

DIRECT PRESS

Sicily



Fate, fire, passion, and the vine

August 2024



Italy exists in our cultural imagination through endless portrayals in movies, books, and social media — often defined by outsiders. Understandably, many Italians are over the tourism that dominates their cities and the quaint, one-dimensional characterizations of Hollywood. Sicily may be the biggest victim of these projections. It started not with “The White Lotus,” Stanley Tucci’s cloying CNN series, or even Francis Ford Coppola’s “Godfather” films — but with Homer’s “Odyssey.”

Back in the 8th century BCE, the Greeks had just set up their first settlements in Sicily, and Homer famously depicted the denizens of Mount Etna as an ignorant race of giant, one-eyed shepherds known as the Cyclopes. He wrote that the land was fertile but the potential was unrealized by the indigenous people and their provincial ways.

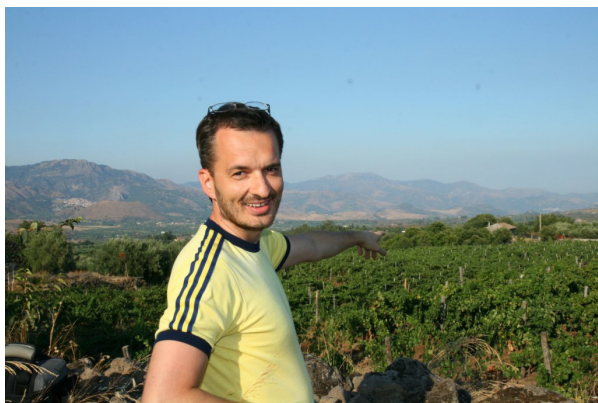
The race is arrogant: they have no laws...they live on mountaintops, in deep caves; every family ignores its neighbors.

Of course, there was a convenient solution. What was needed was some help from the superior Greeks.

Despite the patronizing attitude, there was something prophetic about Homer’s writing on Sicily. Unrealized potential has been a tragic Sicilian plotline for nearly 3,000 years. In the short term, Greek civilization indeed helped to make Sicily the epicurean jewel of the Mediterranean. The Greeks brought grape varieties and their wine culture to Sicily, and by the 5th century BCE some of the most revered chefs in the ancient Greek world were Sicilians. Archestratas, Philoxerus, and Theocritus were all important Greek Sicilian writers who expounded on wine, among other topics.

The Romans were the ones who began a long, grueling history of exploiting Sicily’s natural resources from afar. This included a feudal setup with absentee landowners and their local overseers getting rich off wheat production. Sicily was the proverbial breadbasket of the Roman Empire, and it would later serve the same purpose for much of continental Europe. However, Muslim rule, from 878 to 1061, was a notable exception to this. They set up subsidies for small landowners and gave a leg up to disadvantaged classes like widows, blind people, newlyweds, and immigrants. A whole network of polycultural farms, orchards, and gardens helped diversify Sicily’s crops. Wine wasn’t exactly a priority, given Muslim law, but it didn’t go away and was featured prominently in contemporary Muslim poetry. However, wine cultivation suffered greatly after Muslim and later Norman rule gave way to a long procession of foreign powers using Sicily as a bargaining chip.

It became more and more oppressive and feudal as Europeans started fueling a baronial class in cities like Palermo, Catania, and Messina. Nobody could seem to get Sicilians to pay taxes. So, instead, distant rulers like the Spanish raised money by letting people buy their way into the nobility. This bloated, competitive caste of urban barons had no use for the peasants. Building roads to connect rugged, rural parts of the interior to the cities was beneath them. Centuries passed during which not even a single bridge was fixed, let alone built. And the last thing they would be caught doing is dirtying their hands — even metaphorically — in matters of farming. Not great for wine.



Massimiliano Calabretta

But as the peasantry became poorer and more uneducated, winemaking was only one casualty. Fighting between Christians and Muslims started in the 12th century and ended with most Muslims fleeing, ending the island's polycultural oases and firmly establishing a monoculture based on durum wheat. The fact that no central ruler was present on Sicily resulted in absentee landowners hiring gangs to enforce a grim kind of control over sharecroppers. While the Renaissance blossomed in Florence, Sicily's noble classes were devoid of a merchant class or the presence of artisans. Lawlessness, violence, and crime took hold. If your brain is now starting to play back the scenes of Mafia dons from "The Godfather" that were filmed outside Messina and Catania, it's understandable.

