

# WINE

WINE BEYOND THE VINES #003



Sicily

# World's first domestic benchtop oven to hit 400°C

Cooks a Neapolitan-style pizza in under 2 minutes.



the Smart Oven™ Pizzaiolo  
[smartovenpizzaiolo.sageappliances.com](http://smartovenpizzaiolo.sageappliances.com)

**Sage**

Master Every Moment®



LEADING UK WINE CABINET DISTRIBUTOR

 **ELITE WINE  
REFRIGERATION**

[www.elitefridges.co.uk](http://www.elitefridges.co.uk)  
0333 577 6466  
Chester, Cheshire (HQ)

Amathus Drinks London | Muswell Hill | South Kensington | SOHO

# From the editors

After last month's knockout box from Occitanie, we thought we'd visit another oft-neglected region of a wine superpower this month. Sicily has long played second fiddle to mainland Italian provinces such as Piedmont, Tuscany and Veneto, yet has a huge amount of its own character – and quality, of course – to offer the open-minded drinker.

Elsewhere, Jason Wilson returns with his thoughts on the beautiful union between Sicilian grapes and its other famous export: lemons. Brooklyn's Toussaint Stackhouse then shares his story of how a traditional wine education was gloriously derailed by an obsession with Pét Nat, while Rachel Hendry recounts the thrill of diving into an unfamiliar taste landscape, as she attempts to 'get into' coffee.

We're happy to bring you a slightly longer issue of *Glug* this month - fully 12 pages longer, in fact. This wouldn't have been possible without all the people who tweeted about us, told their friends and generally helped grow our readership. To those people and everyone who's stuck with us over the first few issues, our heartfelt thanks.

*Rich and Katie*

## EDITOR

RICHARD CROASDALE  
[richard@beer52.com](mailto:richard@beer52.com)

## COMMISSIONING EDITOR

KATIE MATHER  
[katie@beer52.com](mailto:katie@beer52.com)

## EDITORIAL ASSISTANT

ROBYN GILMOUR

## SENIOR DESIGNER

ASHLEY JOHNSTON

## DESIGNER

ADELE JURAŽA

## ADVERTISING SALES

MICHAEL BROCK  
[michael@beer52.com](mailto:michael@beer52.com)

## COVER ARTIST

CHIARA PALILLO

*A Sicilian illustrator and graphic designer, Chiara loves to express emotions in her work and experimenting with different printing techniques.*

[www.chiarapalillo.com](http://www.chiarapalillo.com)

[Twitter](https://twitter.com/GlugMag) [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/GlugMag) [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/GlugMag) @GlugMag

Got a Wine52 customer service query? Get in touch:  
**0131 285 2684**  
[support@beer52.com](mailto:support@beer52.com)

This issue of **glug** was first printed in October 2021. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part without written permission is strictly prohibited. All prices are correct at the time of going to press but are subject to change.

## Contents



### 08 Grapes of Sicily

How to tell your Nero d'Avola from your Grillo.

### 12 Sicilian Soil

The geology you can taste in every mouthful.

### 16 Alagna Vini

The family making magic in a medieval mine.

### 20 Belice Valley Wines

This eco-friendly cooperative is rebuilding tradition.

### 22 Cantine Settesoli

A forward-thinking winery in the heart of nature.

### 26 Addiopizzo and the Valdibella Cooperative

Katie Mather meets the co-op facing down Mafia corruption.

### 32 Sicilian whites and lemons

Best friends, from hillside to dinner table.

### 36 Bottling holiday spirit

Why do drinks taste better on holiday?

### 38 Pét-nat, a love affair almost missed

Toussaint Stackhouse, on his natural awakening.

### 42 Compound drinking

Unpacking the flavour world of coffee.

### 46 Sweet equilibrium

Matt Curtis, on beer people and wine people.

### 52 From the heart

Tasting notes should be poetry, writes Rachel Hendry.

## Minds behind the words



### Richard Croasdale

He/Him  
Career booze hound, editor, occasional author. Bikes, bacchanals, early nights.  
[@Croasdale](https://www.instagram.com/croasdale)



### Katie Mather

She/Her  
Editor and writer specialising in beer, cider food and wine. Owner of a lovely bar called Corto, in Clitheroe. Consigliere.  
[@Shinybiscuit](https://www.instagram.com/shinybiscuit)



### Rachel Hendry

She/Her  
Editor and writer with The Burum collective, and creator of the newsletter J'adore le Plonk. Font of wisdom.  
[@ratchelle](https://www.instagram.com/ratchelle)



### Susan Boyle

She/Her  
If it's got an ABV, Susan knows more about it than you do. Drinks consultant, beer judge, award-winning writer. The only Susan Boyle you need.  
[@miss\\_susanboyle](https://www.instagram.com/miss_susanboyle)



### Jason Wilson

He/Him  
A prolific and accomplished booze thinker. Read his books and become a better you.  
[@boozecolumnist](https://www.instagram.com/boozecolumnist)



### Toussaint Stackhouse

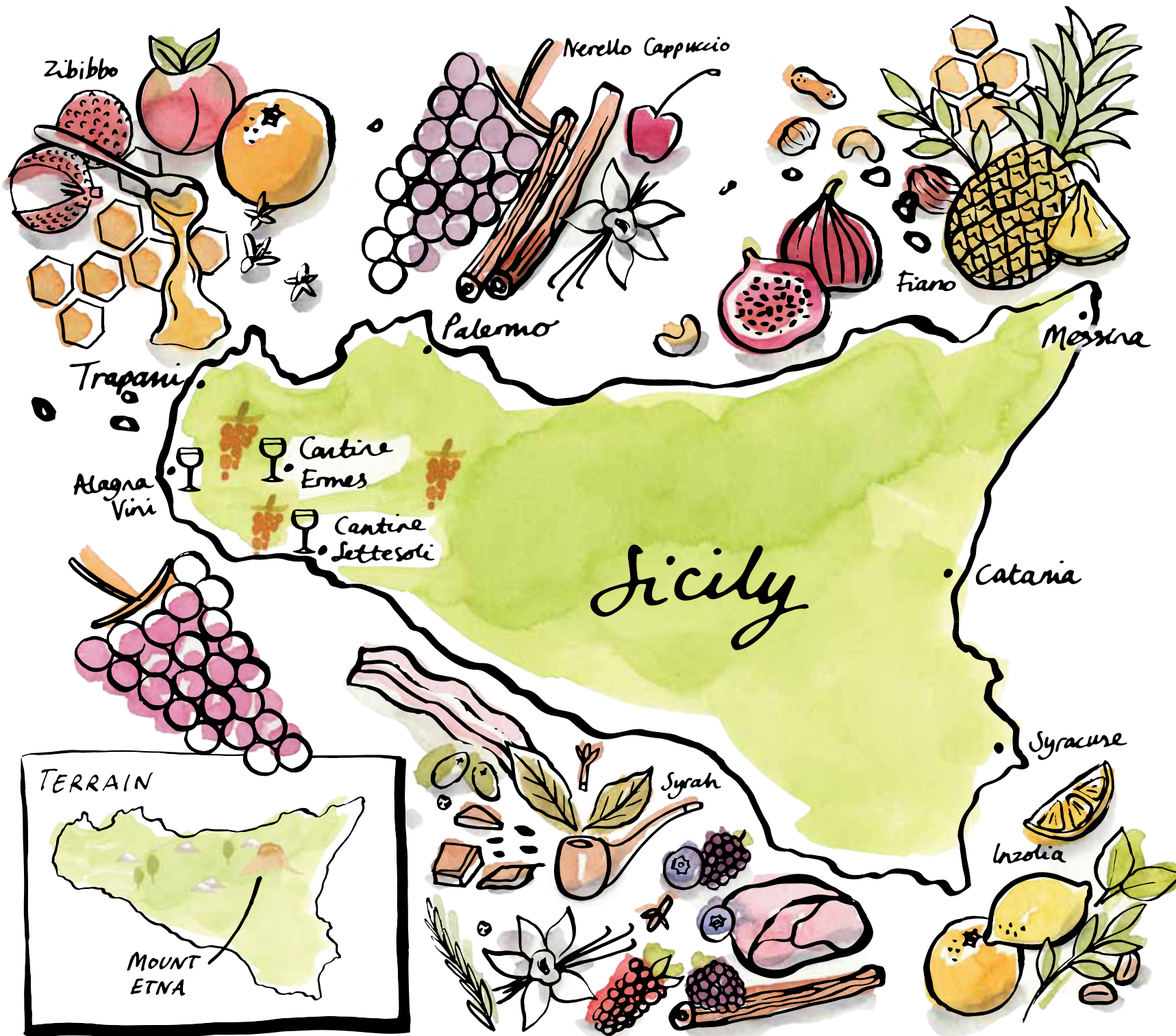
He/Him  
New York City based wine educator, and lover of natural wines. Follow his journey on Instagram.  
[@papi\\_petnat](https://www.instagram.com/papi_petnat)



# The first sip

A rugged mountain on the Sicilian coast stands in stark contrast to the vineyards that surround it

PHOTO: Ingrida Grants



# Welcome to Sicily

We couldn't be more excited to be on the island of Sicily this month – a fascinating wine region with great native grape varieties and a very distinctive terroir, yet whose reputation is most closely associated with Marsala fortified wine. Set aside your preconceptions though (if you even have any – Sicily tends to fly below the wine radar somewhat) and you'll discover the diverse landscapes of Sicily mean it can almost be viewed in wine terms as a country in its own right, rather than simply an extension of Italy. From the strong, sea-kissed grapes of Marsala to the delicious mineralic whites of the slopes of Mt Etna, there is so much to unpack here.

