

Etna - the tasting notes

The nearly 60 tasting notes below were taken at the Contrade dell'Etna wine fair described in my [Sicilian video 1](#) and illustrated in [video 2](#). The point of the tasting was to demonstrate the different characters of 2007s grown in different *contrade* but some producers followed this directive more closely than others. I worked my way round the room from wines made mainly in Castiglione di Sicilia to those from Linguaglossa to those mainly from Randazzo and marvelled at how varied the wines indeed were – although sometimes more because of what happened in the cellar than the vineyard, I felt.

Andrea Franchetti of Passopisciaro, one of the first of the outsiders, told me that making wine here is quiet different from making it, as he has done, in Bordeaux and southern Tuscany. "It's a wine that's all vineyard. It's almost like white winemaking. You don't need to soup it up to get more thickness. You're trying to thin it rather than thicken it. You're playing with the juice rather than the skins."

Wines are listed in geographical groups in more or less the order I tasted them. Since many of the samples are yet to be blended and bottled and often come from vineyards that are partly in and partly out of the Etna DOC it is difficult to give denominations at this stage.

The new generation of Etna vine growers seem supremely unworried that another lava flow might come and wipe out all their vineyard investment, even though eruptions only a very few years ago were enough, for example, to destroy the ski lifts above Etna's most famous vineyards. We visited on a beautiful weekend after a fairly heavy late snow, so there were skiers, but under warm blue skies.

Nerello Mascalese, the most respected grape hereabouts, is named after Mascali on the nearby coast, through which the variety was presumably first imported. No DNA analysis has yet been done on it but with the many waves of conquerors to whom Sicily has been in thrall, it could just as well have French or Spanish as Italian mainland roots, on the basis of both the island's history and how the wine tastes. Nerello Mascalese accounts for about 80 per cent of plantings with the fruitier Nerello Cappuccio accounting for much of the rest. Garnacha, here called Alicante, is grown in some of the warmer spots, notably on the clay soils south of Linguaglossa, and has a connection with Nelson.

The Etna DOC boundary is drawn parallel to the road in some cases rather than strictly round a *contrada* (see my article in free for all tomorrow) so in some cases good wines, particularly those at higher altitudes (and vines are grown up to 1,200m here), have to be labelled IGT Sicilia.

Not all the vineyards are artisanal recuperations of the ancient terraces. Corvo for instance have razed the old terraces to make a single large vineyard whose wires glint in the sun.

The three main communes for top quality wine production on Etna are all on the northern slopes of the volcano, Castiglione di Sicilia, Randazzo and Linguaglossa, each with up to a dozen of their own *contrade*. East and west of these communes are moisture traps with lots of rot problems.

PASSOPISCIARO

Andrea Franchetti's winery where the event was held, and the Tenuta di Trinoro guy driving the car in the super-bumpy [video 4](#). Wines made by Andrea, helped by Australian Anna Martins, who also teaches at the Wine & Spirit Education Trust in the UK. Total 13 ha, of which 60 per cent owned and 40 per cent rented but very closely managed. Nerello vines are 60 to 100 years old. As elsewhere, the Nerello vines tend to be a mix. The higher you go, the more Alicante there is, I was told, although I was told by others that it was a warm area speciality. Mixed when planted. And the vineyards also have 10-12 per cent white varieties, as in Carricante, to smooth the edges of Nerello Mascalese "when people didn't have the guts to pick in November as they do now". No more than 30hl/ha yields. All made in large oak or 4th year barriques. Certainly Nerello doesn't seem a great match for new barriques. Franchetti has also planted the new vines seen on the video, a mix of the Petit Verdot of Bordeaux and Cesanese Affile of Latium to produce the exceptional wine called simply Franchetti. Vine density is 9,000 vines per hectare.

Passopisciario, Sciaranuova 2007 17 Drink 2011-15

800m – new lava flows, the name means. 300-year-old lava flow on pebbles. Northern exposure, picked 29 Oct. 0.6 ha. Very heady nose – rich perfume. Savoury, masculine - quite alcoholic and a bit rustic, certainly compared to, say, the Graci wines?

Passopisciario, Guardiola 2007 17.5 Drink 2011-17

900m, 1000-year-old lava flow, on ashes. 20m-deep tarry soils. 31 Oct picking of 1 ha. This is the vineyard that surrounds the winery. Only one part of it is DOC! Bright crimson. Rich and round and very soft tannins. Then the minerals and dry finish kick in. Very bumptious and attention-grabbing – even a bit burly. Rich and rumbustious. Long.

Passopisciario, Rampante 2007 17 Drink 2010-16

1100m, outside the Etna DOC. 700-year-old lava. Picked 1 Nov from 0.5 ha of vines. Refined, sleek, very fine tannins and pure fruit. Lots of acidity. Probably best in a blend?

Passopisciario 2007 IGT Sicilia 17.5 Drink 2009-12

A possible blend of these and about four more *contrade*. This combines richness with lift and perfume. But very early to be tasting it.

Passopisciario 2006 IGT Sicilia 17 Drink 2008-11

Blend just bottled. Very light cherry red. The vines, I was told, are very well taken care of because local farmers are so proud of their forebears' plots. Rich and brûlée and easy to like but with acid, too. Brawny, slightly bitter finish. More countrified than some. Alcohol stands out a bit. 14.5%

Franchetti 2006 IGT Sicilia 18 Drink 2008-12

A very different wine grown on the slopes of Mt Etna and made from Petit Verdot with a little Cesanese Affile (the 2007 will probably be all Cesanese while the 2005 was 60% Petit Verdot and 40% Cesanese). Amazing deep crimson colour. Extremely ripe and peppery and savoury and exciting. Smooth yet dense – really neat and fresh. Not a typical Etna wine because no Nerello but a very seductive one.