

AN INTRODUCTION TO SICILY

- *NOTE: ALL INFORMATION IS DIRECTLY QUOTED FROM THE OXFORD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF WINE AND IS FOR INTERNAL TRAINING ONLY.*
- Sicily is an island off the toe of Italy. Viticulturally, it is large, hot and growing in importance as modern winemaking techniques have significantly improved the quality of the wines.
- In startling contrast to the present day, Sicily was famed throughout classical antiquity for its agricultural produce, not least its wines. The settlement of colonies of Greeks around the island in the 8th century BC was an undoubted spur to the development of viticulture. Flourishing vineyards are testified for the 5th century at the later Greek settlement Agrigento (Agrigento).
- With over 200,000 ha/494,000 acres under vine and annual volumes of wine which average close to 10 million hl/264 million gal per year, Sicily has been rivalled only by Apulia as the most productive wine region in a country that is often the world's most productive.
- More recently, however, economic crisis and a fall in demand for blending wines led to a severe drop in annual production to a mere (for Sicily) 7.7 million hl in 1990 before rebounding to 9.5 million between 1994 and 1996.
- The island's geography and climate—a hilly and mountainous terrain with poor soil, intense summer heat, and low rainfall—make it ideal for the classic Mediterranean agriculture of grain, olive oil, and wine, and Sicily's viticulture, in fact, enjoys a series of natural advantages which have not yet been fully exploited: hillside vineyards with excellent exposures, abundant sunlight, and high temperatures to ripen the grapes; excellent elevation (it is by no means unusual to find a flourishing vineyard at 500 to 900 m/1,640-2,950 ft above sea level); good diurnal temperature variability; and a range of native vine varieties with real personality.
- Yield statistics tell a significant story: after averaging 5 tons/ha in the early 1960s, they reached 7 tons in 1968, exceeded 9 tons in 1973, 1978, and 1980, and surpassed 10 tons as an island average in 1979. The philosophy of high production with no market in sight has encouraged a significant part of Sicily's viticulture to aim no higher than producing anonymous blending wines.
- Despite all this, a significant number of quality-orientated Sicilian wine producers also emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, and their wines have had little difficulty in establishing a place for themselves in national and international markets. DOC production is still low, usually no higher than two per cent of total wine production.
- Nowadays Sicily's wines are conventionally divided into seven zones, each corresponding to a dominant vine variety: the Zibibbo, which is the island of Pantelleria (see Moscato di Pantelleria); the zone of white grape varieties Catarratto and Grillo, which is the province of Trapani, and the DOC zones of Marsala and Alcamo in particular (although the varieties are cultivated further to the north as far as Calatafimi and Castellamare del Golfo); the zone of Perricone and Inzolia, which is the province of Agrigento; the zone of Nero d'Avola and Frappato, which is the provinces of Ragusa and Siracusa; the zone of Nerello Mascalese which is the province of Messina, both on the slopes of Mount Etna and in the north east of the province; and the zone of Malvasia, which is the Aeolian islands, including Lipari. These divisions are obviously only rough ones and it is not difficult to find Inzolia cultivated in the

province of Trapani; Inzolia, Nero d'Avola, and Perricone are also cultivated in the centre of the island, in the south east of the province of Palermo, and in the province of Caltanissetta.

- Among white varieties (which are far more widely planted than red varieties), Inzolia (also known as Ansonica) and Catarratto are generally considered the best-quality grape varieties while the somewhat neutral Grillo is best suited to the production of Marsala. So far Inzolia has regularly given a lighter and more fragrant wine, Catarratto a fuller and spicier wine, although much remains to be learned about the proper fermentation and ageing of each. Recent experiments with Inzolia have suggested a certain affinity with new oak and both Inzolia and Catarratto from higher, cooler sites, fermented in modern wineries with efficient refrigeration, have also shown a fruity and floral quality not unlike the wines of Friuli and the Alto Adige. In the 1990s, such grapes provided some rich pickings for flying wine-makers.
- Nero d'Avola is undoubtedly a red variety of very high potential, capable of giving wines of great richness, texture, and longevity, in addition to aromas of some complexity; ageing in oak, which has largely replaced the traditional chestnut casks of the past, has given wines that can compete with the best southern Italian wines, such as Aglianico del Vulture or Taurasi. Frappato can yield fruity wines with a peppery, berry character not unlike a Rhône wine in its classic zone of Vittoria. In combination with Nero d'Avola (the canonical blend of Cerasuolo di Vittoria) it gives a fuller wine with more ageing ability. Nerello Mascalese is also considered a red variety of some potential, but the Etna area has not participated in the general improvement of the 1980s and 1990s and few wines or wineries have emerged to indicate what the grape could give at its best.
- Sicily once enjoyed a great reputation for sweet wines, and attempts to revive the tradition are currently under way. Marsala, the most famous, is in serious decline.