



Italian Wine Club
OCTOBER 2021

THE AEOLIAN ISLANDS, THE VOLCANOES, THE WINES.

Sicily is an iconic wonder of an island when it comes to so many delicious things but there are even more wonderful things to discover off of its coastline. More specifically, Mt. Etna steals the show with everything from world class wines to dramatic, and frequent, volcanic eruptions. But travel north to the small string of volcanic Aeolian Islands and you will find some very comparable gems that share similar stories as their more famous neighbor.

Long only recognized for the Malvasia di Lipari sweet wines (which are incredible and clearly still worth seeking out) these tiny islands and their steadfast producers have more recently begun to truly reveal their potential for producing dry wines as well. With the enviable combination of cool sea air, volcanic soils and, of course, ample Mediterranean sunshine, these vines have all the right stuff in terms of producing high quality mineral driven showstoppers.

These factors in abundance would also usually point to more producers trying their hands at this special terroir as well, like in Etna, but to say that viticultural real estate on the tiny islands of Lipari, Salina and Vulcano is limited would be a hilarious understatement. Trying these rare gems together is a truly exceptional treat.

- Kevin Wardell, October 2021

WINE NO. 1

Barone di Villagrande Etna Rosso
Nerello Mascalese + Nerello Cappuccio
Etna, Sicily, Italy 2019

GRAPES: NERELLO MASCALESE [neh-REHL-loh MAHS-kah-LEH-zeh]
+ NERELLO CAPPUCCIO [neh-REHL-loh cap-POOH-cho]

These two grapes are the reason why Mt. Etna has become the most important region in Sicily, and perhaps all of Southern Italy, in the past two decades. Despite their obvious differences, these two (as well as a third, Nocera) were traditionally interplanted with one another and field blends were commonplace. The grapes have been growing here on this iconic volcano for several generations, but only in the past few decades has the true potential of the wines been unlocked, and the ceiling for world class wines seems nowhere in sight. As you can imagine, however, there isn't much land to go around and so the growing popularity of it is coming at a premium.

GROWER: Barone di Villagrande is one of the original houses to be tending to these volcanic vines for many years. Marco Nicolosi is 10th generation and his family has basically written 'the book' with regards to the viticultural history here. The estate is located on the more eastern edge of the old vine areas, in a valley essentially created by the collapse of an ancient volcanic crater lake. Nothing like some good old fashioned drama and intrigue, eh? The Barone di Villagrande vineyards in Milo are set in an incredible picturesque natural amphitheater, 700 meters high and overlooking the Sicilian eastern coastline. They are also one of the very few Etna based producers that make wine from Salina. Their Salina Bianco is actually only 40% Malvasia di Lipari blended with Rucignola, Catarratto and other local varieties.

GLASS: Earthen clay terracotta pots packed with cherries and wild strawberries. Where many wines from Etna can pick up a more smokey element from the soil, here it provides a background to the complex flavors of dried flowers and blood orange. Velvety tannin provides a persistent dry grip but not at all overpowering the juice. A Sicilian wine akin to the Pinots of either Sonoma coast or Willamette Valley. Lean and crunchy with beautiful aromatics and tart acidity.

SIDE NOTES: Marco and his wife Barbera have breathed new life into this historic winery in recent years, but have not changed a thing when it comes to the wines. Quality at great value is as rare as it comes in modern day Etna.

WINE NO. 2
Caravaglio 'Nero du Munti'
Corinto Nero
Salina, Sicily, Italy 2020

GRAPE: CORINTO NERO [ko-REEN-toh NEH-roh]

The Corinto Nero grape has called the volcanic caldera of Lipari home for centuries and is a truly ancient local variety. Caravaglio's Corinto Nero vines are pre-phylloxera and the majority are more than 150 years old. There are a number of clues that point experts to this variety being a very old (and seedless!) mutation of Sangiovese, where others maintain that its origin has it's own identity along that particular genetic branch. Clearly there is more work to do there, but it is so exceedingly rare and localized, there is very little information to work with. Caravaglio is just about the only 100% varietal example, certainly the only one that most of us will ever come across. Unless we visit the island... Field Trip! Who's with me?

GROWER: Winemaking on the Aeolian Islands off the coast of Sicily began with five Spanish families who initiated all basic agriculture in the dark volcanic island soils in the 1500's, one of which is Caravaglio. Today, Antonino Caravaglio carries on the traditions his ancestors have established, and can trace his own rooted vines back to the original Venetian traders that brought the Malvasia delle Lipari and Corinto Nero grapes to the island. The vines are certified Organic now, but have been managed organically since their original plantings. An incredibly special and rare viticultural treasure indeed.