Andrea Gawwood at Divi, who we worked with closely in putting together this month's wine selection, sums it up perfectly.

"I often feel like Sicily is kind of an untapped resource in terms of Italian wine, and in the wine world more broadly," she says. "We at Divi really enjoy working with some of these smaller, less export-focused wineries and getting them in front of businesses like Wine52, that are interested in going off the beaten track to find really great wines that might otherwise be a little bit inaccessible. The selection we've put together here I think is a good representation of the island, and of a winemaking community that I've got to know really well over the years. They care passionately about their craft, and I really think that comes across." 🍷

ILLUSTRATION © 2021 MELANIE CHADWICK

# GRAPES OF *Sicily*

Ask a wine lover about Sicily and watch their eyes light up. A little island just off the south west coast of Italy, its unique food and drink is influenced by the many cultures who've stopped off there, including colonisers from Ancient Greece, mainland Italy, the Middle East and Northern Africa, France and Spain. In return, Sicily has had a huge impact on wine and cuisine all over the world.

Summer in Sicily is hot. At the moment, thanks to global warming, it's never been hotter in living memory. Thankfully, for the moment, the island's indigenous grape varieties thrive in the dry, sunny climate and volcanic soils here. It seems a volatile place to grow fruit with delicate, nuanced flavours, but for thousands of years these vines have produced wines with elegance, power and structure, and a truly unique expression of Sicily's unmistakable terroir.

One of Sicily's most famous and well-loved indigenous grape varieties is wine-list winner **Nero D'Avola**. Also known as Calabrese, it makes up just under 20% of Sicily's vines, and has been enjoyed since the Middle Ages. High tannins and medium acidity mean that winemakers can create big, bold wines with this grape, but equally they can choose to use a lighter touch, crafting young wines with interesting texture, and flavours of ripe plum.

**Nerello Mascalese** is the "grape of the volcano". Grown up on the slopes of Mount Etna and in the volcanic soils of Catania and Messina, this variety flourishes with that gritty, ashy terroir all about its roots and is the main component in Etna DOC wines. Another Sicilian variety with big tannins

and medium acidity, Nerello Mascalese is earthy and herbaceous, with red fruit flavours that mellow with age. Take a look at our feature on the soils of Sicily to learn more about how volcanoes have shaped Sicily's wines as well as its landscape!

One of the most common and delicious grape varieties being used to make modern natural orange wines in Sicily is **Cataratto**. A white grape that's been unfairly treated as lower quality for years, as a skin contact white it transcends easy-drinking-table-white and comes alive with citrus peel and fresh ginger notes.

You will most likely find **Perricone** in a Nero D'Avola blend because alone, it can have a bitterness that flattens any tannin or acidic yumminess. When it's made well, however, solo Perricone can drink like a good Barolo — if you find a good one, they're a great value wine.

If you've ever drank Marsala (or used it in a recipe), you've tried **Grillo**, Sicily's most-planted white wine grape. Used for years to make fortified wine and not much more, in recent years this grape has become more favoured as the basis for local dry white wine because of its round citrus flavour and lemony zing.

**Zibibbo** — also called Muscat de Alessandro — is an ancient grape that's been used for winemaking all over the Mediterranean, and has been loved in Sicily since the Phoenicians and Ancient Greeks cultivated vines there in around 800 BCE. It's aromatic, and as a white wine it's citrusy and floral. As an orange or skin-contact wine, it gets figgy, packed with apricots and garnished with candied peel.

Grown in Sicily since the 7th century, **Inzolia**, also known as **Ansonica**, is mostly grown in the West of the island, in the "golden triangle" between Agrigento, Trapani and Palermo. Low in acid and sugar, Inzolia makes a really surprising wine when used well — full of savoury notes, salty minerality and a touch of almond. Maybe even some menthol.

Versatile **Frappato** has an intense aroma often described as "peculiar" — violets, geraniums and menthol. It makes a light-bodied, transparent red wine with a surprising boost of black fruit flavours and soft tannins, which goes brilliantly with local fish soup or chargrilled fish steaks.

If you're looking for a grape with real historic claims,

look for **Fiano**, a grape that's also grown in the Campania region of mainland Italy. Believed to have been the main variety used to make the Roman wine Apianum mentioned by Pliny the Elder, in Sicily it creates a floral, honey-toned wine with a rich nuttiness. It thrives in volcanic soils, which is why it does so well both in Sicily and in Campania.

If you've ever visited Sicily, you will most likely have tried a **Nocera** wine, being that it's indigenous to Sicily but normally blended with Nerello Capuccio or Nerello Mascalese. It's a tannin-rich grape that makes a hefty, bold wine, full of black fruit flavours and leathery spice, and manages to keep acidity levels high, even in the hot Sicilian sun. It's also called Barbi du Sultan, which is an excellently extra name.

**Nerello Capuccio** is Nerello Mascalese's cousin, and is usually found blended with it to add fresh fruit flavours and softness. This grape is a bit of a daredevil, and loves volcanic soil, especially at high altitudes. It gives off cherry flavours by itself, but hasn't got much tannin to add structure as a single varietal, which is why it's usually blended with fellow red grapes for more texture. It goes really well with Margherita pizza, by the way. 🍷



PHOTOGRAPH © SHUTTERSTOCK



# Sicilian soil

**S**icily is an incredibly diverse place to grow grapes. With vineyards planted on sea-level plains right up to the 1000m heights of the slopes of Mount Etna, and climate variations to match, the Sicilian harvest lasts from August right through to November some years. In the summer as the grapes ripen, it's sunny, warm and dry; it can really heat up when the Scirocco wind blows in from North Africa bringing Saharan dust and, sometimes, drought. Mild winters are tempered by breezes from the Mediterranean sea, reducing damp in the vineyards and the destructive mildew it causes. These super-agreeable conditions have drawn people to plant grapes and make wine here for around 4000 years. Sicily really loves wine. Always has.

It's not just the weather that makes Sicily so special, though. What many winemakers and wine-enjoyers love most about Sicilian wines is the soil. That stuff under your feet, the earthy ground, the material those sun-baked vines send roots deep down into for sustenance, anchoring themselves into the landscape. In Sicily, these soils are what give local wines another level of intrigue, excitement and intensity. From deep down in the earth, minerals are extracted by hungry vines, bringing hidden flavours and textures to the surface and into our grateful mouths.

Any wine region will boast about the rocks it has, eroded and strewn about by glaciers and tectonic movements, left by receding seas and moved and excavated by changing

habitations for millions of years. Some wine lovers just love to drink wine. That's cool. Some wine lovers become obsessed with wine region geology and topography. If that's you, you're in good company here.

## Volcanic Soils

Let's look at Mount Etna first. How could you not? She's gorgeous.

Known as Mongibello in Sicilian, Etna is the second tallest active volcano in Europe. She's huge, in fact — 85 miles around the bottom, 3,357m tall, and growing with each eruption. In 2021 alone, Etna had grown 30m in height by June.

Etna's constant eruptions have endangered lives and swallowed villages, caused tsunamis felt across the Mediterranean and destroyed puny little human follies like a 19th century volcano observatory and a cable car. What she's brought as destruction, however, has created a totally unique strata of lava flows and rock, layering incredible volcanic soils that Sicily's vines thrive in.

The volcanic soil in the areas surrounding Mount Etna are made from pumice, basalt pebbles and black ash — rock and carbon deposits blown out from the very centre of the earth. Pumice, which was formerly lava flowing glassy and dangerous down the slopes of the volcano, retains humidity and moisture in the ground. Essential for healthy vines in a hot region. There's plenty of basalt too, which is thought to block certain minerals from being absorbed in high levels by grapevines, helping them to retain deliciously high acidity. All you need to know, really, however, is that the many diverse minerals that make up volcanic soil are drawn up into vines and reach the grapes, adding live, interesting complexity to the wine they create.

What's especially fun about the volcanic soils of Eastern Sicily is that it is young, and always changing. Every time Etna erupts, however destructively, the make-up of the soil surrounding her is shaken up, scorched and ultimately replenished.

## Rock and Sand

In the North regions of Sicily, near Cefalu and Palermo, sandy, rocky soils are mixed with windblown silt to provide a well-draining material grapevines eke a life from. This sounds counterintuitive — how can any plant survive in such poor quality soil? But vines love the challenge, and (when no fertilisers are involved) send their curious roots deeper into the ground to seek out minerals and moisture.

