



FOOD

In Sicily, Making a Name for Vittoria

The Pour

By ERIC ASIMOV AUG. 11, 2016



Arianna Occhipinti at her winery in Vittoria, Sicily. Alfonso M. Cevola for The New York Times

VITTORIA, Sicily — The red wines made in the vicinity of this midsize town in southeastern Sicily can be elegant and beautiful, with a crunchy freshness and a reticent austerity. They can be intriguingly mineral, gorgeously perfumed and astonishingly pure, while still displaying rich, focused fruit flavors. They offer a lot to love.

Yet if you held your breath waiting for a discussion of Sicilian wines to get around to those of Vittoria, you may end up gasping for air.

With good reason, the [wines of Mount Etna](#) to the north have captured the imagination of many Americans. The equally entrancing wines of Vittoria stand in Etna's considerable shadow, to the point where Vittoria's star winemaker, [Arianna Occhipinti](#), is sometimes assumed to be based in Etna.

"We are not living in the same moment as Etna," she said, as we walked her vineyards in June. "They get all the attention."

Her observation was by no means a complaint, simply a statement of fact. In the Etna region, the volcano provides a magnificent backdrop for the vineyards in its foothills. The Vittoria wine region, by contrast, is unprepossessing, to say the least.

Vittoria is a relatively flat area where agriculture rules. But grapevines here, unlike those in so many other modern wine regions, do not have a monopoly on the land. Oranges and tomatoes are grown all over, as are table grapes in greenhouses. Fields are planted with wheat and olive trees, though if you look hard enough, you can find wine grapes, too.



Arianna Occhipinti's vines in Vittoria, Sicily Alfonso M. Cevola for The New York Times

What stands out in the region, unfortunately, is the trash strewn all over, often besmirching pastoral landscapes and otherwise pristine beaches.

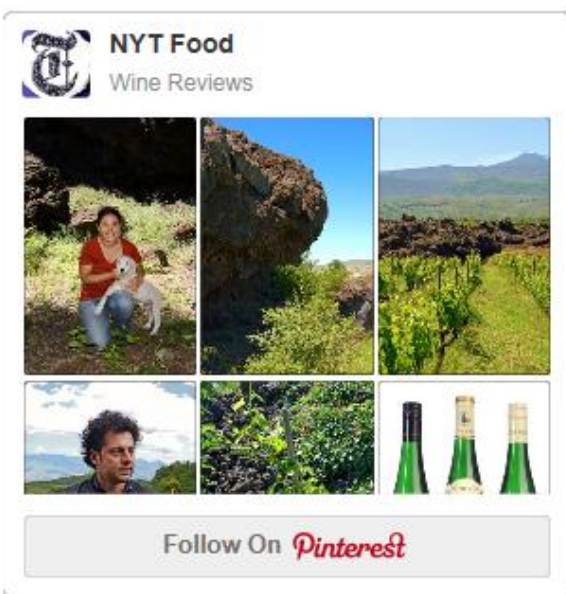
The southeast is one of the poorer parts of Sicily. Jobs are scarce, and wine is one of the few fields to offer the possibility of hope, pride and prosperity. Leading producers like Ms. Occhipinti, COS and [Valle dell'Acate](#) are significant success stories. Wine can pay a lot more than other types of agriculture, but the risks can be high.

Next to Ms. Occhipinti's vineyard of frappato and nero d'Avola in the Contrada Fossa di Lupo is an abandoned vineyard planted with merlot. Back in the 1980s and '90s, international grapes like merlot, cabernet sauvignon and chardonnay were seen as a way of proving Sicily's ability to make fine wine despite its reputation for heavy, powerful wines sold in bulk.

Sicilian merlot may have earned a momentary blip of attention, but it was not a long-term path to prosperity. The real treasure, as Ms. Occhipinti, COS and a few others understood, was in the indigenous grapes like frappato and nero d'Avola, the constituents of [Cerasuolo di Vittoria](#), the region's most prestigious wine.

Individually, each grape can make promising wines. I often love frappato, which offers freshness and vibrancy with a distinct floral quality. It's low in tannins and in alcohol. Nero d'Avola is fruitier and more powerful. It can easily become heavy and overbearing, though when painstakingly farmed and vinified with a light hand, as in Ms. Occhipinti's Siccagno, made entirely of nero d'Avola, it can be energetic and delightful.

Blended together, however, in roughly equal proportions, they make Cerasuolo, a wine of great freshness and deceptive concentration and structure, often with notes of flowers and citrus zest. Valle dell'Acate, a midsize producer with an annual production of 400,000 bottles (compared with Ms. Occhipinti's 120,000), makes an excellent, moderately priced Cerasuolo that is full, spicy and substantial, yet lively and bright.



