

# ERUPTIONS ON ETNA

The vision of a bunch of hardy newcomers to Etna a decade ago is now being realised – but not without controversy. Their unique, old-vine wines are reviving volcanic vineyards but irking traditionalists. By **STEPHEN BROOK**

**T**he slopes of an active volcano may not sound like the ideal place to plant a vineyard, but vines have been cultivated on Mount Etna for centuries. Lava provides a rich mineral soil that is hospitable to vines, and a variety of elevations and expositions ensures the mountain is anything but uniform. It's only when you are perched on the mountainside that you realise how vast the volcano is. It's possible to stand in a vineyard without realising there is a crater smouldering away a thousand or more metres above you.

With alarming frequency, the volcano erupts. 'When the 2001 eruption began,' says Andrea Franchetti of the Passopisciaro estate, 'its force propelled me from my bed.' Lava sluggishly, but destructively, slouches down the mountain, creating a rugged, gnarled, black landscape in place of whatever once stood in its way. Franchetti recalls how during the 2002 eruptions, the villagers of Passopisciaro carried the statue of a local saint from the parish church and pointed it in the direction of the volcano, while credulous women prayed around the clock that the lava would not come their way. 'It worked,' adds Franchetti drily.

Many, though by no means all, of the vineyards are planted on north-facing slopes at elevations of up to 1,000 metres. Days under the Sicilian sun can be torrid,

but nights on Etna are cool. Two red varieties flourish here: Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Cappuccio, with the former far more widely planted. For those who associate Sicily with Nero d'Avola, Nerello Mascalese will come as a surprise. Nero d'Avola gives wines that are dark, sumptuous, juicy and plump. Nerello Mascalese is the opposite: pale, lean, febrile, perfumed and delicate, as though tottering on stiletto heels, as opposed to Nero d'Avola's Doc Martens.

## Old trunks

The high elevation means the ripening season here is amazingly long, with the harvest often continuing into November. Most of the vineyards, which are planted at between 450 and 1,200 metres, are terraced and many ancient stone walls remain. The older trunks are planted as bush vines, but some newer plantings are trellised. Although red varieties dominate, some white varieties, usually Carricante and Catarratto, are also encountered.

The vineyards once formed part of substantial estates of around 500ha (hectares), known locally as *contrade*, but these have been dismembered over the years. Palatial wineries and mansions in towns such as Piedimonte (not to be confused with Piedmont) are reminders that in the 1920s, Etna's *contrade* produced vast quantities of wine that was mostly exported to France, along with the