The decadence and neglect of Sicily's shallow barons came at the same time that revolutionary changes in farming productivity were happening in France, Germany, and England. The English were actually responsible for bringing Sicilian wine into the larger world when they realized they could make a cheaper version of Madeira on the western coast of Sicily in the 1770s. This was the beginning of Marsala. Like Madeira, it is a sweet, fortified, oxidative wine that can't spoil — necessary qualities for supplying the British Navy. British money helped stimulate the Sicilian wine trade, as did English winemaking

knowledge and business models. But by the 20th century, the market had shrunk again. In the 1880s, phylloxera infestation destroyed at least half of the vineyards on Sicily, just as in the rest of Europe. From 1901-1913, nearly a third of the Sicilian workforce emigrated to the U.S. and other countries.

Land reform finally came in 1950, albeit a few centuries late. Farms were redistributed to many of the sharecroppers who had been working the land. This was immensely transformative, improving the quality of life for peasants who had been exploited for ages. Cooperatives emerged that helped them pool resources and sell grapes. However, the co-ops quickly started causing countless other problems. With advances in machine harvesting, winemaking technology, and EU subsidies, Sicily was, all of the sudden, overproducing grapes and bulk wine. By 1987, some 78% of Sicilian wine was produced by cooperatives. Nearly 100% of it was bulk wine. Much of that, in turn, was actually grape must concentrate, which was being used all over Europe, Russia, and the world to enrich wines — often subverting countless regulations designed to protect quality. This was Sicily's reputation even after the turn of the 21st century. Yet many of us associate Sicily with a range of amazing wines from small producers. Names like Occhipinti, Salvo Foti, Frank Cornelissen, Terre Nere, and De Bartoli can be reliably found on shelves and wine lists all over the world and signify anything but mass-produced swill.

How have we witnessed a total backflip in reputation so quickly? Wines from other regions and countries we've featured in *Direct Press* — including Greece, Portugal, and former Soviet-controlled Central European countries — are more of an uphill battle to sell despite them all having a similar story, and similarly exceptional natural resources for winemaking. But with Sicily, it only took around 15 years to go from a reputation of exporting bulk wine to Russia to one in which connoisseurs take it for granted that the wines can compete with those of Piedmont or Tuscany.

Short of explanations, I went to the winemakers themselves.

“It is easy,” Massimiliano Calabretta (*featured in August's Press 4 Mix, as well as February 2021 and September 2021*) told me. “There are many new producers who started producing for quality and not for quantity. How many producers in the 1990s had small production? There were only big structures that produced millions of bottles.”

Marilina Paternò (*featured in August's Press 2 and in March 2024*) expanded on this idea. “From the beginning of the 2000s, Sicilian bottled wines began to establish themselves on the market because it was precisely in those years that Sicilian producers began to recognize the importance and quality of their grapes

and wines,” she said. “In those years, the wine production process improved in all its phases, from cultivation to bottling — no longer with the characteristics of bulk wines. After almost 20 years, Sicily bottles a percentage of wines that is greater than the sale of bulk wine and will increasingly be so.”



The Paternò family

Crucial to improving wine quality was an embrace of organic farming methods. Marilina cited an “exponential growth of organic grape cultivation and bottled organic wine,” noting that “in Sicily, 70% of the vineyards are now grown organically, which is a wonderful fact.”

Mount Etna, mythical home of the Cyclopes, has been the beacon for the rest of the world’s renewed interest in Sicilian wine. “Etna is considered an island within the island because of the particular terroir,” Valeria Agosta of Palmento Costanzo (*featured in August’s Press 4, in November 2022, and in September 2021*) explained to me. “Infinite eruptions occurred during the centuries. Lava covered the land with volcanic sands and effusive rocks, which enriched this soil with mineral and organic elements that give Etna wines a unique profile.”

“Fifteen years ago, think of the wines that emerged from Etna,” Massimiliano pointed out. “Terre Nere’s and Franchetti’s ‘Contrada’ wines, Girolamo Russo’s ‘San Lorenzo’ (*Direct Press September 2021*), Calabretta’s old vine red, and Frank Cornelissen’s ‘Magma.’” Indeed, these wines made a huge impact on professionals and consumers alike, as I recall well. Cornelissen, especially, took what was happening in Etna and transformed it into a phenomenon. The frenzy surrounding Susucaru has ignited an interest in Etna and in natural wine that continues today. Cornelissen and his cohorts unequivocally proved that Etna’s indigenous varieties like Nerello Mascalese could express terroir, finesse, and nuance the same way that Pinot Noir does in Burgundy or Nebbiolo does in Barolo.

