated solely by their terroir rather than winemaking, you indeed feel like visiting a top domaine in Gevrey or Chambolle.



**Contrade: concept and reality**

The concept of “contrada” is traditional in Sicily, but has only been translated into Etna winemaking reality in the last decade. “Contrada” can best be rendered in English as “sector,” an entity larger than a single vineyard but smaller than traditional crus such as practiced in Barolo. There are now 142 contrade throughout the region, each extending over, typically, 30–40 hectares and shared by several producers. The best of these have become household names: Passopisciaro, Guardiola, Santo Spirito, Feudo di Mezzo, Calderara, Barbabecchi, as well as Villagrande and Cavaliere for whites, while others remain fairly obscure. In short, they are the equivalent of Burgundian climats, and as the trend deepens towards microvinifications, premium bottlings, and more precisely designated wine origins, expect the contrade to become even more prominent on front labels.

The (very Italian) paradox is that some of the best locations, such as Guardiola and Barbabecchi, have no right to the Etna DOC,

lying as they do above the legal altitude limit of 1000 metres asl. They are currently labelled as IGP Terre Siciliane and function as “super-Etnean” wines in parallel to the DOC bottlings, but this artificial and by now (global warming helping) baseless distinction will need to be rectified by a change of DOC rules before more damage is done by Etna’s best wines being unable to evoke the name of the volcano.



**Etna terroir(s)**

The If you just drove the 20 km or so between Piedimonte, Linguaglossa, Castiglione, and Randazzo, the winemaking centres of Etna’s northern slope, or looked at the relatively narrow list of top-scoring estates, you might be inclined to think Etna is some sort of Chambolle: an limited, easily graspable area of consistent characteristics. The opposite is true. To start with, Etna is enormous. The National Park (which essentially begins where vineyards end, going uphill) covers nearly 60,000 hectares, and the circumference road runs no fewer than 180 km across twenty communes (towns).

Vineyards were traditionally concentrated in the north and east: the former for red wines, the latter for white. But this simplification has long been rendered obsolete by new plantings, new winemaking operations, global warming, and volcanic eruptions. Etna erupts vehemently from time to time, but its activity is almost uninterrupted: a rain of fine volcanic grit is commonplace as far as Catania or Taormina, and there minor outflows of lava regularly appear throughout the area. Italy’s Geophysics and Volcanology Institute (INGV) publishes a chronological map of lava flows that looks like a fauvist painting. The most recent flows have tended to focus on the eastern and southern slope, so the main vineyard area to the north has been relatively spared, but there can be local episodes anywhere. This impacts vineyard geology: where more recent basaltic outcrops have only started withering into large stones, the soil is extremely hard to work and fast-draining, yielding powerfully tannic red wines. In lower, more eroded areas, the lava decomposes into a fine, sandy, extremely fertile ash, considered better for white and rosé wines.

Viticulture used to be practiced much higher than it is today. There are extant plots of ungrafted Nerello (phylloxera cannot survive in

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# Tasting Notes

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## Tenuta delle Terre Nere Etna Rosso Santo Spirito 2019

Originating from some of Etna's deepest beds of fertile volcanic ash, this incredibly expressive Nerello Mascalese is a perfect illustration of this challenging grape's personality. The triangulation is simply perfect between Pinot Noir-like aerial finesse, granular Nebbiolo tannins, Grenache-like fleshy, Mediterranean fruit, and something altogether more aromatic that made me think of pink Muscat. It is emphatic but not exaggerated, hitting a prodigious golden ratio of structural balance, as often at Terre Nere. Marco De Grazia defines Santo Spirito as his "charmer," but I feel its silky fruit allure serves a nobler mineral purpose.

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## I Custodi delle Vigne dell'Etna Etna Rosato Contrada Muganazzi Alnus 2019

Etna's answer to Viña Tondonia Rosado, this deeply hued, vinous rosé is released after three years in tank and can look forward to many more in bottle. The scent is subdued but sophisticated, with wild strawberries underpinned by cooling minerality. What follows on the palate is best described as otherworldly juiciness of fleshy red fruits, crisp citrus, and crushed stones. One miracle here is to have so much depth and complexity with no oak ageing at all; another is tangible mineral extract that never feels austere. One of the world's top rosé wines.

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## I Vigneri Aurora Carricante 2013

This archive vintage of Salvo Foti's old-vine white was served to me at the outstanding Shalai restaurant. It is slowly acquiring a nutty patina of old Burgundy but retains a glorious richness of peach jam and honey, with savoury minerality for balance. Unexpectedly wonderful, and proof that the best Etna whites can really age.