Sand retains heat and drains well, and in Sicily this often translates to softer wines with a lot of aromatics. »

MOUNT ETNA

PHOTOGRAPH ◦ MATTEO BADINI

— THE —  
**DRINKS TRUST**  
— EST. 1886 —

**HELPLINE**  
0800 915 4610  
NOW OPEN 24/7

# SUPPORTING DRINKS INDUSTRY PEOPLE WHENEVER THEY NEED IT

Our Helpline Is Now Open  
7 Days A Week, 24 Hours A Day

**0800 915 4610**

Email [helpline@drinkstrust.org.uk](mailto:helpline@drinkstrust.org.uk)

Whatsapp “Hi” to 00 353 87 369 0010



[drinkstrust.org.uk](http://drinkstrust.org.uk)

Registered Charity No.1023376



VINEYARD, TRAPANI

KATIE MATHER ◦ SICILIAN SOIL

PHOTOGRAPH ◦ ANTONIO SESSA

Think about it this way: if a grape has less water to thrive on, the flavours and aromas become more concentrated. Owing to this particular region’s unique weather, the grapes grown here and other factors, this concentration usually shows up in the aromatics, rather than by intensifying sugar content.

The West of the island has some of Sicily’s most highly-regarded and highest quality vines, and is widely planted by larger producers too. Here you’ll find sandy loam soils (essentially, topsoil made from sand, clay and other rock deposits), as well as limestone areas with calcareous clay, and even sandstone. This huge variety of soil types — and hopefully you’re getting just as excited about soil types now you know how vital they are to make great wine — gives Sicilian winemakers in the Trapani, Agrigento and more Westerly areas of Palermo regions a broad canvas to work with.

While loam is usually too fertile to grow excellent grapes, clay is incredibly useful to winemakers in warmer parts of the world, because it retains the coolness of night. In Sicily, the clay is “calcerous”, meaning that it’s made up of limestone deposits made from the fossilised

remains of ancient sea creatures; crustaceans living in a deeper Mediterranean Sea well before the Ice Age, that covered much more of Europe than it does now. Add to this full seams of chalky, mineral-rich limestone in a vineyard and you’ve got yourself a party, and if it’s in the right hands, a truly delicious wine full of energy, mineral intensity and structure.

Nearer the coast, this is often also combined with ideas of the salt from the sea air becoming entangled in the growing fruit. These romantic ideas of grapes intermingling with their direct environments are how many winemakers and wine lovers choose to interpret what they taste in their glass. While there is no solid scientific evidence for where the “minerality” of a wine comes from, it’s difficult to see how such environmental connections could be incidental. It’s an incredibly complex subject taking in all manner of scientific data and winemaking experience. Soil is argued about at length. For many winemakers, however, there can be no question that what’s in the soil affects the final flavour and emotion of their wine. After all, what is terroir if not the flavour and aroma of a specific place? 🍷



PHOTOGRAPHY ○ ALAGNA VINI

The Alagna family has been making wine in and around Marsala since the Second World War, from its traditional winery built into the cool and humid depths of a medieval sandstone mine. Its own story charts the history of the island's wine industry, moving from bulk production and a focus on Marsala fortified wine to a more respectful, traditional form of quality winemaking over the course of several decades.

“When the winery was started by my grandfather, everyone here was very focused on Marsala. I don't know if you know this, but Marsala was actually invented by a British person, which really kicked off large-scale winemaking in the province. Just to put that into context, 50-60% of all the wine of Sicily comes from around here, so it's really shaped the look of the countryside because it's full of vineyards.”

Alagna has approximately 80 hectares of vineyards

spread over Marsala, Mazara, Trapani and Salemi, where it cultivates local varieties such as Zibibbo, Nero d'Avola, Grillo, Catarratto, Inzolia and Damaschino. Charmingly, 50 hectares are managed by Antonio's father's side of the family, and 30 are managed by his mother's side.

“My grandfather basically started as a farmer, before moving into bulk wines and Marsalas. At the time, the vast majority of Sicilian wine was exported in bulk to northern Italy; very little of it was actually sold to customers. But my father was always the one developing different models and introducing a little bit of wine tourism into the business, which gradually became more important as the market began to change in the 1980s. Today, I'm in charge of export activities and tourism, which is very important for us. Marsala production is still part of our business, but we are quite diversified now.”





The historic Marsala connection isn't the only reason this area is a hub for Sicilian wine. Its low latitude and proximity to the Mediterranean coast means it enjoys a fairly consistent warmth, with little temperature variation between day and night. Most characteristically though, the region is renowned for its warm winds, which result in grapes with a high concentration of sugars and, consequently, wines of higher alcohol content.

As well as creating a distinctive terroir though, the relative dryness of the climate, combined with the coastal soil, can create problems, as Antonio explains.

"We prefer to position our vineyards a little inland, because that's where you find more clay in the soil. The closer you go to the sea, the more sand you find, which is much less effective at retaining water and therefore makes your vines more susceptible to drought. So we're slowly creeping back from the coast as the climate gets hotter and drier... This also means we often keep our vines for longer – sometimes more than 20 years – as old vines have deeper roots and are again more drought resistant. We have to harvest these old vines by hand, the old fashioned way, so around half of our grapes are manually harvested."

Sadly, at the time of writing it's still not particularly practical to visit Sicily, which is a great shame as Alanga's home is meant to be spectacular. Hewn from the same sandstone that built the temple at Segesta and the ancient city walls at Marsala, the medieval mine in which Antonio's grandfather built his winery provides the perfect environment for maturing wine. But in truth, it wasn't the beauty of the historic surroundings or the potential for tourism that drove the decision.

"My grandfather was looking for cheap land, basically," Antonio says. "In these areas around Marsala that were heavily mined, land 60 years ago was very cheap. We had no idea where the mines ran, and this was before anything like x-ray machines to scan the ground, so there was always a chance your land could collapse into an old excavation. My grandfather found one of those old caves, used it to store some barrels and eventually built these huge concrete pillars that were both structural – supporting the level above – and each hold about 1200 litres of wine. They're quite impressive."

Tourism has become dramatically more important to Sicily's wine industry over the past 30 years, in line with its shift from bulk exports to quality wines with true regional provenance. The challenge, says Antonio, remains less about recovering from a poor reputation, and more about having no reputation at all.

"It's a bit of our fault, honestly," he says. "I think that is a bit linked to our economic history, where the mentality was not that much about creating brands or getting the territory known, but just to produce a lot in the cheapest way. Today, there is much more attention put into quality, but that's also backed up by

building our brands – both individual wineries and Sicily as a whole – and generally in the way we tell our stories. Having people visit and really understand the unique landscape and culture that these wines come from is a huge part of that, so hopefully we will welcome some Wine52 members as soon as travel becomes easier." 🍷

## Selected for you

### Il Punto

ABV **12.5%** Savour between **15-18°C**  
Grapes  
o **Rosso**

#### Tasting notes

The Alagna family brings the taste of the sun and the earth to your wine glasses using the best grapes which are produced in their own vineyard spread in the areas of Marsala, Mazara and Salemi. This full-bodied, deep ruby red is excellent with any kind of roast or mature cheeses.

Artwork by *Ortica Studio*

[www.behance.net/anonymdeis25bf](http://www.behance.net/anonymdeis25bf)



# Belice Valley Wines



In 1968, an earthquake devastated the Sicilian region of the Belice Valley, crumbling ancient towns and shaking the South West of the island to dust. More than 100,000 local people were made homeless by the natural disaster, and the “ghost town” of Poggioreale, which was totally ruined, remains an eerie monument to the destruction, now visited by more tourists than its rebuilt neighbours.

Many local wine growers left the area to restart their life elsewhere, leaving vineyards in Belice to be sold or swallowed up by larger companies, and to a few producers using international varieties such as Chardonnay, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon. In 1998 though, a group of young wine growers emerged, keen to rebuild the appellation’s winemaking communities and bring indigenous grapes back to the area.

Set in a beautiful landscape of rolling hills and dramatic cliffs, the vineyards of these young Sicilians are

today baked by the sun and cooled by the sea air, providing a microclimate that’s ideal for nurturing vineyards of important indigenous grape varieties such as Nero D’Avola, Grillo, Cataratto, Zibibbo, Grecanico and Inzolia, alongside more international varieties and grapes from Mainland Italy like Sangiovese, Frappato and Nerello Mascalese. In the wilder corners of the vineyard, head-trained vines crouch, gnarled and stout, pruned in this ancient way to keep low, protected against gales blowing in from the sea.

Thanks to millennia of changes, the soil in this part of Sicily is highly variable. Earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and emergence from the sea have all played their part in the geological marvel that is this island. Limestone, volcanic ash, pumice, sand, grit and chalk all appear in the soil, bringing unique texture, aroma and minerality to their wines. It is a beautiful bigger picture of their wine composed of tiny essential fragments, each as unique and important as the last.

This incredible local terroir is, of course, vital to Sicilian wines, and so the entire Sicilian viticulture is working to drastically reduce their impact on the environment

A lot of winegrowers use eco-friendly and sustainable working practices too. Here, every single step of the winemaking journey should be taken with sustainability in mind, because without sustainability, there is no future for winemaking. And what would be the fun in a future without wine? 🍷



## Selected for you

### Sogni D’Oro

ABV **12%** Savour between **7-12°C**  
Grapes  
o **Fiano**

#### Tasting notes

In the heart of Sicily, a unique territory characterised by unique geological origins and microclimates, Belice Valley Wines grow some of the most iconic indigenous varieties. Fiano is nutty and textured with floral and honeyed notes, spice and tropical fruit flavours like pineapple.

