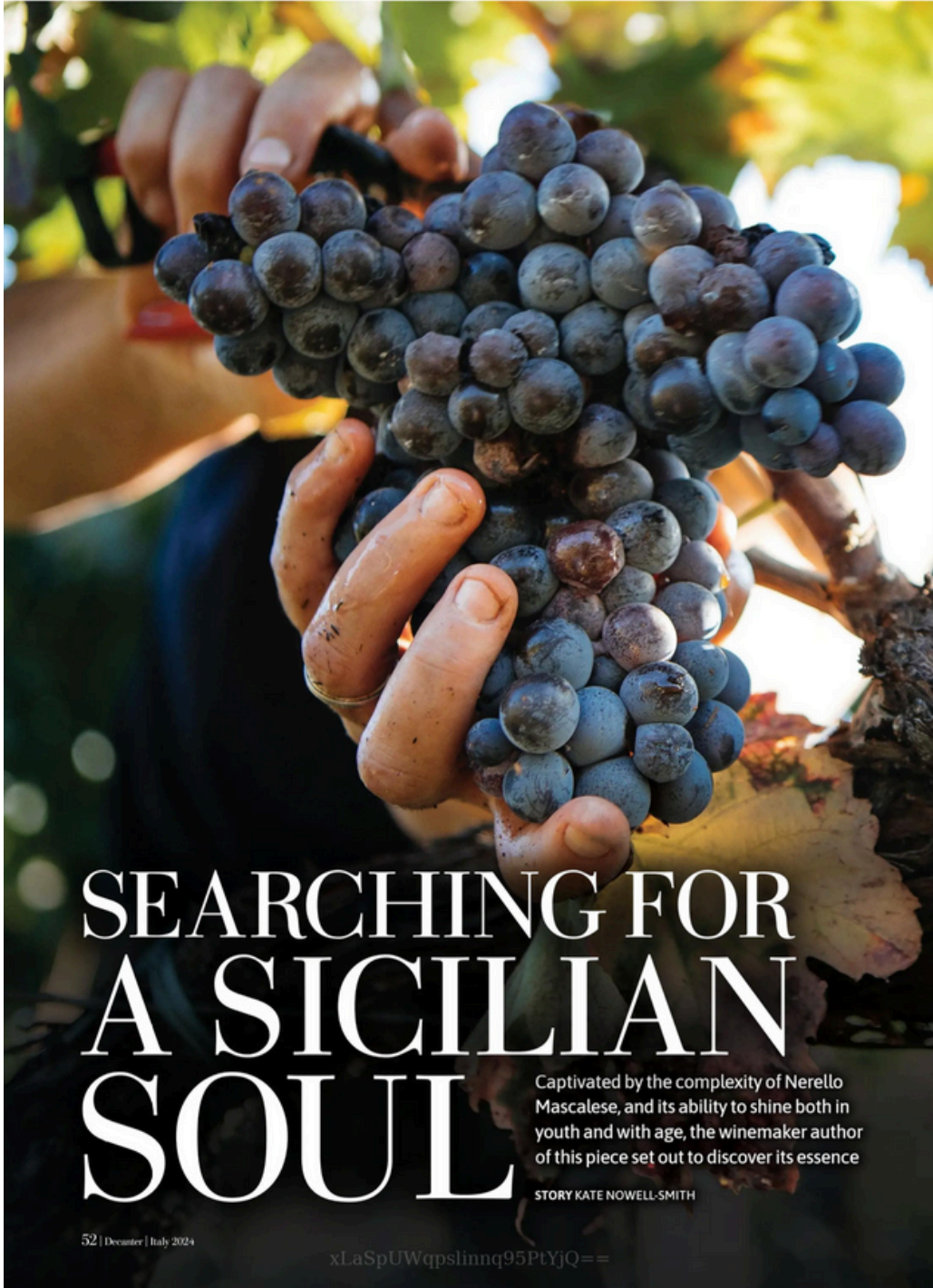




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# Decanter



# SEARCHING FOR A SICILIAN SOUL

Captivated by the complexity of Nerello Mascalese, and its ability to shine both in youth and with age, the winemaker author of this piece set out to discover its essence