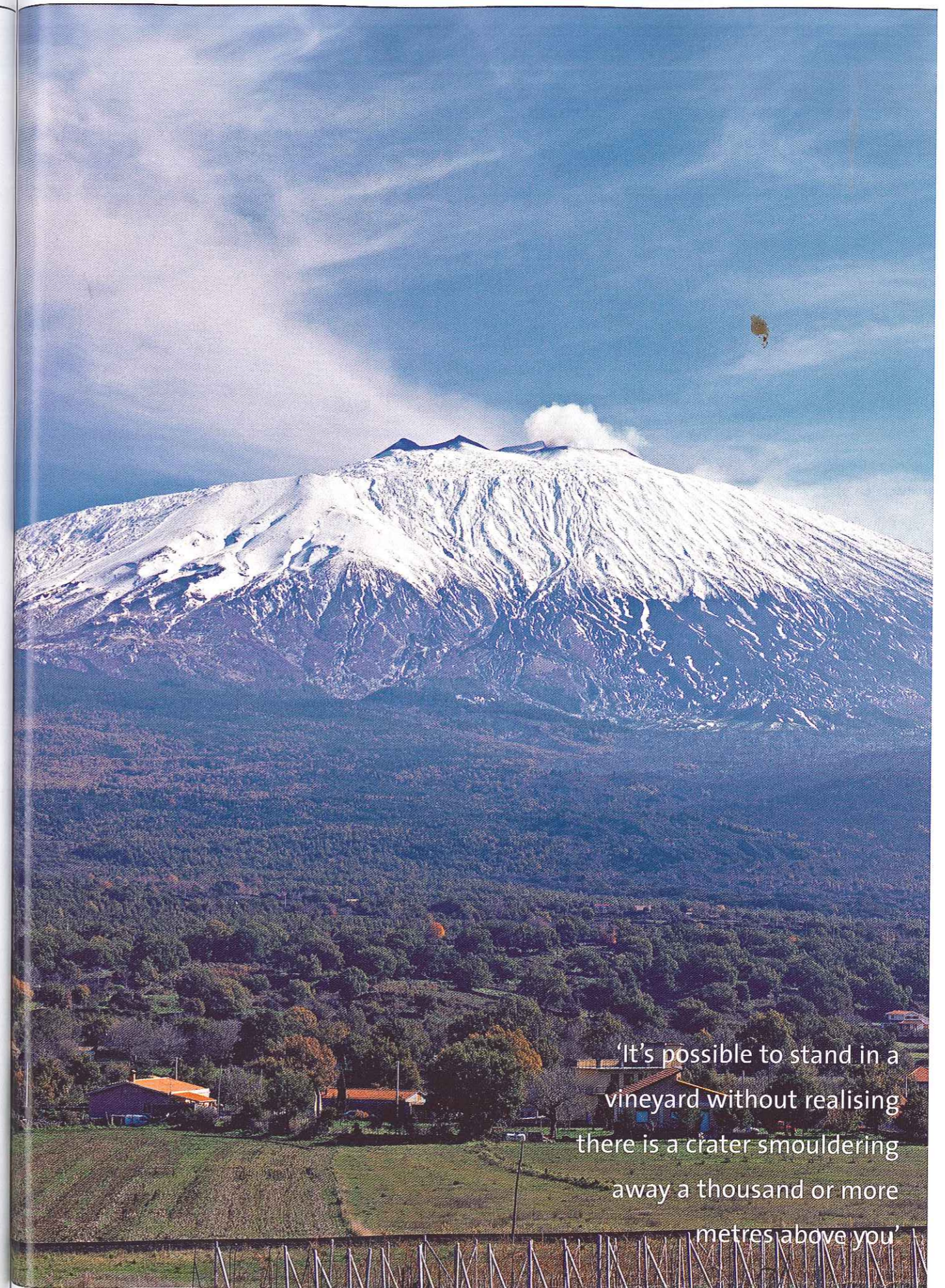
oranges, apples and pistachios that grow so easily on these fertile soils.

The appeal of Nerello Mascalese is easy to understand. Not only is it beautifully scented with red fruits, but the palate is marked by natural acidity that gives the wines poise and freshness. The wines have the same power as Nero d'Avola and other southern grapes, alcohol levels being invariably 14% or more, yet despite their seeming fragility, they carry the alcohol well. Nerello Mascalese is a grape that evokes the north rather than the Mediterranean, and its wines are more easily mistaken for Pinot Noir, Mencia, or Nebbiolo (especially aromatically) than for southern reds. Nerello may have more overt tannins than Pinot, but it has a good deal less than the often ferocious Nebbiolo.

What also attracted many new producers to Etna was the proliferation of very old vines. Alberto Aiello, of the Graci estate, says that almost all his vines are between 60 and 100 years old, and some parcels of pre-phylloxera vines have survived the ravages of the infamous louse. Another producer, Michele Grasso, told me he had some vines that were 180 years old, though I would take such claims with a light pinch of salt.

Although there have long been some established producers, such as Benanti, on the mountain, Etna was usually regarded as a viticultural sideshow. The mountain started to attract attention about 10 years

PHOTOGRAPHS: FRANK TSCHAKERT/ALAMY; ACE FOTOSTOCK/SUPERSTOCK



'It's possible to stand in a vineyard without realising there is a crater smouldering away a thousand or more metres above you'



Left: Mount Etna towers over the wine town of Castiglione di Sicilia, just 12km away from the village of Passopisciaro

ago, when some enterprising winemakers began to realise the extraordinary potential of Nerello Mascalese. Among the pioneers in the early 2000s were Franchetti, owner of Tenute di Trinoro in Tuscany; Marc de Grazia, an American importer who created the Terre Nere estate; and a Belgian by the name of Frank Cornellsen (see box below). By the mid-2000s new wineries and labels were being created in profusion, sometimes by local growers who had ceased to sell their

grapes to larger wineries or coops, sometimes by outsiders jumping on the bandwagon. The major Sicilian wineries, such as Planeta and Tasca d'Almerita, also acquired vineyards on Etna. Today there are at least 65 producers.