95

## Palmento Costanzo Etna Rosso Prefillossera 2017

The heritage of ungrafted vines is one of Etna's major assets. No fewer than 1500 bottles are made of this true heirloom vine gem from an up-and-coming estate. With its bright red cherry profile, this is one of the tautest, least Mediterranean red Etna wines I've tried. Its real value is in the matchless, diamond-grain texture of tannins and fabulous silky juiciness on the palate. There is still a hint of oak, as the wine is made in a hands-on style with long ageing potential in mind, so it will (incredibly) get better every year.

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## Passopisciaro Etna Rosso Contrada G 2019

2019 has yielded quite a few phenomenal red wines on Etna, such as Passopisciaro's version of Guardiola, which raises their standard even higher than before. There is a tangibly lighter touch in terms of extraction, letting the cool, almost salty minerality express itself more freely, while following on the mid-palate with enormous density, superfine grain, and staggering length of flavour. Top league.

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## Passopisciaro Terre Siciliane Contrada S 2017

Sciaranuova, as the name suggests, lies on one of Etna's younger lava outcrops, lending the wine a somewhat burly, almost animal quality that resolves into impressive sour plum energy on the palate. A statement in mineral force and ripe fruit at the same time, a very authentic wine with little winemaking apparent—it's notably oak-free. With plenty of volcanic grit, this is a 2017 to age another few years.



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**Girolamo Russo Etna Rosso San Lorenzo 2019**

2019 is in many ways similar to 2016 and I found Russo's San Lorenzo to be of very comparable quality. The fruit is so ripe to feel almost prune-like but the volcanic terroir adds lovely freshness and precision. The mouthfeel is almost architectural, like a spacious Baroque cathedral.

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**Girolamo Russo Etna Rosso San Lorenzo 2021**

Always the most structured of Russo's contrada bottlings, San Lorenzo will reward the patient but impresses everyone with its fine interplay of herbal and fruity, juicy and gritty, Mediterranean and cool-climate. At these levels of extract, the natural-flowing juiciness is something to behold.

94

**Graci Etna Rosso Arcuria Sopra Il Pozzo 2015**

Alberto Graci selects only the finest grapes from two hectares, just enough for 1,300 bottles (the rest goes into his Rosato). Aged 18 months in large oak vats, this wine flirts with the natural style with its open, warm, lightly balsamic expression but has a beautiful—and clean—mouthfeel of flower petals and puréed plums, before finishing on a gritty, volcanic note. Simply terrific.

94

**Graci Etna Rosso Arcuria Sopra Il Pozzo 2018**

This special selection from Arcuria excels against the odds, combining high alcohol, a rich, almost fat balsamic texture, charming freshness, vivid minerality, and almost leafy, vegetal overtones. Impressive even before you realise it comes from the infamous 2018 vintage.

94

**Passopisciaro Terre Siciliane Contrada C 2019**

Chiappemacine doesn't enjoy the renown of top contrade such as Guardiola, but at Passopisciaro it delivers a top-drawer expression of Nerello in all its wild stallion personality: superripe yet tightly wound, gritty, stony, with a vivid note of porcini mushrooms (and the porcini of Etna are a memorable taste). Enticing sweetness of fruit and very domesticated tannins. Etna red wine is about hitting the right balance and this does.

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**Passopisciaro Terre Siciliane Contrada S 2012**

It is quite an experience to taste one of the earlier Contrada bottlings at Passopisciaro, when the style was somewhat more forceful and Mediterranean than it is now. This is slowly maturing on a dried tomato note on the nose but the palate is simply monumental in its volcanic expression, with next to zero wood influence and indiscernible 15.5% alcohol. Think of an old noble Bandol. I found this 2012 slightly more complete and harmonious than the similarly cut 2015.

94

**Tenuta delle Terre Nere Etna Bianco Calderara Sottana 2020**

Showing a signature Terre Nere reduction on the nose, this is likely the broadest, richest white Etna in this winery's collection, with peach, butter, and wax. While there is less lemony incisiveness than often in this appellation, this is no oak Chardonnay-lookalike: the tightly wound, bone-dry, austere bitterish character of the Volcano shines through.

94

**Tenuta delle Terre Nere Etna Rosso Guardiola 2019**

Originating from some of Etna's poorest, stoniest soil, this displays wonderful finesse and precision, betraying the higher elevation, too: the lip-smacking acidity tastes almost of cranberry. Yet as everything at Terre Nere, this avoids extremes of richness or austerity and chooses a crowd-pleasing middle ground, without sacrificing a strong sense of place. Wonderfully polished tannins.