“We basically did what the French have always been able to do,” said Marilina.

“Every winery you can think of now from Etna started working with old vineyards, old vines, and autochthonous [indigenous] grapes,” said Massimiliano. “There was more interest once they stopped following the idea of working with Chardonnay, Cabernet, and Merlot.”

In the 1980s, efforts to propagate international varieties such as Syrah, Pinot Noir, and Chardonnay initially brought attention to Sicily at tasting competitions. Far more success, however, was found by focusing on the island’s unique varieties. On Etna, there is Nerello Mascalese and Carricante that have the most noble standing for red and white wines, respectively. In the southeast corner near Noto, reds such as Nero d’Avola and Frappato thrive. Farther west near Marsala, white grapes such as Grillo dominate. All of these Sicilian varieties are becoming more and more familiar to consumers, stimulating a taste for the salty, volcanic flavors and textures that make Sicilian wine so special.

“The support we had from the EU and the Sicily region was also important, which tried to enhance and support wineries working this way,” said Marilina.

Government policy and a growing interest from consumers helped bring outside money and investment to Sicily. Nino Caravaglio of Ancestrale (*August’s Press 4*) said he felt “it has improved because many small and medium-sized companies have been born in the last 15 years — managed mainly by young people who produce in a natural way, respectful of the environment.” The scaling down of operations has been a crucial change. We’ve discussed the outsize effect of small-scale production on wineries in past Direct Press issues, including how it affects quality far more than it would for most farming operations. Sicilians have quickly seen the return on investment from this move to quality over quantity, and it continues to have positive effects on the economy and sense of pride among Sicilians.

“I think the mentality has changed. The awareness of telling the world about the beauty and quality of Sicilian wines has matured,” said Marilina.

Wine has contributed to an increase in tourism that has also injected money into Sicily, though this cash is not without strings attached. Droughts caused by rising global temperatures have pitted the needs of tourists against those of farmers with animals who don’t have enough water. A recent article in *The New York Times* covered the growing tension between tourists, farmers, and Sicilian towns that are being forced to decide between rationing showers in luxury resorts or letting animals die of thirst in pastures. It’s a complex calculus. Many quote Cinzia Zerbini, who represents Italy’s largest farmer’s association, as saying, “If you take away tourism, too, we are going to die.”

When I asked Massimiliano about this issue, he simply asserted that “you must not plant grapes where you historically had wheat. I have a system in order to save rain. Tourists are always welcome.”

Just in case, I’ll be sure to ration my own showers when I visit.

For thousands of years, outsiders have been drawn to Sicily. Some have caricatured its residents unfairly. Some have exploited its resources and people. Many have come away permanently smitten. And a few have even stayed to throw their lot in to improve the fate of one of the Mediterranean’s most fervently beating hearts.

Â saluti!

Jonathan Kemp



Photograph from Alice Hohe

EVEN THE HUMBLEST PEASANTS HAVE THEIR VINES AND MAKE THEIR CASKS OF WINE IN THE OPEN, TREADING THE GRAPES WITH THEIR BARE FEET: SAN MARINO

Palmento Costanzo Mofete Bianco

Etna • Sicily • Italy

Press 4 Mix/White

With the establishment of the Etna DOC in the 1960s came an end to the historic practice of making wines in Palmento - a stone structure carved out of the mountain itself, in which winemakers of yesteryear pressed their grapes into volcanic stone vats. Italian wine bureaucrats forbid this practice due to hygienic concerns — making wine in the mountain itself was too hard to keep clean. Recently, under the guidance of Etna's most renowned viticulturist and enologist – founder of I Vigneri, Salvo Foti – some estates have fought to reestablish these ancient structures and preserve this piece of Sicilian history. Palmento Costanzo has done just this.