### Handle with care

Unfortunately a lot of miserable wine has also been produced here. Overcropped, Nerello produces a weedy, astringent wine of little appeal. So it took considerable

imagination for those pioneers of just a decade ago to understand the grape's true potential. Low yields are important, as is a respect for Nerello's delicacy. Despite its power, it is a light-bodied wine, and although many winemakers initially favoured barrique-ageing, that is far less common today. Aiello at Graci ferments and ages his wines in large wooden vats; Franchetti uses both cement tanks and large casks; Filippo Grasso ages his wines entirely in stainless steel tanks. He explains: 'I want to retain the purity of Nerello, not cover its character by adding another dimension by oak-ageing. And the grape is naturally tannic, so there is no need to add tannins using barriques.'

The old guard doesn't think much of the wines of the newcomers, whom they refer to in unguarded moments as 'colonists'. But there is no doubt that the newcomers are leading the revival in Etna. The north Italian oenologist Giorgio Grai has little patience with the old guard: 'The problem on Etna is one of mentality. The established producers see no reason to improve their quality. They make wine the way their grandfathers did and assume that is good enough. It's not.'

## VOLCANIC VISION: THE ETNA PIONEERS



Above: Frank Cornellsen's wines are unique and won't be to everyone's taste

The most idiosyncratic of all Etna's producers is Frank Cornellsen (pictured above). A disciple of Josko Gravner in Friuli, he ages his top wines in clay amphorae. A rigid non-interventionist, he only vinifies ungrafted, and therefore very old, vines, uses no chemicals, no temperature control, no cultivated yeasts, and bottles his wines by hand. His white wine, called Munjebel, is a complex blend of varieties, fermented on skins in amphorae, bottled unfiltered and, consequently, left cloudy in the

bottle. The red Munjebel blends two vintages, while the top wine, Magma (see box, right), is made only in the best years and in minute quantities. They are all remarkable wines, though distinctly artisanal, and not everyone will like them. A 2006 white Munjebel I drank with dinner looked as though it had been scooped out of a pond.



Above: Passopisciaro owner Andrea Franchetti is a relative newcomer to Etna

Andrea Franchetti (pictured above) had already made a name for himself in Tuscany. Then, in 2000, he acquired an

abandoned vineyard on Etna, and restored an old winery – Passopisciaro (see box, right). He too produces many single-vineyard wines, from different elevations. The reds are fermented with selected yeasts and aged in large casks. Like de Grazia's wines (see below), they can be very high in alcohol – 15.5% is not unusual – but I never detect any heat on the palate. At the very ripest end of the spectrum, as with the 2008 Chiappemacine from centenarian vines, the wine displays a glossy red-fruits character not unlike Zinfandel, although the palate is more luminous.

Marc de Grazia's label is Terre Nere (see box, right), and he only vinifies organically farmed Nerello Mascalese, producing various single-vineyard bottlings as well as one from pre-phyllloxera vines. They certainly have the typicity of Nerello Mascalese and are enticingly perfumed, but they can, in some bottlings, show considerable extraction and heat on the palate.



Above: grapes thrive on the mineral-laden slopes of the volcanic Mount Etna

At an incredibly well-attended tasting (see right) I was flying blind, sampling wines from reputed producers as well as from names unknown to me. I was impressed, if confused. Benanti's whites were more interesting than its reds. Biondi's vineyards are planted in extinct craters and, unusually for Etna, face southeast, yet its Outis red struck me as typical of Nerello Mascalese, blending austerity with ripe fruit.

Alice Bonaccorsi's old-vine Cruci Monaci, although a bit Porty, was superb. There were good reds from Don Saro, Pietradolce, Romeo del Castello, and Arcuria, and Fessina's intense old-vine Musmeci. There were four vintages of Quota 600 from Graci, and none let the side down. Filippo Grasso's steel-aged wines had floral aromas and just the transparency on the palate he looks for. Giuseppe Russo, a former classical pianist whose first vintage at Girolamo Russo was in 2006, experimented with amphorae but didn't like the results; all his reds, now aged in older barrels, had delicious fruit and spiciness, as did Terre di Trente's organic wines. So one is spoiled for choice, even if few of these wines have, as yet, found a presence on the UK market.