COS, a partnership of Giambattista Cilia and Arianna's uncle Giusto Occhipinti (a third partner, long departed, accounted for the S) with a production of around 200,000 bottles, makes two excellent versions. The Cerasuolo Classico, fermented and aged in concrete tanks and large casks of Slavonian oak, is lovely and fresh, over time gaining flavors of herbs and tobacco.

COS also makes a version fermented and aged in terra-cotta amphorae from Spain, labeled Pithos Rosso, though it's the same blend as the Cerasuolo. It has a savory,

austere purity, as if you were examining the wine through a microscope.

Many of the best vineyards in the Vittoria region are planted on red, sandy soil above limestone, in which the vines must send their roots deep to find water. Because of the arid climate, Vittoria growers are permitted to irrigate. But the best growers avoid it, as they do chemical fertilizers.

"People think incorrectly that sun and heat give you sugar, but it's the ground, if it's fertile," Mr. Occhipinti said.

Not boosting the fertility and vigor of the vines, and accepting relatively low yields are crucial.

"It's what permits us to have lower alcohol, elegance and minerality," Mr. Occhipinti said. "With fertilizer, chemicals and selected yeast, you get nothing from the terroir. You have to be intellectually honest."

The best producers, like Mr. Cilia and Mr. Occhipinti, Valle dell'Acate, Manenti and Ms. Occhipinti, all farm organically.



Giambattista Cilia (left) and Giusto Occhipinti of COS. Alfonso M. Cevola for The New York Times

“It’s stupid not to be organic in Sicily,” Ms. Occhipinti said. “We have the perfect climate.”

Relatively few Vittoria producers are imported to the United States. One of the more interesting, [Lamoresca](#), is not actually from within the confines of the appellation but from just north of it, in the hills near the town of San Michele di Ganzaria. It’s an area not known for wine, but for wheat, and for the fruit of the prickly pear cactus, which is farmed in rows like any other crop.

There, in “the middle of nowhere,” as he put it, the idiosyncratic Filippo Rizzo began his estate around 2000. Mr. Rizzo was born in the area, but spent years in Belgium, where he owned a restaurant. He believes that the altitude of his vineyards, about 1,500 feet, helps to offset the heat. He grows frappato and nero d’Avola, along with a little grenache and vermentino.

“I think there is a potential to make good wines — not great, but good,” he said. “We are not a famous place for wine, but we’ve always had a lot of vines.”

When one walks through Mr. Rizzo’s vineyard, with the scent of wild mint in the air, it’s easy to see the meticulous care he takes, nurturing each vine almost individually.

“Every plant is different, so prune accordingly,” he said. Although he refuses to use chemical treatments, he sneers at labels like organic.



Filippo Rizzo of Lamoresca. Alfonso M. Cevola for The New York Times

“I’m more than organic, I’m an artisan,” he said. “I want to be a traditional Mediterranean farm. I don’t want to be a trend.”

Likewise, his wines, like his Nerocapitano, a frappato, are pure and alive. They might be called natural wines, yet he rejects that term, too.

“They are not natural wines, which are Coca-Cola for young people in Paris,” he said. “They lose the terroir. They taste the same. I won’t be a part of it.”

His attitude is not unlike Ms. Occhipinti’s. Almost since her first vintage, in 2004, made when she was 21, she has been embraced as a darling of the natural wine world. While she is adamant about her traditional, conscientious viticulture, her winemaking, she said, has evolved.

“Sometimes in natural wine, being a good grower and a good winemaker are two different things,” she said. Too many natural wines, she said, are made with the same techniques and taste the same. “I want to taste the grape and the place.”

That’s exactly what you taste in Ms. Occhipinti’s frappatos, which are the best examples of the singular potential of this grape. Her 2013 Il Frappato, made from vines more than 50 years old, is profoundly mineral with a deep wealth of fresh fruit and herbal flavors.

Her success and recognition around the wine world have allowed her to build a bright new production facility and a small hotel. It has also put her in a leadership role among Vittoria winemakers as an anti-establishment figure working counterintuitively with the established wine authorities.

She preaches the virtues of traditional agricultural practices, skills that were largely replaced by modern chemical farming in the years after World War II, which she said led to “tomato culture, too much richness and greenhouses.”

“I want the producers here to feel more proud of their work,” she said. But results have been slow. “I feel strongly, but sometimes I believe more than the others.”

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