Located in the Cru of Contrada Santo Spirito, Palmento Costanzo has been creating wine in their reclaimed winery since 2012. They tend to their bush-trained vines, some of which are over 120 years old, organically with focus on preserving biodiversity in their vineyards. The Mofete Bianco is 70% Carricante and 30% Catarratto, coming from younger vines (an average of 30 years old). Fermented and aged in stainless steel to preserve the fresh and joyful fruit, this is a lemon-lime electrolyte drink in wine form. Clean, zesty, and focused. The bright citrus fruit is pleasantly supported by a touch of rosemary herbaceousness and smoky minerals. *Kirk Sutherland*



Mt Etna from Palmento Costanzo's vineyards

Marino Turi Bianco

Sicily • Italy

Press 4 Mix/White

Salvatore Marino, nicknamed “Turi,” grew up around wine in Pachino in the far southeast corner of Sicily. His father and grandfather both made wine that was sold in bulk but as Salvatore’s interest in wine grew he decided to find his own path. He learned a lot very quickly in big wineries in Sicily, Puglia, and California, but after 10 years of that he and his wife Stefania started their own project that is nothing like his family or his former employer’s. In 2017 they created a polycultural farm out of parcels they bought or rented from her family and neighbors. About 7 hectares are grapevines and another 8 are planted to fruit trees and grains among other crops. They do all the work themselves and it really shows. Their wines are special and reflective of the hot sun and intense winds at latitudes farther south than the upper reaches of Africa.

Their Bianco is 100% Catarratto, which is not typical of Pachino, though Salvatore’s grandfather thought it was the best white grape for the area. It sees just a few days of skin contact, but it drinks like a full-on orange wine. Upon opening, the wine is firing right away, offering beautiful aromas of ginseng, yellow plums, peaches, lychee, and lightly underripe mango. On the palate, you’ll experience a delightful mix of lemon peel, apricots, and early-season stone fruit. It’s light, tart, and really refreshing — reminiscent of those San Benedetto iced teas you can find at every corner shop in Italy. Its vibrant acidity and just the tiniest amount of tannins give it a good ‘crunch,’ making it incredibly versatile. Pair it with a sunset, some lightly grilled and marinated vegetables, or red prawns. Or enjoy it on its own — you can’t really go wrong.

Jonathan Kemp & Nico Haunold



Salvatore Marino with his vines and olive tree

Calabretta Cala Cala Rosso

Sicily • Italy

Press 4 Mix/Red

Calabretta, on the northern slope of Mount Etna, is one of our favorite estates, and though it is a regular presence on our shelves, we couldn't do a whole month of Etna wines without including at least one of their offerings. The winery is 100 years old but has only been bottling their wines for about 25 years. Before that, they sold entire barrels to restaurants or private customers. Now they really advocate for long aging in big, older botti, and have some of the best examples of aged Etna wines. All of their wines, even this inexpensive, everyday red, see a degree of barrel aging that is not typical, especially given their affordable prices. They are also refreshingly loose and wild in their approach – hardly a stuffy old winery, more like a quirky, rustic throwback.

The Cala Cala Rosso is a non-vintage wine, which allows them to offer an inexpensive red with 6-7 years of aging in huge, old barrels. It's a blend of Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Cappuccio with spicy, smoky complexity from Etna's effusive lava flow. Sage, medicinal cherry, even notes of leather that are extremely satisfying, with layers of fruit and tannin that are truly remarkable for this price. It's a wine that offers up a generosity and depth that will capture your heart. A former colleague of mine was so enamored of this wine that he got the cartoon slug on its label tattooed on his arm. Now how many wines can inspire that kind of devotion? *Jonathan Kemp*

Barraco Fior di Rosso

Sicily • Italy

Press 4 Mix/Red

Nino Barraco is a son of Marsala, where successive generations have watched the market and the price of their wines take an epic nose dive. At one point, owing not just to wine but to capers and salt, Marsala was the second wealthiest city in Italy. But now it has just roughly half of the vineyards and production it once did. Even more shocking is that only 3% or 4% of the wine is bottled: most is sold off as bulk wine, a problem endemic to much of Sicily for the past 50 years. In Marsala, most of it goes to France to be used as cooking wine. Not surprisingly, Nino Barraco decided to go in a different direction in 2004, working organically from day one and making his decisions based on the health of the soil and vines. He goes for an oxidative approach in the cellar, a method that pre-dates the 18th century English merchants who started exporting sweet, fortified Marsala.