Artwork by **Michelangelo Greco**  
[www.behance.net/dudegraphic](http://www.behance.net/dudegraphic)



### In bocca al lupo

ABV **12.5%** Savour between **16-18°C**  
Grapes  
o **Syrah**

#### Tasting notes

Ruby red with violet tones. On the nose it is spicy and elegant. The palate is full with a complexity of red fruits, floral undertones and spicy oak. The finish is warm and elegant with integrated French oak tannins.

Artwork by **Sarah Mazzetti**  
[sarahmazzetti.com](http://sarahmazzetti.com)





# Cantine Settesoli

PHOTOGRAPHY © CANTINE SETTESOLI



PHOTOGRAPHY © CANTINE SETTESOLI

Since 1958, Cantine Settesoli has been growing grapes by the banks of Lake Arancio in Sambuca. Now with an accumulation of farmers all working together to create a cooperative that works hard for its members, the winery has vineyards in the hills and by the sea, and on the slopes by the rivers Belice and Carboj. There are even grapes in vineyards by the Magaggiaro Forest, taking advantage of the humidity and special qualities of the soil and biodiversity there.

When you think about Sicilian wines, you might immediately think of Mount Etna smoking in the distance, or of fuller-bodied red wines full of tannin and spice grown from dry, sandy soils. At Cantine Settesoli,

however, there's a wealth of limestone and chalk-rich soils — soils known as “skeletal” because of the high composition of fossilised sea creatures from when Sicily was once under the ocean. There's clay here too, concentrating flavour and grabbing hold of moisture, keeping vines hydrated during hot, dry periods.

Settesoli is proud of its biodiversity, growing grapes and making wine in a region that's thriving with wildlife. Hares are commonly seen darting through the fields, flamingos balance in the lake and by the forest, wild boar snuffles out into the evening.

Of its 2000 members, the Settesoli cooperative looks to support its youngest as an increasing priority. >



Keeping young people in Sicily to tend to the vines and to make high quality wine for the coming generations is something that many winemakers in the region know is important for the industry's future, however it's organisations like Cantine Settesoli who are investing in young winemakers, and supporting them with their experience and technical expertise. Alone, these smaller winemakers might have a rough time sending their finished wines to drinkers around the world. As members of Settesoli, they can ensure their grapes are harvested at the right times, sold for a fair price, and that the wine they make ends up bringing them the profits they deserve — and will taste delicious too.

It's not only young people that Settesoli seeks to benefit, however. The wine cooperative wants to improve working conditions for all its winemakers and growers, creating a more attractive prospect for ex-pat Sicilians so that they might return to the island, bringing their experiences and skills with them. These prospects include protecting and respecting the environment, an aspect of their winery that has become ever more prescient in recent years. They've even got their own fundraising campaign to protect and restore the Selinunte, an ancient Greek city on the South West coast of Sicily not far from the winery.

In 1985, Settesoli was one of the very first wineries in Sicily to introduce Chardonnay to their vineyards. In addition, they began to experiment with other international varieties, many of which remain in their

estate and make up some of their most popular bottles. However their commitment to maintaining the quality and popularity of indigenous grapes has never faltered. One of their most popular grapes is still Grillo, a Sicilian mainstay, originally used to make Marsala. Now, it features

in their bright and fresh white single varietal wine, with orange blossom aromas and minerality from their unique patchwork of soils around the Settesoli vineyards.

In contrast to many Sicilian cooperatives, Cantine Settesoli pushes a fun, eccentric style in its artwork and

its representations of itself. Easygoing, light and breezy, but with serious consideration to the tasting notes for each wine, it's clear that even the most simple-seeming wines made at Settesoli are meant to be enjoyed in a way that goes deeper.

"The benevolence of the smiling sun on our labels tells the story of the genuineness of our community," say Settesoli.

"The energy of the Sicilian sun is in our grapes; the passion and experience of a community of winemakers is in the quality of our wines." 🍷

## Selected for you

### Torno Subito

ABV **13%** Savour between **16-18°C**  
Grapes

- **Nerello Cappuccio**

#### Tasting notes

With a perfumed nose and a blackcurrant jammy body, this special dark-skinned grape variety thrives in the volcanic soils of Mount Etna, particularly at higher altitudes. Here, the combination of soil and climate result give this wine elegance and structure.

Artwork by **Pepo (Grottangles)**  
[www.grottangles.com](http://www.grottangles.com)



### Santo Cielo

ABV **12.5%** Savour between **10-12°C**  
Grapes

- **Inzolia**

#### Tasting notes

Fresh and mineral, this Inzolia has a soft yellow colour with greenish reflections. It is a fragrant wine that gives pleasant hints of jasmine, bergamot and green apple. With the power of the Sicilian sun in their grapes, Settesoli's wines convey the character, fragrance and energy of Sicily.

Artwork by **Mezzopieno Studio**  
[www.mezzopienostudio.com](http://www.mezzopienostudio.com)



### Allora

ABV **12.5%** Savour between **14-16°C**  
Grapes

- **Zibibbo**

#### Tasting notes

Otherwise known as 'Muscat of Alexandria', Zibibbo is one of the rarest grapes in the world, with a rich history dating back over 5,000 years. Grown for eating, wine-making and raisins, it has survived through the centuries, particularly in Sicily. A truly aromatic variety, this glass will hit you with honeysuckle, dried apricots and citrus fruits.

Artwork by **Carlo Quaranta**  
[carloquaranta.mypportfolio.com](http://carloquaranta.mypportfolio.com)



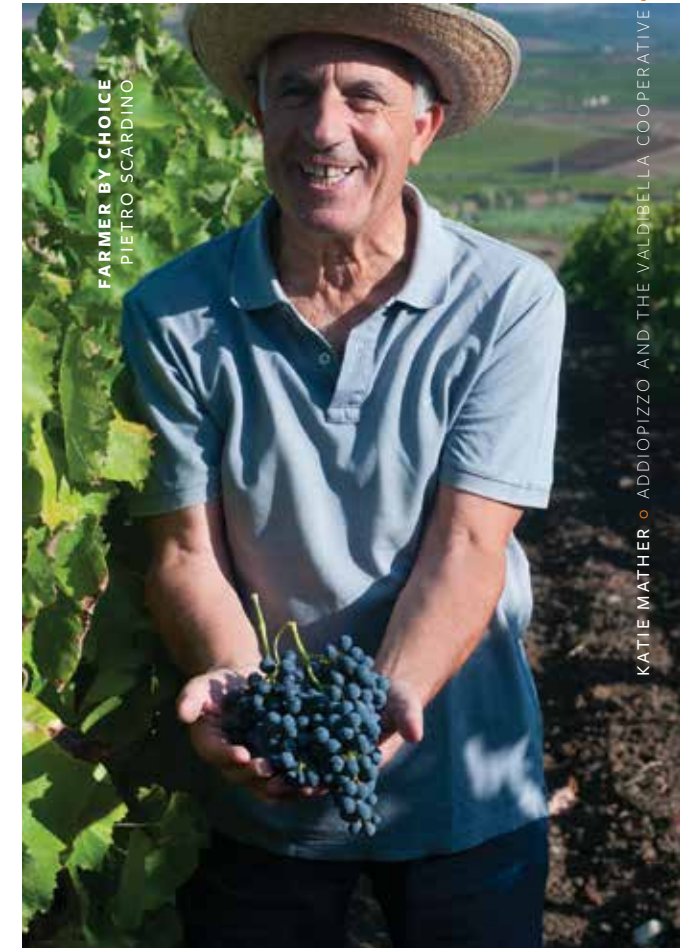


# ADDIOPIZZO AND THE VALDIBELLA COOPERATIVE

PHOTOGRAPHY © VALDIBELLA COLLECTIVE

**S**icily still struggles with The Mob. In picturesque cobbled streets where sandy limestone market towns lean into their squares, on the dry farming plains and the sloping volcanic vineyards, in the sun-drenched fishing villages and on remote agricultural terraces, the Mafia remains a very real presence in the lives of thousands of Sicilians.

But the Mafia, as it is in Sicily today, is not one criminal organisation, but a cartel of individual organised gangs operating loosely together under a similar code of conduct, using the term “Mafia” as more of a brand than an actual umbrella company. It’s difficult to understand, unless you’re Sicilian. There, there’s not much to understand. They exist, these gangs, and they extort and exploit businesses you know; maybe even your business. They traffic drugs and refugees, commit fraud, launder money, commit murder. In another form they exist as part of Sicilian civic life — a persistent problem with the collection and removal of rubbish around Palermo is directly caused by the interference of official lawmakers into a long-standing and lucrative private garbage disposal business in the area operated by the local Mafia. Once the police got involved, and then the army, it became a less attractive business prospect. They moved on to easier, less risky projects like arms smuggling. The people of Palermo were left with piles of rubbish in the streets no longer collected by anyone, and the situation is still in the process of being officially rectified.