GLASS: Summer blackberries and Mulberries gathered along a garden path, complete with some distinct forest floor tones. Bits of black licorice, ball point ink and a helping of fresh picked berry pie... more tart than sweet of course. Corinto soaks up plenty of the Mediterranean sun with ripeness but still remains taught on the tongue. Easy to picture as the house wine at the seaside trattoria with a volcano shaped sunset backdrop.

SIDE NOTES: Salina is the second largest of the chain (roughly 26 square kilometers), and is considered a posh hotspot for tourists peppered with stunning beach views to soak in.

WINE NO. 3
Tenuta del Castellaro 'Ossidiana'
90% Corinto Nero + 10% Nero d'Avola
Lipari, Sicily, Italy 2017

GRAPE: CORINTO NERO [ko-REEN-toh NEH-roh]

The Corinto Nero grape has called the volcanic caldera of Lipari home for centuries and is a truly ancient local variety. It is a dark, thin-skinned grape that originated in Greece and Turkey before the Romans brought it to Sicily, but there are a number of clues that point experts to this variety being an old mutation of Sangiovese, where others maintain that its origin has its own identity along that particular genetic branch. The grapes ripen early but are small and thus its yields are not exactly suited for large commercial plantings elsewhere.

GROWER: Massimo Lentsch and Stefania Frattolillo formed Tenuta del Castellaro in 2005 that boasts one the most incredible views imaginable (though hard to find a bad view here) and as one of the only new wine projects on the Aeolian archipelago. the Piana di Castellaro on Lipari. The winery was designed with a focus on modern efficiency and sustainability in combination with some unique local Lipari natural construction knowledge. For example, they make use of a solar chimney, a wind tower and a thermal labyrinth that all act as a natural and zero energy temperature control system for their cellars.

All of their farming is Organic and, again, they follow the traditional local methodology by training their vines in the "quinconce" triangular shape to take advantage of the full sun exposure as well as create airflow in the vineyards. Lastly they use a traditional system of wood boxes (now on a mobilized cart) to rest the grapes after harvest for weeks under the warm sun allowing them to sweeten perfectly for their sweet Malvasia.

GLASS: Just picture it; a warm black volcanic sandy beach, some olive tapenade on toast, maybe a black cherry tart. My kind of picnic. Nice of Tenuta del Castellaro to put it all in a glass to transport us all. There's a hint of Cab Franc-iness to this wine as well with some polished bitter cocoa and strawberry fruit leather. Zips up neatly with some volcanic broken stone earthiness and plenty of tart young red fruit crunchy-times.

SIDE NOTES: Corinto Nero actually remains a Required grape, albeit in very small amounts, in the making of the famed local sweet white wines 'Malvasia di Lipari.'

WINE NO. 4
Hauner 'Hiera'
60% Nero d'Avola + 30% Alicante + 10% Nocera
Vulcano, Sicily, Italy 2017

GRAPE: NERO D'AVOLA [NEH-roh DAH-vo-lah]

To note... the actual information on this wine seems even more limited than the wine itself. Many sources list the amount of Alicante to Nero d'Avola in opposite quantities. Whether this is a mistake or actually varied in different vintages, both or neither could be true it seems. Nero d'Avola (actually named Calabrese!) is a prominent grape that's not surprising to see on the islands but certainly takes on some unique characteristics in this terroir and island climate. The Alicante history here dates back to the early Spanish agricultural influence, as it does in a few other spots in Italy's grape varietal landscape.

GROWER: Carlo Hauner Sr. was an artist and a designer, and in the early 60's his true art was realized with his groundbreaking and iconic wines. His vineyard work and the brilliant results in the bottle that followed by the early 80's basically single handedly introduced the wines of the Aeolian islands and their pristine volcanic soils to the world. Carlo passed away in 1996, and now his son and the generations inspired by the icon have carried his torch, and with it the same attention to quality as Hauner established. Carlo built the winery in Salina, but Hiera (meaning 'sacred' in ancient Greek) is the original name of the neighboring island of Vulcano, which is where these grapes are grown.

GLASS: Plucky plums and deeply delicious baked raspberries bring you down the Hauner rabbit hole, with a hint of leather and spice lending some savory depth. Light on its feet when it comes to the Nero d'Avola influence, yet there is little here that would point anywhere other than Sicily. There are some iron-y qualities to the wine that desire some (perfectly) thinly sliced charcuterie, as well as some balsamic and rhubarb notes that give a perfect platform for a plate of hard cheeses and pungent Sicilian olives.

SIDE NOTES: The primary 'Isole Eolie' are Lipari, Salina, Filicudi, Alicudi, Panarea, Vulcano and Stromboli. The last two are still very active volcanoes.