The best Etna wines are expensive, coming mostly from small parcels of very old vines, but they are certainly worth getting to know. One can safely say there is nothing else in Europe, or the world, quite like them. **D**

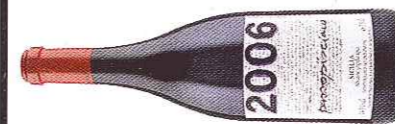
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## BROOK'S DREAM DOZEN ETNA REDS



Above: organic plantings in Etna's volcanic soil can yield exciting results

When I received an invitation to taste wines from 50 Etna producers, I found it impossible to resist. Unfortunately half of Sicily felt the same way, and the tasting hall was packed with 2,000 wine enthusiasts, their dogs, babes in pushchairs, and raucous children. Nonetheless, elbow power allowed me to sample some truly remarkable wines.



**Passopisciaro 2006** ★★★★★ (18.5/20)  
Lean, pungent, raspberry nose. Delicate, with slightly dry tannins, refined but lacks some flesh. Good length. Drink now–2014. £24.95–£33; C&B, F&R, SLP



**Cornellisen, Magma 2006** ★★★★★ (18)  
Lean, intense red-fruits and orange peel nose, quite oxidative. Intense and spicy, has finesse and length despite grainy tannins. Drink now–2015. £125; CPy, SLP

**Graci, Quota 600 2006** ★★★★★ (18)  
Pungent, vibrant red-fruits nose. Ripe, spicy and complex, with fine acidity, giving elegance as well as drive and length. Drink now–2014. N/A UK; www.graci.eu

**Pietradolce, Archineri 2008** ★★★★★ (17.5)  
Cherry and raspberry nose, generous fruit. Full-bodied, tannic and powerful, with plenty of spice, alcohol and persistence. Drink now–2018. N/A UK; www.pietradolce.it

**Tenuta di Fessina, Musmeci 2007** ★★★★★ (17.5)  
Lean, dusty raspberry and cranberry

nose. Delicate, almost fragile, understated, but very refined, pure, and long. Drink now–2014. N/A UK; silviamastrelli@tenutadifessina.com

**Terre di Trente, Nerello IGT 2007**

★★★★ (17.5)

Intense perfumed nose with considerable weight of fruit. Full-bodied and concentrated, tannic and forceful, spicy and vigorous. Drink 2012–2020. N/A UK; www.terreditrente.com

**Alice Bonaccorsi, Cruci Monaci 2006**

★★★★ (17)

Ripe if Porty nose. Dense and concentrated, with burly tannins but also shows vigour and depth. Excellent fruit, lively acidity, and good length. Drink now–2015. N/A UK; www.valcerasa.com

**Girolamo Russo, A Rina 2006**

★★★★ (17)

Perfumed cherry nose. Medium-bodied but velvety and concentrated, elegant and balanced with some depth and firmness. Drink now–2015. £13.50; Gdh

**Don Saro, Dioniso 2007** ★★★ (16)

Perfumed red-fruits and cherry nose. Rich, oaky, full-bodied and tannic, hefty and powerful yet shows good acidity and length. Drink now–2016. N/A UK; www.donsaro.com

**Feudo Arcura, Palummaru 2006**

★★★ (16)

Lean, pungent cherry nose. Juicy, with big ripe tannins, sweet fruit with plenty of spice. Has presence and length. Drink now–2015. N/A UK; www.feudoarcuria.it

**Filippo Grasso, Ripiddu 2008** ★★★ (16)

Floral nose, violets and raspberries. Juicy and concentrated, with light tannins, ample fruit and minerality. Drink now–2014. N/A UK; enofilligrasso@tiscali.it



**Terre Nere, Sottana Calderara 2007**

★★★ (16)

Herbal, nose, quite oaky. Juicy but tannic, grippy with plenty of alcohol, good length, and a lightly dry finish. Drink now–2015. £23.60; J&B

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