FARMER BY CHOICE  
PIETRO SCARDINO

KATIE MATHER © ADDIOPIZZO AND THE VALDIBELLA COOPERATIVE

“We are not afraid,” says Caterina Lo Bocchiaro, Sales Manager for Valdibella, a winemaking and agricultural cooperative based in Palermo. Launched in 1998, the Valdibella cooperative has worked to identify and then undo the cultural and socio-economic barriers and challenges that Sicilians experience on a daily basis. Their website states their aim: to restore dignity to farmers, promoting concrete actions against commercial and labour exploitation and promoting organic agricultural methods that focus on biodiversity and native crops.

“They can only touch you when you feel alone. We can say we can defeat the Mafia. We are proud to say no.”





### “A People Who Pay Pizzo is a People Without Dignity”

Saying “no” is a specific rejection as well as an ideological or political stance in Sicily. Addiopizzo is a nonprofit charity and legal network Valdibella are active members of. It encourages its members to stand up to the Mafia by refusing to pay the “pizzo” — extorted protection money. The name translates to English as “Goodbye Pizzo”, and the aim of the network is clear: to build a cultural revolution against the Mafia. Their mission statement when they began, anonymous at the time, was printed on stickers and left all over Palermo, demanding dignity for the people of Palermo and of Sicily.

Addiopizzo work with independent business owners to provide support against organised criminal activity, and even offer an emergency fund to help recover from criminal damage and usury (loan sharking) committed against their business while refusing to pay the pizzo. Caterina explains the importance of joining forces with Addiopizzo:

“We are working with people with social difficulties who would be easily exploited elsewhere. The aim is to work to be free of the Mafia and the problems they cause. It’s a big problem for the island.”

“Addiopizzo works in schools also, to promote the legal approach of working and owning a business — we put on events, fairs and festivals in Palermo to promote the dignified way of working, featuring only producers who refuse to pay the pizzo. Having the Addiopizzo branding on our products shows clearly that we do not pay the pizzo, and hopefully encourages others to join.”

Additionally, Addiopizzo also organises meetings with businesses to help them with the legal side and to support them in refusing the pizzo. “We’re open-minded,” says Caterina, “We work with all manner of producers and partners to help prevent Mafia activities.”

As of August 2021, there are 1028 Sicilian businesses within the Addiopizzo association, and 184 local schools involved in Addiopizzo’s anti-racket training projects.

### Produce that Produces Change

“We are wine producers that also produce other products,” Caterina explains, painting a picture of a network of independent farmers throughout the Palermo region.

“We started out as five farms in the beginning, and are now, with more than 30 farms, the largest cooperative organisation in Sicily, and we focus on



organic farming. There is not another option for sustainable and ethical agriculture.”

In its production of organic and natural wines, Valdibella really focuses on practical vineyard management, concentrating on specific techniques: bush-trained or espalier-trained cultivation, producing low yields and using zero tillage, green pruning and manual harvesting. There’s even a cooperative Biodiversity Charter, to set accountability for the ecological work they do.

“Thanks to the clay soil of our land the wines have a high content of extractive matter and a balanced acidity,” says Caterina.

“In the cellar we have a full respect for the natural features of the grape and keep interventions to a minimum. We do not add any synthetic chemical substances. All of our wines are made by spontaneous fermentation, in this way the wine can truly express the territory from which it comes! The organic grapes are rich in native yeasts that are perfectly able to carry out the fermentation. We use small doses of sulphites — still below half of the doses legally allowed. Some wines are also made entirely without adding sulphites.”

Valdibella’s cooperative of organic farmers



**“ORGANIC SHOULD BE FOR EVERYONE, NOT JUST FOR A SMALL NUMBER OF PEOPLE WHO CAN AFFORD IT”**



KATIE MATHER © ADDIOPIZZO AND THE VALDIBELLA COOPERATIVE

also focuses on cultivating and regenerating vineyards of indigenous grapes like Nero d’Avola, Catarratto, Perricone, Grillo and Zibibbo, using low-intervention methods to produce wines that show the terroir of the island they love while trying hard to keep prices accessible and fair to all. One of their wines, a Nero D’Avola single variety called Kerasos, harks back to the ancient Greek settlers of the island in its name, which appropriately means “cherry” in Greek. Fresh, but deep and with a satisfying tannin structure, it does indeed taste like rich ripe cherries on a bed of soft leather, with warming notes of Moroccan tagine spices.

“Organic should be for everyone, not just for a small number of people who can afford it,” says Caterina. For cooperatives like Valdibella, and smaller independents not part of any coop, it’s hard to be visible. More and more large-scale farming companies claim to be using organic practices and offering artificially low prices. Caterina says it’s a challenge, but one they are well prepared for.

“Our prices are set by paying the right costs to the workers in the field. We can show you where our wine comes from, we can show you the difference between industrial organics and the rural organic farming everyone in the Valdibella cooperative commits to.”

It’s important to the cooperative that they can prove that their profits are going back to the farmers, the field workers, promoting Valdibella

to the wider world, supporting Addiopizzo projects and, ultimately, giving back to Sicily. Because from the beginning, Valdibella was about creating great local wine, naturally, but it was also about social and economic empowerment for young Sicilians. Without prospects, it’s easy to fall into criminal patterns laid out over generations. Working with the Jonathan Project, Valdibella helped to train young people in agriculture, artisanal skills and winemaking.

Vital work, as Addiopizzo point out in their mission statement: “It is not enough to accompany and support traders and entrepreneurs to report pizzo and extortion if one does not take charge of removing the pockets of poverty, urban and social decay that contribute to... organised crime.”

Can the wine in your glass do that? 🍷



FARMER BY CHOICE  
ANTONIO ACCARDO

PHOTO © VALERIA MONTI

# Sicilian Whites and lemons

**Y**ou probably don't think very much about lemons; they're a commonplace fruit. It may surprise you then that, throughout history, they've been among the world's most coveted and mysterious of foodstuffs; the lemon is the most painted fruit in Western art. During the Dutch golden age alone, more than half of those 17th century paintings depicted the yellow citrus. Why did the lemon appeal so deeply to those artists?

But that isn't the lemon's only mystery. When and where was it first grown? Perhaps 3,000 years ago? Maybe older? Perhaps from northwestern India? Maybe Myanmar? Honestly, who really knows?

What we do know — is that lemons were brought to Sicily by conquering Muslims in the 9th century, when the island was part of the Byzantine Empire. Within a few centuries, lemons were so plentiful in Sicily that the Bay of Palermo was called the *Conca d'Oro*, the shell of gold, for the yellow citrus fruits shining along the coast. By the 19th

century — after doctors realised that citrus cured scurvy — it was 60 times more profitable to grow lemons than any other crop, including olives and grapes. So lucrative was the lemon trade that it gave rise to Sicily's infamous mafia, who controlled the industry.

So why all the talk about lemons in a wine pairing article? First, if you're like me (and god help you if you are) you enjoy a wine pairing challenge, and citrus is devilishly difficult. Second, if you're like me (again, lucky you) one of your favourite dishes is the southern Italian standard *pasta al limone* — a deceptively simple recipe that calls only for lemon, butter, basil, and Parmigiano-Reggiano, along with linguine or spaghetti.

Like the tomato — the other southern Italian staple — lemon defies an easy pairing.

Do you match the acidity, with a white like Pinot Grigio or Sauvignon Blanc? Do you contrast with sweetness, like an off-dry Riesling, or with heavily oaked red? I say, neither. With *pasta al limone*, it's an



exemplary case of “what grows together, goes together”. That means, Sicilian white wine with a classic Sicilian dish.

Sicilian whites made from lesser-known but ancient grapes, such as Grillo, Catarratto, Zibibbo (aka Moscato d'Alessandria), Inzolia, and others have been gaining popularity over the past decade as good-value, everyday wines. Particularly around the cool volcanic slopes of Mount Etna, they are becoming some of the most sought-after Italian whites.

Dry whites, however, are a relatively recent phenomenon in Sicily. From the late 18th century until the end of the 20th century, grapes here were mainly grown for producing Marsala,

the island's famed fortified wine. But over time, poor quality doomed Marsala's reputation as a cheap cooking wine.

Enter Marco de Bartoli, who made the revolutionary move in the 1990s to vinify Grillo and Zibibbo as dry wines. There are now over 8,000 hectares of Grillo planted in Sicily, up from just under 2,000 at the turn of the 21st century. Catarratto, though, remains the most widely planted grape, and it's the backbone for one of

ILLUSTRATIONS • SHUTTERSTOCK





my go-to value Sicilian wines, Donnafugata Anthilia. At under 10 pounds, its lush floral and fleshy stone fruit notes, along with its supple roundness, pair beautifully with a Tuesday night *pasta al limone*. It's an amiable crowd-pleaser.

These days, Sicily has become a hotbed for natural winemaking from producers such as Frank Cornelissen and Arianna Occhipinti. One of my favourite whites in all of Italy is Occhipinti's SP68 Bianco, which is a blend of Zibibbo along with a rare, ancient variety called Albanello, of which there are only a few hundred hectares remaining. SP68 ("the name of a road, for a wine which is a journey," says Occhipinti), is both complex and refreshing. There are unique aromas of grapefruit, lychee, saffron, rose, and even kirsch, yet in the mouth it's salty and stony, full of nectarine and sage

with a very dry finish. Beautiful, and with its low alcohol, dangerously drinkable.