STORY KATE NOWELL-SMITH



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**H**ad I been writing 50, even 20 years ago about Nerello Mascalese – the Sicilian grape variety believed to have originated on the plain of Mascali, between Mount Etna's eastern slope and the coast – this story would have been simple: an unfussy, high-yielding grape that ripens reliably and embraces Sicily's oppressive heat. Its thin skin makes a bright red wine with good acidity and limited tannins. Grown around Mt Etna, the vast majority of Nerello Mascalese – with its serviceable amount of alcohol and body – is transported as must [the freshly pressed, unfermented juice of grapes with all the accompanying solids] in bulk down the mountain on a dedicated train track that delivers it to the port of Riposto, whereupon it is shipped, mostly to France and the Italian mainland, stripped of its identity and used to beef up generic red wine blends.

But today, Nerello Mascalese is taken seriously as a standalone variety and the story has become far less straightforward. With considerate wine-growing that respects the fruit and allows terroir to shine through, this grape reveals itself to have many, sometimes seemingly contradictory, facets. The wines it makes today can take you into extraordinary territory, bordering on inscrutable, in the yummiest of ways. At their best, they are bright, mineral-driven wines, charming and food-friendly, yet bearing a poetry and gravitas that brings to mind fine Burgundy or Barbaresco. This is an easygoing variety whose beauty can make one weep! If complexity and evanescence, alongside deliciousness, is what makes for great wines, then today's Nerello Mascalese are intriguingly great.

How does that happen? And how can Nerello Mascalese at all price points show exceptionally well when young and fresh, but also be suited to being aged for a decade or more? Preparing for this article, as the contradictions mounted, I found myself asking: what are the essentials of Nerello Mascalese? Wherein lies its soul? The only thing for it was to travel to the heart of its production: Mount Etna.

#### HARD TO DEFINE

Until recently, it wasn't actually that easy to find 100% Nerello Mascalese wines; before 2012, both tradition and the law required Etna DOC Rosso to contain a minimum of 80% Mascalese and 10%-20% Nerello Cappuccio. Indeed, field blends with additional, often unidentified varieties, such as Grenache, were the norm. Many Sicilian reds calling themselves Nerello Mascalese are still made this way, and they offer a clue as to why the variety can seem so hard to characterise: field blends may have good intentions but they were not going to help me understand Nerello



Modern-day Nerello Mascalese pioneer Giuseppe Benanti, with winemaking twin sons Antonio (left) and Salvino (see p54)

Mascalese. For that, I needed to pay a visit to Benanti, a leader in promoting and producing first-rate wines on Etna.

In the 1980s, Giuseppe Benanti (pictured, above), an avid wine lover and native Sicilian, began a passion project, purchasing and developing vineyards in four (eventually five) distinctive contrade, or vineyard 'zones', around Mt Etna. He applied rigorous scientific methods to understand the complex set of soil and climate variables that account for the great diversity found among all the contrade in this volcanic terroir. To ensure a full expression of the vineyard in each bottle, Benanti limited the winemaking factors influencing his fruit by restricting himself to a select few yeast strains isolated from his vineyards and cellar, fermenting in stainless steel and ageing his reds in predominantly neutral oak.

Today, Giuseppe's twin sons, Salvino and Antonio, remain faithful to this approach. They are quick to playfully rib each other, but they are quicker still to speak passionately and seriously about their wines and their DOC. 'Of course, making wine must leave some room for a personal approach, but we think that there should be some kind of limit to the creativity... to respect the place.' In doing so, Giuseppe says, one can ►

**'At their best, they bring a poetry and gravitas that brings to mind fine Burgundy or Barbaresco'**



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clearly see 'how obvious it is that the local climate, and culture, and soil really characterise the wine'.

### TERROIR TELLS ALL

And herein lay the answer I had been looking for: these wines are changeable because this variety is exceptional in allowing for the purest translation of terroir. The growing conditions on Mt Etna are so varied: it has four active craters spewing lava and about 300 extinct craters, each with its own unique soil composition. The age of all the lava flows and their state of erosion is another factor, dating from thousands of years old to almost present day. Then there is the elevation and aspect of each vineyard site, from about 400m to 1,000m above sea level. The south side of the volcano sees hot sunny days tempered by ocean winds, producing generous, approachable wines, whereas the climate on the northern slope is much cooler, giving elegance and austerity. The eastern slope – cool, wet and windy, exposed as it is to the ocean – is where Carricante, Sicily's great white grape, thrives. The west is not favoured for viticulture and is not a part of the Etna DOC.