Fior di Rosso is from a mix of his super chalky, white limestone vineyards and is 50/50 Pignatello and Nero d'Avola. It's rustic and a little funky, with some pungent brackish aromas and a light tickle of carbon dioxide. The palate is gamey and grippy, with chewy iron notes and flavors that bring to mind a juicy, flame-grilled burger. That being said, it's really not that heavy a wine and would be lovely with a little chill. Pair with anything from caponata to the aforementioned flame-grilled burger. *Jonathan Kemp*



Filippo and Nancy Rizzo of Lamoresca

Lamoresca Rosato

Sicily • Italy

Press 4 Red

Lamoresca's wines are some of the most soulful, pleasurable wines in Sicily or anywhere, for that matter. The Rizzos — Filippo, a Sicilian, and Nancy, a Belgian — ran a restaurant in Belgium in the early 2000s where they were early natural wine advocates. This led them back to Filippo's native land, where they started a winery and farm in southeast Sicily between Gela and Etna at 450 masl. Their first few vintages were made in the cellar of a friend of theirs from Belgium named...wait for it...Frank Cornelissen. The Lamoresca wines are different from Frank's, however— a bit smoother, more ethereal, maybe less intense, but hardly any less moving.

The Rosato is simply sublime, and it would be easy to mistake it as a red. It's usually 50/50 Nero d'Avola and Frappato, but this vintage is mostly Nero d'Avola since Frappato yields were way down due to mildew. This makes it darker than in the past. There's also a tiny splash of Muscat in the mix. Soulful, sleek, and vivid, with raspberry, cherry, hibiscus, and some herbal tinges on the finish. The wine is so stinking delicious there's not much else to say. *Jonathan Kemp*

Vino di Anna Palmentino Rosso 2022

Etna • Sicily • Italy

Press 4 Red

Anna Martens, originally from Australia, trained as an oenologist, but her husband Eric Narioo, from France, pushed her towards the more natural side of winemaking. Anna and Eric made their first wine together on Mount Etna in 2008. In 2010, the couple purchased their first vineyard of old vine Nerello Mascalese in Contrada Crasà, along with a neighboring, derelict palmento – the stone structure used in traditional Etna winemaking for centuries. They now work around seven hectares of vines using biodynamic practices and adding as little sulfur as possible, often none. The vines range from 60-100 years old and are planted anywhere from 2,100 to almost 4,000 feet of elevation.

The Palmentino Rosso 2022 is a blend of several micro-vinifications of organically farmed Nerello Mascalese (92%), picked as field blends along with Nerello Cappuccio (2%), Grenache (3%) and the indigenous white varieties of Mt Etna; Carricante, Grecanico, and Minnella Bianca (5%). All of the grapes were hand harvested from old bush vines grown on terraces, at high altitudes on the northern slopes of Mount Etna. Sixty % of the grapes were destemmed by hand and the remaining 40% are whole cluster.

The Palmentino Rosso burst out of the glass with fresh aromas of cherries, red flowers, light herbs, and a hint of sumac. This is a complex yet satisfying young wine with ripe and present tannin, great minerality, ripe cherry fruit, a hint of black tea, and a nice herbaceous note. Chill it and enjoy with a light pasta dish or bruschetta. *Jeremy Hernandez*

Ancestrale Vino III

Sicily • Italy

Press 4 White



Ancestrale's cellar and vineyard

Ancestrale is located on the island of Salina, part of the Aeolian Islands, a volcanic archipelago off the northeast coast of Sicily. Friends and business partners Antonino “Nino” Caravaglio and Giuseppe Mascoli emphasize truly small scale and sustainable farming by focusing on micro parcels that express the terroir of this magical landscape that’s been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2000. Nino has also been producing capers since beginning his business in 1989. The vineyards for Ancestrale are located between two spent volcanoes, Monte dei Porri and Monte Fossa delle Felci.

Ancestrale’s winemaking is minimalistic and anti-technological, done underground, in 750L clay amphorae. The Ancestrale III is comprised of 60% Malvasia di Liparu, 30% Catarratto, and 10% Grillo planted in 1980. It sees 15 days of maceration. Only 1,500 bottles were produced.

The Ancestrale wines wowed our staff during tastings for this month’s club selections. These are truly unique and compelling wines that convey a sense of place. The nose has high-toned florals, a hint of petrol, salinity, orange skin oil, and a gamey note reminiscent of salami. In the glass you’ll find macerated stone fruit, salinity, beautiful acidity, and great length. Pair with capers, tinned sardines, hard and salty cheeses, and eggplant preserved in oil.