What's striking about the Sicilian whites I've tasted over the years is that while there's a common thread — drinkability, freshness, big floral notes, and an underlying seaside element — I find a lot of variety. Part of that is because of Sicily's diversity of grapes. But the other part is that Sicily's dry wine culture is young and there aren't so many strict traditions and rules.

In that way, Sicilian whites mirror *pasta al limone*, which is a simple recipe with dozens of local variations. In mine, I use butter instead of oil, linguine instead of spaghetti, and I insist on using lemon zest as well as the juice. I've seen people (ahem Nigella Lawson) mistakenly incorporate eggs and cream (In a word: No). But the recipe is more of a suggestion or form rather than a prescribed list. Make it to your taste.

Do yourself a favour, though, and see how well it pairs with a delicious Sicilian white. 🍋

“ Sicily's dry wine culture is young and there aren't so many strict traditions and rules

## Pasta al Limone

This lemon pasta dish is an overlooked classic, native both in Sicily and the Amalfi Coast. The basics are always the same — lemon, butter, basil, and Parmigiano-Reggiano — but adjust according to your taste (I tend to use slightly more butter, lemon, and salt). The key is to use lemon zest as well as the juice for a fresh and lively sauce. A perfect accompaniment to grilled fish, or great simply on its own.

### INGREDIENTS:

- 340g dry linguine
- 6-8 tablespoons unsalted butter
- Zest of one lemon
- Juice of one lemon
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon fresh-ground black pepper
- 10g fresh basil leaves, chopped
- 90g Parmigiano-Reggiano, freshly grated
- Basil sprigs for garnish

### INSTRUCTIONS:

Bring a large pot of well-salted water to a boil and drop in the pasta. Cook according to the package instructions, stirring constantly.

When pasta is almost finished, melt butter in a large skillet. Add zest, juice, salt, and pepper and heat on low for 1 minute.

Strain the pasta when it is ready and then add it to the skillet and toss. Add basil and Parmigiano-Reggiano and toss until the pasta is evenly coated.

Serve with more grated cheese and black pepper at the table. Serves four.



# Bottling holiday *spirit*



**H**oliday drinks taste better. Who hasn't lugged a bottle of local liquor home, hoping its foreign brightness would pierce a grey homebound evening only to discover disappointment in every sip? Millions of banished bottles languishing in the back of a cupboard! Don't think about glugging it down the drain; you paid to put a bag in the hold just to bring it home, for goodness sake, best to tuck it behind the Christmas Baileys. Yet every time it peeks out, maybe when you're rummaging for some other lost liqueur for an obscure dessert, there it is, reminding you you're no longer on holiday and that once, it really did taste delicious.

This is my feeling about Aperol, a drink that is never quite as tasty at home. For me, it specifically conjures a hot and sticky summer visit to Palermo with my sister. We planned to drive around the island, discovering secret spots filled with delicious wine, on the hunt for

the best caponata, but I balked after just one day of car rental. I simply wasn't cut out for the intense motorsport that is driving in Sicily, where wing mirrors hang from car doors like jangly earrings, and every intersection is a battle of wills. Hertz got the car back early, and we spent our holiday in the city taking excursions along the coast by train, which has an upside: no longer a designated driver, I could enjoy drinking a bit more.

Sicily swelters in summer. I had been warned that it can get warm, but what would I know of heat? My Irish understanding of island life has been whipped into existence by bitter on-shore breezes and salty Atlantic swells. A volcanic island blanketed in thick, oppressive humidity was something new to me; I now understood how chickens feel in an oven.

And this is when Aperol Spritz came to my rescue. "Ooh!" my sister cooed, "This one's

only €2.50". It didn't seem to matter if we paid a couple of euro or almost a tenner; it was the Goldilocks of drinks: not too bitter, not too sweet, not too alcoholic and always ice cold. Perfect for a blistering vacation, and if you ordered it at the right time of day, it came with snacks!

Searching for that same holiday flavour at home, I've come close, but it's not the same. Holiday drinks taste of the places we drink them. They mingle with the air that envelops where we are, embodying the very feeling of being away. My sister makes the best home attempt — good spumante prosecco makes all the difference — but it's not quite the antidote to sweltering Sicilianesque heat that I remember. 🍷

# Pét-nat vs Professor Champagne

*Toussaint Stackhouse* shares his journey from classical education to natural evangelism

**“W**ow, you like pét-nat?! It’s way too wild and funky for me”.  
“Damn, we were just vibing bro!” I think to myself. It’s commonplace for this sentiment to be accompanied by a barrage of eyebrow exercises and a lecture that makes me feel like I was sent to the principal’s office to be scolded by Professor Champagne. In this instance, I was enjoying a lovely conversation with a wonderful dude, who I soon found out was a sales rep - hence the shift to the preachy shit. Now, I could have returned fire with a monologue that would have sent homie stumbling back to the Brut Brigade, but that attitude in itself is not the essence of what pét-nat, or the whole sector of “natural” wine for that matter, represents. Instead, I ask the one question I know will give me all the answers I need:

“Bro, where did you study?!”



ILLUSTRATIONS • LILY LAMBIE-KIERNAN

By no means do I consider my wine journey, which only began four years ago, unconventional or unique. Actually, my story is so eerily similar to the one told in the 2020 Netflix movie “Uncorked” that I sometimes feel as if I went through some sort of sick Truman Show experiment. I’ll hit you with the condensed version of my plot: Guy gets random opportunity to work at wine bar, doesn’t know shit but quickly falls in love with it, starts drinking his ass off and buys hella books to get educated, takes a chance and moves away from home to work on a vineyard, signs up for one of the incredibly intimidating wine certifying programs, studies his ass off for months with limited sleep and battles imposter syndrome, overcomes the odds and the haters and passes exam, and then, finally, celebrates officially being a wine professional.

Seriously, doesn’t this sound like a movie you’ve

seen? I will admit achieving my first certificate through the Court of Master Sommeliers (CMS) is one of my greatest accomplishments. It gave me the foundation to deeply understand wine, no matter how hyper-focused it is to conventional winemaking and the laws that surround it (something I learned *after* I passed).

I can’t front, it’s pretty cool to flex my formal education from time to time. Want to know the difference between the Left Bank and Right Bank of Bordeaux? I got you. Or how about aging requirements for Cava classification? Say no more, fam! As grateful as I am for this knowledge, the process isn’t always fun, and certainly isn’t cheap. Nevertheless, I keep going back for more, achieving certification from the Wine & Spirit Education Trust (WSET) in the summer of 2020.

If you aspire to gain some certs and don some fancy pins I definitely encourage you to seek



out whatever programs are available where you are (they vary and can range from being region-specific to education-focused). Here in the States, if you seek a career focused on the service side of the industry, you'd go with the CMS. But if you desire to be on the communications side of things – writers, bloggers, and educators of the world – you'd lock in with the WSET.

Although there are a number of unique and positive aspects to both of these courses there is a disappointing common thread; there is no focus on natural wine making, nor on organic or biodynamic farming. Honestly, it is completely disregarded, and often denounced, by the instructors of these programs.

Case in point, a quote from a previous instructor that left the majority of my mates shaking their heads, pondering but seemingly in agreement: “Why wouldn't you use technology to make sure you achieve the results you always want in the winery?” All I could do was wonder why in the hell we'd been talking about the importance of terroir for the past 90 minutes if that was the case.

Because of this, I will say my greatest lessons have come from working in wine shops. Lots of tangible education, and a breadth of wines available to you from all over the world, curated to satisfy the desires of most wine drinkers, no matter your level of understanding or amount

of drinking experience. Not to mention the fat employee discount you're typically afforded as well, which makes exploration a bit more, shall we say, palatable? I keep a job in a wine shop for all of these reasons, but most importantly to encourage a similar level of exploration in my customers who are clearly overwhelmed with choice paralysis.

I know what that feels like. I also know how influential being in and interacting in these settings has been to my growth as a professional. I've learned my favourite wines come from volcanic soils, shout out to Mount Etna, and that Pinot Noir from Burgundy is going to be my third choice after a Pinot from Willamette, and a Spätburgunder. Most importantly, working in wine shops is where I fell in love with the most delicious juice in the world, a naturally sparkling style known as Pétillant Naturel.

Pét-nat, for short, is perfect. It is natural wine to its core, where so many spontaneous elements contribute to the final product. It's a winemaking style that pre-dates the methods used to make champagne, and is much less intrusive. When I describe the process of making pét-nat to people unfamiliar, the quickest and most direct way that I like to explain it is as “the winemaker assisting it through its journey, not dictating what the final product will be”. There aren't any laws that restrict where it can be made, nor on the grapes

**“ Pét-nat, for short, is natural wine to its core, where so many spontaneous elements contribute to the final product**



you can use to produce it. You can age them and let them develop even deeper characteristics, or drink them while they are refreshing and vibrant and young. They are easily enjoyable any time of day, month, or year. It's typically what I'll pop open for my homies after a long night of drinking a few bottles. Still, even with its booming popularity, those that still hold traditional wine values in such high regard shun the idea of these wines being taken seriously, like most of the natural wine world. Most articles you read will refer to pét-nat as wine for the “cool kids”.