Salvino Benanti (*pictured, p53*) explains: 'Mascalsese has surpassed the boundaries of the Etna appellation... with completely different results. It will become a bigger wine [when] made in warmer conditions.'

Indeed, the majority of Nerello Mascalsese is grown not on Etna, but throughout the rest of the island. A notable example comes from Fabio Sireci and Melissa Muller (*pictured, top right*), husband and wife proprietors of Feudo Montoni in the centre of Sicily. At 500m-750m on a high plateau between two mountains, surrounded by wheat fields, the property is remote and in effect cut off from all other viticulture on the island. According to Sireci, wine has been made here for more than 2,000 years; the present-day winery structure was purpose-built in 1469. The Sireci family bought the property in the late 19th century and have been quietly making wine in the traditional method – that is, vinification and ageing in concrete vessels, using native yeasts and relatively cool fermentations – ever since. The land has always been farmed organically and has been certified for the last 20 years.

### A REFERENCE POINT

Feudo Montoni's isolation has given it an important place in Sicilian viticulture. The first of the Sirecis to own the property brought in vines from Catania, the municipality at the base of Mt Etna. No vine stock has been introduced to the estate since then; all new vineyard material is propagated solely from vines already on the



Harvest time for Benanti in Contrada Calderara Sottana, on Mt Etna's northern slope

property. This means that Montoni's Nerello Mascalsese stands as a genetic reference point, its DNA helping to confirm that this variety originated as a natural cross between Sangiovese and Mantonic Bianco [as cited on the VIVC Vitis International Variety Catalogue]. 'Now, of course, Nerello Mascalsese is very famous in Etna, where it has a beautiful expression,' Sireci says. 'But Nerello Mascalsese is not a Sicilian original grape. Looking back several millennia, we think that *Vitis vinifera* in Italy came from Georgia and the Caucasus mountains, passing through Greece, and arrived in Puglia, in the south of Italy.'

It took Sireci 20 years and the encouragement of Muller to decide to bottle his Mascalsese as a standalone variety. 'There is too much Nerello Mascalsese that's not made with a clear vision of what it can be,' he laments. 'Twenty years ago, our wines were not understood by the market.' But now he and Muller have happily found a new audience that appreciates their delicate, true-to-type red and rosé iterations of Nerello Mascalsese, which stand as further testament to the grape's ability to express terroir when treated with care and restraint.

### TERRITORIES NEW

At home in northern California, I approach Kevin Harvey (*pictured*), North America's sole producer of Nerello Mascalsese, curious to understand what he sees in the variety that justifies the lengths to which he has gone to produce his wine. With a proven track record

PHOTOGRAPHS: ITALIAN FOOD PRODUCTION; SHUTTERSTOCK; VALERIO D'URSO; GJ; ALFRO GAROZZO; MARK IRWIN



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Kevin Harvey of Rhys Vineyards in Sonoma County, California

in Pinot Noir and Chardonnay under his Rhys Vineyards label, Harvey is a vintner who does his homework and doesn't believe in half-measures – he and his team had to import the Nerello Mascalese vine stock from Europe and put it through the UC Davis Clean Plant Program before propagation and planting could begin. They spent years studying the soil and climate of their site to ensure that it would be a good match and they engaged Sicilian winemaker Salvo Foti as their mentor. And – just like winemakers on Mt Etna – they have found that meticulous viticulture, a hands-off approach and minimal new oak has brought about the best results.

'We really only like varieties that express terroir,' he explains. 'Like all Italian wines, it's a great food wine.' But more importantly, he says: 'Some of these great sites [in California], as they continue to warm up, are going to need grapes that are a better match [to the climate]. Nerello Mascalese's ability to retain acidity in hot climates makes it a great fit.

After visiting the vines, I sit down with Harvey and his team. It just so happens that this is the first vertical of their Nerello Mascalese they've tasted together. Harvey jokes: 'You need at least three wines for a flight and [with the 2021 ready] we finally have that!' The success of his Aeris label (see p56) means they can now provide a California benchmark – and vine stock – to others looking for varieties with the potential to thrive in our changing climate.