**93****Palmento Costanzo Etna Rosso Contrada Santo Spirito Particella n. 466 2016**

A big, emphatic expression of Nerello with a tangible fine-grained minerality that will look familiar to fans of "Rutherford dust." It's very fresh, too, almost herbaceous in its Mediterranean overtones, with an imposing, virile austerity: the Nerello paradox laid bare.

**93****Palmento Costanzo Etna Rosso Contrada Santo Spirito Particella n. 468 2016**

Palmento Costanzo now bottle three special cuvées from Santo Spirito to express the microcharacteristics of different lava soil types. 468 surely tastes very volcanic: it is positively chewy, almost mulchy in the way of a young Nebbiolo. Over time in the glass, the palate fills out with plum flesh and sour cherries, and the tannins align like well-drilled soldiers. A baby even at age six.

**93****Palmento Costanzo Etna Rosso Prefillossera 2019**

The new release of one of Etna's most promising bottlings is a sheer essence of crushed volcanic stones, with the aftertaste lasting a good minute. With a hint of 2019-typical balsamic evolution and bright plummy acidity, this nonetheless is focused much more on gritty power than any fruitiness. Give it time!

**93****Passopisciaro Terre Siciliane Contrada S 2015**

Passopisciaro's (arguably) top red used to be made in a more extractive, monolithic style and this 2015 shows considerably more grit than later, more elegant years. While the balance might be skewed towards power, it's an impressively mineral wine, with richly textured, slowly evolving black fruits.

**93****Pietradolce Etna Rosso Barbagalli 2017**

Made from 120-year-old vines with prolonged ageing in cask, this very ripe wine shows beefy, savoury tones over a textured fruitiness. An example of Etna at its wildest and grittiest.

**93****Pietradolce Etna Rosso Contrada Santo Spirito 2018**

A strikingly full, concentrated wine for the vintage, this allies cranberry pith with polished but grainy, bricky tannins. Less savoury than other Pietradolce bottlings, Santo Spirito has a vibrant energy particularly eloquent of northern Etna.

**93****Pietradolce Etna Rosso Contrada Santo Spirito 2019**

Everything in 2019 fell in line to yield a great Santo Spirito, seamlessly blending ripe, expressive cherry-driven fruitiness, fine powdery tannins of real Etnean breed, and impressive purity of mineral expression. It is a more elegant and approachable red than Pietradolce's other cuvées, giving immense pleasure today despite its good ageing potential.

**93****Pietradolce Etna Bianco Sant'Andrea 2017**

Kept on the skins for ten months, this is nonetheless a structured white rather than orange wine, with no tannins or other macerative character coming in the way of its pure, volcanic, tangerine and lemon fruitiness. The balance and composure are impressive.

**93****Src Etna Rosso Crasà Alberello Selezione 2020**

Src make some of the boldest, most extreme "natural" expressions of Etna. This special selection of 120-year-old Nerello Mascalese, aged in concrete egg, greets you with a wall of crunchy tannins before a charming, redcurrant-bright fruitiness on the mid-palate. The fruit is ripe and very expressive, and the wine avoids the (relative) oxidation and brett issues of some Src bottlings.

PRODUCER	STYLE	NAME	VINTAGE	SCORE
Passopisciario		Passobianco	2019	90
Passopisciario	Terre Siciliane	Contrada PC	2019	92
Passopisciario	Etna Rosso	Passorosso	2019	92
Passopisciario	Etna Rosso	Passorosso	2018	87
Passopisciario	Etna Rosso	Passorosso	2017	89
Passopisciario	Etna Rosso	Passorosso	2016	92
Passopisciario	Terre Siciliane	Contrada C	2019	94
Passopisciario	Etna Rosso	Contrada G	2019	95
Passopisciario	Terre Siciliane	Contrada P	2019	92
Passopisciario	Terre Siciliane	Contrada R	2019	91
Passopisciario	Terre Siciliane	Contrada S	2019	92
Passopisciario	Terre Siciliane	Contrada S	2018	91
Passopisciario	Terre Siciliane	Contrada S	2017	95
Passopisciario	Terre Siciliane	Contrada S	2015	93

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Passopisciario	Terre Siciliane	Contrada S	2012	94
Passopisciario	Terre Siciliane	Contrada S	2011	90
Passopisciario		Franchetti	2019	91