Jeremy Hernandez

Viteadovest Bianco

Sicily • Italy

Press 4 White

Marsala has experienced a serious rise and fall in fortune over the past hundred years. It was one of the most modern, wealthy cities in Italy thanks to wine, salt, and caper trade but now has half of the production and vines and sells most of its wines as bulk cooking wine for restaurants. Nothing left to lose also means a kind of freedom, to paraphrase Kris Kristofferson, and a few winemakers are showing that Marsala still has much to offer the wine world. Growers like Vincenzo Angileri, are looking to Marsala's past to make dry, oxidative wines from local varieties like Grillo and Catarratto. Angileri has reclaimed the family's grapes from being sold for to bulk wine production and has helped others to do the same.

This Bianco, made from Grillo and Catarratto, sees 21 days on the skins and has zero sulfur added. The oxidative approach and the skin maceration helps preserve the wine, a very old method that still works. Unsurprisingly given the salt production in the region, this is a salty beverage. However it is a wine with terrific tension and contrasting elements. Dark, oxidative notes of orange peel, sun tea, and cinnamon are met with snappy notes of dried apple ring, fresh pear, and zappy acidity. There is a clarity and edge to the wine that make it refreshing while it showcasing the hot, flat, dry land it comes from. *Jonathan Kemp*



Etnella's Contrada Saette

Etnella Tracotanza Plus

Etna • Sicily • Italy

tPress 2

Davide Bentivegna was born in Sicily but was working in management for Siemens in Milan when he found himself pulled back to Sicily and bitten by the winemaking bug. On Mount Etna he learned winemaking from his neighbor, an old man who only made one wine for himself. Yet he was able to hand down old, traditional knowledge to Davide, who had no background in wine. Davide was also helped along by natural wine stalwarts like Piedmont's Stefano Bellotti and Etna's own Frank Cornelissen. His first vintage was 2010. He has a humanistic approach to winemaking and a low-intervention approach to farming, and takes his responsibility to his century-old, albarello-trained vines very seriously.

Tracotanza Plus is 100% Nerello Mascalese from 60-year-old vines planted at 1000 meters above sea level. Only 533 bottles were produced. Deep black cherry and dusty sage are matched with very fine, filigreed tannins. It's a grippy wine with a restrained power that will age well but is drinkable now. It harnesses the explosive energy of Mount Etna into something invigorating, impressive, and seriously moving. *Jonathan Kemp*

Tenuta dei Fossi Sketta 2006

Noto • Sicily • Italy

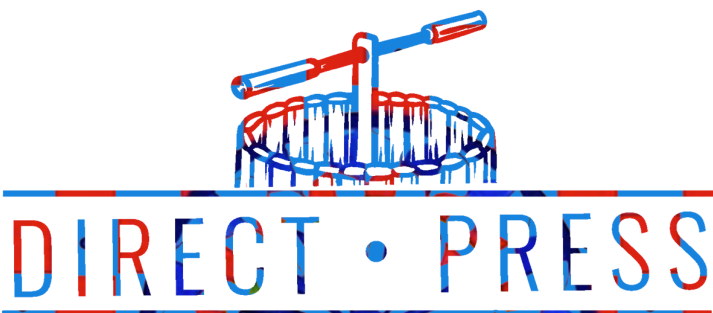
tPress 2

Many know the wines of Marilina and Federica Paternò from their 'Sikele' wines. But this wine is from 2006, when their father, Angelo Paternò, was still making the wines.

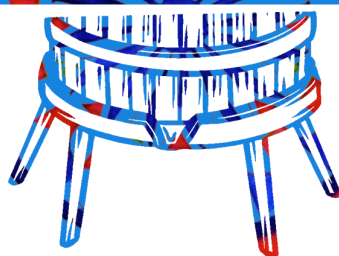
Their 60-hectare estate on a hill in the southeastern Sicilian province of Siracusa was formerly known as Tenuta dei Fossi. Angelo thought the land near the town of Pachino was one of the best areas in Sicily for wine. They have been organic since 2001, practice polyculture to nurture and enrich the ecosystem of their vineyard, and take sustainable measures to use recyclable materials and packaging wherever possible.

Despite the advanced age of this 100% Grecanico, it is rich and alive. Instead of becoming a curiosity, it stays pleasurable. Deep, lush notes of orange peel, citrus oil, marshmallow root, baking spice, and salt. It's a complex wine with opulence, power, and some caramelized development that is remarkably singular.

Jonathan Kemp & Jeremy Hernandez



DIRECT • PRESS



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