I guess I consider myself one of those kids, for sure. Pét-nat is not a fad, it's not some cool shit that will fade away in a few years. It is, in my opinion, the essence of wine. I'm just saying, before technology, all that was needed was what the earth provided. And those nomads were getting plenty drunk.

My love for “untainted” wine is simply based on how I live and view life. I know where my food comes from, and in my home we make our food choices based on seasonality and what we should actually have access to. Most beautifully, it is an expression of a people, of a land, and of a period of time. For those reasons, I often find myself on an exploration for deeper comprehension of a bottle I'm drinking, which inevitably makes my drinking experience much more intimate.

This is my process, and my journey is just beginning. There will always be something new and exciting in wine to tap into, no matter what you enjoy. So I sincerely hope by reading this, you are empowered to go on, continue, or reignite whatever journey you may be on. And if you love pét-nat like me, claim it unapologetically; who gives a fuck what Professor Champagne has to say? 🍷

# Compound drinking: Wine and coffee

“What’s the filter today?”  
“You tell me.”  
“I don’t know!”  
“Well, what does it taste like?”  
“Coffee?”  
“Get out! Is it fruity or is it more chocolatey?”  
“Chocolate?”  
“I thought you were supposed to have some form of superpalate?”  
“Okay, okay lemme try again. Fruit, right?”  
Okay... Peach?”  
“That’s better.”  
“...and sour cherry?”  
“Yes!”

**T**wo months ago I started working in speciality coffee. Two months ago I became aware I was not the taster I thought I was.

I’ve been working with wine for some time now. To me, wine can taste of the sharp, blasphemous sweetness of pineapple on a pizza; of dusting icing sugar on top of a victoria sponge and of fat green olives nestling in a martini glass. To taste wine is to be greeted with who I am that day and to be connected with those whom I am drinking with too.

But coffee... Coffee so far just tastes like coffee. And that frustrates me.

Will Davies of Mec Coffee in Cardiff reassures me when I tell him of my frustrations.

“I think wine is quite immediate and coffee is a bit more like whiskey or beer,” he says. “You need to acclimatise your palate to it.”

Mec Coffee is currently operating as a pop-up in a wine bar, Bulles, my favourite in the city. Will visits wine on his foundation of coffee, the mirror image of how I am approaching my new role. As a result I find conversations with Will as comforting as they are fascinating.



ILLUSTRATIONS ○ BILLIE FRANCIS

“If I served you a coffee and said ‘I’m getting blueberry, with a toffee-like texture’ you, or someone else, might sip it and tell me ‘it tastes like coffee,’” continues Will.

“Whereas most people that try a really jammy, young Beaujolais would be like, ‘yes, that does taste like Ribena!’ So I think wine is easier in that sense. I think coffee does taste like coffee, but you have to tune into that palate more to find what else is there.”

So what would tuning into a coffee palate look like? What affects the way coffee tastes?

One of the most crucial aspects in a wine’s taste is its terroir. In theory, a good wine should taste of where it comes from, to the point where some sommeliers may take it upon themselves to lick the ground in order to get a true sense of place. Couldn’t be me.

Thankfully, terroir can be applied to all products of agriculture, so as a starting point to tasting coffee this is something I’m familiar with at least.

Sam Thomas is the Head Roaster at Hard Lines in Cardiff, and my colleague. His role is adjacent to that of a winemaker if you’re approaching it from my brain — which I am. I’m intrigued as to

how much a coffee’s heritage affects the decisions he makes.

“Just as in wine, a coffee’s terroir, along with the species and varietal or cultivar of the coffee tree, are what gives a coffee its inherent flavour characteristics,” he tells me.

“It’s fairly easy to be able to accurately describe Colombian coffees in one way and Ethiopians in another.”

Sam also explains that terroir isn’t the only thing that informs his roast approach.

“Factors such as altitude, varietal (therefore size and density of the bean) and the given fermentation process a coffee goes through, along with the desired brewing approach, that will determine how I roast a coffee. We essentially work backwards from the beverage or brew method — for example espresso or filter — determining the roast approach we will take and finding a coffee that fits.”

Perhaps part of tuning into a coffee’s palate is appreciating the sheer complexity of its supply chain.

Let’s try an example. With a glass of theoretical Pinot Gris (skin contact, if you please), grapes are grown, picked and taken to their maker. It is the





winemaker's job to tune into where the grapes have come from and where the wine is ultimately going, and decide what story it will tell when it gets there. While many can choose a wine, there are none that can take ownership of a wine in the same way a winemaker does.

Coffee has many owners, I have found. There are those that grow the coffee, then those who roast it, closely followed by those who brew it and ultimately, the choices a person makes when they order it.

Because here's the thing: I have very little control over what a wine tastes like. There are minimal ways I can ruin a wine for a customer. I can serve it too cold, or not cold enough. I can forget to perform due diligence and serve a wine that is too faulty to drink. I can make a bad recommendation. Perhaps my hands will shake when I pour the bottle because the person I am serving is attractive and kind to dogs. None of these invoke the end of the world; all are redeemable.

While I have no control over how a wine tastes, baristas have an ownership of their finished product that I am unfamiliar with. It makes me wonder why on earth sommeliers are held in such

high regard when all we do, really, is pour.

"That's the thing with coffee, it's just a really nice thing and you're trying not to ruin it I guess," Will tells me, when I ask him about how he's finding serving wine in comparison to making coffee.

"The thing itself is already really great and I guess that is a parallel to wine, but instead of serving it at the right temperature and decanting it at the right time you have to grind it correctly, use the right water, brew it at the right temperature..."

To add anything to wine, be it ice or some form of mixer, is, as far as most wine professionals are concerned, to face God and to walk backwards into hell. The combinations in which a coffee can be served alongside milk and water, as well as various temperatures and textures are too much for me to comprehend. How would you even go about creating a product that could be drunk in so many different ways?

"Additives are great!" Sam surprisingly exclaims.

"They allow us to create unique and delicious flavours to serve and get excited about. We can start with one coffee and serve it in as many ways as our creativity allows us to – what's not to like about that?"

## “Coffee is still undergoing ‘processes’ right up until the cup is in front of the consumer

"Unlike wine whereby the product is completely finished by the time the consumer gets it, coffee is still undergoing 'processes' right up until the cup is in front of the consumer - mad right? So in serving a coffee, we ask ourselves questions like 'What can we pair with or add to this bright and juicy Kenyan to create a nice summer drink that will enhance its inherent flavours but also create a new flavour experience?'"

I cannot tell you how much I have dragged my heels writing this. I re-watched Season Three of *The Office* (US) instead of writing this. I planned an outfit for a date I haven't been asked on instead of writing this. I thought really long and hard about hoovering my flat (before ultimately deciding against it) instead of writing this – all because I'm not as sure about coffee as I am about wine, and uncertainty breeds discomfort. This procrastination reminds me of something

Will said when I asked what the biggest difference between working with wine and coffee was, to him:

"It's the simplicity of the chain, and the sheer expectation of what you're supposed to know when you talk about wine."

But isn't that where the joy comes from? Life would be dull if all knowledge were innate after all. I may not know much now but I will do, as long as I keep tuning in, and in the meantime I can greet those who carry a matched uncertainty with empathy. Oh, you're not sure about this drink either? Neither am I. Let's stumble through discovery together, curiosity looks good on us I think.

I made my own coffee this morning. It tasted like coffee at first, but after a deep exhale and another sip I got a faint whiff of parma violets and a tang reminiscent of honeydew melon. I took another sip, another deep breath in, head tilted towards the sun. I'll get there. ☕

# Sweet Equilibrium

*Matthew Curtis* discusses wine people, beer people, and the pleasure that can be found in liminal spaces

I've often, mistakenly, found the world of wine to be somewhat inaccessible. As a beer drinker and writer, I know that I love wine, and have done for almost as long as I've loved beer, but I'm a "jeans and trainers" kind of guy. I own one suit, and it gets an outing as infrequently as possible, reserved only for the rare wedding or funeral. In this context, wine spaces in the traditional sense more often than not seemed too formal; too rich for my blood. And so for a long time I deprived myself of them.

This is almost definitely one of the reasons why I found the world of craft beer so easy to settle into. Here was something interesting and delicious being made and served by people who look like me, before I consumed it sat at a rickety trellis table beneath a railway arch surrounded by people who also look like me: white men in their

mid-to-late 30s with a similar aversion to formal attire. I am acutely aware that this in itself is as problematic as why I once found wine to be so inaccessible – privilege has played a huge role in shaping today's drinks culture, after all – but I feel it's a good example of why I invested my time and energy into learning more about the grain, rather than the grape.