#### KEY TO ITS APPEAL

Nerello Mascalese's changeability – in the bottle, in the glass, from site to site – is what defines it and makes it so appealing. Salvino Benanti echoes a conclusion I had been coming to: 'I think the beauty of Nerello Mascalese is that it can be enjoyed young and with age.'

This is not a fickle soul, but an ever-evolving entity in a constant state of flux; impossible to capture but worthy of the attempt. We are only just scratching the surface of what this grape is capable of, both on Mt Etna and around the world. I for one am delighted that this is a story that will need to be written time and again. ►



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GRAPES: NERELLO MASCALESE



## Insight into Nerello Mascalese: Nowell-Smith's six to try

### ① **Murgo, Brut, Sicily, Italy 2021** 91

US\$23-\$28 Circle Liquor Store, Hi-Time Wine Cellars, Vinous Reverie, Wine.com

An affordably priced, traditional-method brut that shows how Nerello Mascalese can lend itself to bubbles. A hint of struck match aroma soon transforms to grilled peach and apricot, with a touch of cream. Dry, with nicely structured bubbles and good acidity, this makes an excellent aperitif; pair it with prosciutto e melone and you're off to a fine evening. **Drink** 2024-2029 **Alcohol** 12.5%

### ② **Feudo Montoni, Rose di Adele, Sicily, Italy 2023** 91

£24 (2022) Theatre of Wine

Aromas of fresh apricot, peach, a touch of strawberry and some salinity, then delicate cherry, apricot and blanched almond on the palate. Lively, crisp and refreshing, perfect for sipping on a warm summer evening, but also with enough body, flavour and length to accompany a serious meal. Organic. **Drink** 2024-2028 **Alc** 13%

### ③ **Benanti, Contrada Dafara Galluzzo, Etna, Sicily, Italy 2022** 94

£38 WoodWinters

Coming from vines at 750m on the cool northern slope of Mount Etna, this wine retains a minerality and freshness that belies its complexity. It opens with delicate strawberry and floral aromas, evolving into more spicy notes with hints of clove. More



strawberries on the palate play wonderfully with the more resinous, earthy notes that appear over time. A touch of iron adds intrigue. With good acidity and slightly chewy tannins, this has the structure to age beautifully. **Drink** 2024-2037 **Alc** 14.5%

### ④ **Aeris, Centennial Mountain, Sonoma County, California, USA 2021** 92

aeriswines.com

A rich, dark wine that shares the complexity of previous vintages, as well as their ability to change in the glass. This opens with perfumed red fruits, orange peel and blood orange. It has great body without being suffocating. Still young, its tannins are strong but they're in balance. There is a long, faintly herbal finish, with just the right amount of sage to pair beautifully with

grilled foods. You can enjoy this today, though it could well hold up for another decade. **Drink** 2024-2036 **Alc** 14%

### ⑤ **Feudo Montoni, Terre di Elio, Terre Siciliane, Sicily, Italy 2020** 92

\$21.60-£27.65 Central Wine Merchants, Mid Valley Wine & Liquor, Sip NYC

A great example of a well-made Sicilian Nerello Mascalese that does not come from Mt Etna. It misses the mineral, chiselled nature of an Etna Rosso, but does deliver a delicious, complex red with lovely acid and soft tannins. Cherry, strawberry, caramel notes and red fruit continue on the palate, along with floral perfume, a touch of aniseed and some chalky confectioner's sugar that evolves into a gorgeous violet flavour. Organic. **Drink** 2024-2032 **Alc** 13.5%

### ⑥ **Passopisciaro, Passorosso, Etna, Sicily, Italy 2021** 92

£44 Sociovino

The aromas are gorgeous, and impactful for such a delicate-looking wine - classic Nerello Mascalese sleight of hand! The wine opens with dusty rose and violets, plenty of strawberry and citrus peel, then oyster shells appear with faint herbal notes. Intriguing flavours of forest floor meet chalky mint. Clean and precise on the finish, this is absolutely ready to be enjoyed now, but can likely be aged for at least another eight years. **Drink** 2024-2032 **Alc** 14.5%