Something I've always struggled with are attempts to conflate the cultures of wine and beer, as though they're somehow similar to one another. Take beer and food matching for example: I'd agree that a great many beers go well with a variety of dishes, but I'm yet to be convinced that anything will go better with a medium-rare ribeye than a delicious glass of Syrah, or Cabernet Franc. Similarly, if I'm at a restaurant serving an indulgent nine-course



tasting menu, I'm absolutely going to go with the pairing options a sommelier has painstakingly chosen. While pubs will always be my temples of beer, restaurants are the cathedrals where I indulge in the glory of wine.

Neither am I fond of articles with titles like "Five Wines for Beer Lovers" which tell you things like: "if you love Belgian Saison, then you will also enjoy a glass of Riesling." Yes there are Saisons

that undoubtedly share characteristics with this glorious grape, like Saison Dupont, for example. But they should be celebrated and enjoyed on their own merit. They're better this way.

I've found that attempting to demonstrate how much beer and wine have in common in terms of how they taste, or what they pair with, actually has the opposite effect, making the world of wine even harder to crack. It's true that beer

“*Something I've always struggled with are attempts to conflate the cultures of wine and beer*”



“ *I strongly believe both beer and wine serve the drinker better when celebrated on their own merit*

and wine share a great many similarities, but I strongly believe both serve the drinker better when celebrated on their own merit. What I believe we need to normalise is that it's ok to enjoy a little bit of column B with your column A; each are good for their own reasons, rather than simply tolerable because they're somehow similar. I began to enjoy wine a great deal more when I stopped trying to compare every glass I drank to beer.

Before I could truly enjoy wine like I do beer, I had to get over myself a little. Wine is not all white tablecloths and formal attire. Like a great many wine lovers, the barriers that prevented me experiencing it as fully as I might began to break down when I visited a vineyard, and saw winemaking first hand. This was no French chateau or slope beside the Mosel, however, this was in Washington's Walla Walla Valley, part of the American Pacific Northwest that is producing, for my money, some of the best wines on the planet right now.

Spring Valley Vineyard is a serious winery. Bottles like the scintillating Nina Lee Syrah – full of deep notes of black cherry, and tannins that shine like freshly buffed leather – go for upwards of \$50 (£36) a bottle, often more. But when I arrived at the farm where they produce these exceptional wines, I found something I wasn't expecting: familiarity. Here were a bunch of jeans-and-trainers folks like me, obsessed with extracting deliciousness from every harvest, and eager to geek out about fermentation. They even let me punch down some Pinot Noir and taste juice that had only been harvested and pressed three days

ago; the tiniest prick of carbonation amid the sweetness indicating that fermentation was already underway.

I felt as comfortable here among the rows of stainless steel vessels and racks of oak barrels as I have done in any brewery. My glass was rarely empty as our guide eagerly poured us vintages that were finished and bottled, and those that were yet to be. This visit helped me understand that, while I appreciate that it's important for wine and beer to stand apart on their own two feet, when it comes to things like process, and creating flavours for people to enjoy, here was a tangible similarity that, as a beer lover, I could hang my hat on.

This was the nudge I needed to seek out more wine experiences – not necessarily at other vineyards, but in bars and restaurants. Back in London, where I lived at the time, my newfound curiosity led me to spots like Noble Rot, Newcomer Wines, and one bar in particular, P Franco.

I was a little nervous when I first entered this bar/restaurant/off licence hybrid that sits on Lower Clapton Road opposite Hackney's famous Round Chapel. The place was packed (which to be fair isn't difficult, as the small room just about manages to hold 20 people at capacity). While there are seats by the windows at the front, the business end of P Franco is the table at its centre. Here, guests are seated together while servers whizz around like hummingbirds, dispensing the nectar instead of drinking it. At its end, the current resident chef is busy cooking small plates using only a modest pair of immersion hobs.



It's hard to explain why I initially felt out of place here, but my gut anxieties kept telling me that this just wasn't "my scene" for whatever reason I'd invented. Was it because they were pouring a different beverage or merely my own preconceived bias that was making me feel this way? In all likelihood it was an unhealthy dose of the latter, and I'm so glad I got over it.

What ensued was one of the most unforgettable nights of food and wine I've ever experienced. Well, I say that but I can't fully remember what I ate or drank, other than I have this feeling of how incredible everything was, and that when afterwards I walked out into the cold East London night air, I immediately longed to

return. Again, a similar feeling to the glow you get after a night in some of the best pubs, or brewery taprooms. Wine not being accessible was a myth that I invented for myself.

I am not what you would call a "wine person", I am a beer guy who appreciates how delicious other drinks can be. But I no longer have a desire to preach the gospel of beer and convert people who prefer other beverages. It's boring, honestly. And you don't need to know what a qevri is, or understand the function of carbonic maceration to have fun drinking wine. Just concentrate on enjoying both beer and wine when and however you feel like it, simply because they're both delicious. 🍷



# THE *odd* COUPLE

You asked for more wine and crisp pairings, so that's what you're getting. **Rachel Hendry** tears open a few more bags, in her quest to find the ultimate marriage of grape and potato.

## Roast Chicken and Cassis White

Summer is here and all I can think about is roasting a chicken.

There's just something about having its cold carcass in my fridge, ready for salads, for butter slathered cheese-thick on bread, for mindless snacking after a long day at work. This epitomises long, hot, summer days to me.

When the gap between wanting roast chicken and making roast chicken is too long to bridge, as it so often is, there are always crisps—for that I am grateful.

Whilst Cassis is renowned for its sweet fruited liqueurs, it is also home to white wines that are delicate in their salinity, all preserved lemons and young herbs and sunrise slowly warming a beach. Perfect for the soft, soothing sage and slowly roasted garlic that a roast chicken crisp radiates. Bonus points if consumed al fresco.

## Cheese & Onion and Gavi

I'm going to level with you here. Not only do I not like cheese and onion flavoured crisps (they taste sweaty!), one of the (many) hills I am willing to die on is that cheese and wine is not the perfect pairing some may think.

Having said that, it would be amiss of me—the divine creator of this masterful crisp and wine pairing series—to exclude cheese and onion and not provide it the faultlessly compatible partner I have given all other flavours.

Cheese-flavoured things are a very umami savoury experience—and umami can be a pretty tricky taste to balance when drink pairing. So we're gonna need a wine as amiable as they can get here. I'm thinking Gavi.

Made with the Cortese grape in the Piedmonte region of Italy, a good Gavi sings with lemon and lime acidity, the crisp crunch of biting into a green apple or a good pear and, if you're lucky, the whole experience ends on a pillowy almond croissant floating through the air. What's not to love? Cheese and onion crisps certainly think it works, and who am I to say otherwise?

## Black Truffle and Pomerol

I will know I have made it in life when I have the following three items: a kitchen island, a freestanding bath, and enough disposable income that I can drop a fiver on a single packet of crisps without inducing some form of panic attack.

Let's pretend that I have this aforementioned triptych in my possession for a moment.

I am perched at my kitchen island debating whether or not to have a bath this evening. I look past my fridge (which can make crushed ice on command) and my gaze settles on the fifteen storey wine rack to it's right. I glide across the room and pull out a bottle of Pomerol, pausing briefly to grab a packet of black truffle crisps from my dedicated crisp cupboard as I make my way back to the kitchen island.

Pomerol is sourced on the right bank of the famous Bordeaux region in France, which means it's heavier on the Merlot than it is on the Cabernet Sauvignon. A good Pomerol has the potential to taste like the smooth, taut, skin of a plum caressing your lips, the snap of dark chocolate and gives off a well spiced perfume that causes heads to turn.

Drunk alongside the salt and the earth of a black truffle crisp only works to accentuate Pomerol's sensual nature. I take a sip and I follow it with a crunch. I have made it. I am at peace. 🍷

ILLUSTRATION • CLARE BEVIS



RACHEL HENDRY • THE ODD COUPLE

# From the heart

## Rachel Hendry finds poetry in an honest tasting note

**T**here is something aspirational about the smell of other people's laundry. Steps closer, deep breaths in, double takes with the breeze. One fabric softener in particular reminds me of a boy I fell in love with before I was old enough to know that love should keep you full, not drain you hollow. Over a decade later his smell still gets worn by others. I stop in the street every time, heart turning to face them, seventeen all over again.

It's the Proust effect, Nigel Slater's relationship with toast and that scene in Pixar's *Ratatouille* where restaurant critic Anton Ego inhales Remy's food and is transported to his early childhood, knocked knees and broken bikes soothed by maternal cooking.

Our sense of smell holds a power over us I would argue no other sense does – one of teleportation and transportation – that is all down to the way our organs are connected.

"In terms of brain anatomy, there are more direct neuronal connections from the nose to parts of the brain that are involved in emotions and memory formation (collectively referred to as the limbic system) – these are more direct than connections from other senses such as sight or sound," Venkatesh N. Murthy, Professor and Director of the Centre for Brain Science at Harvard University tells me.

"A lot of what we think of as taste is a combination of taste and smell (flavour is a better word) because almost everything we eat or drink gives off volatile molecules that travel from the back of our mouths to the insides of our nose, where cells that mediate smell reside."

So not only does our olfactory system have the ability to differentiate between a whole catalogue of scents, its close relationship to the parts of our brain involved with memory and emotion – the amygdala and the hippocampus

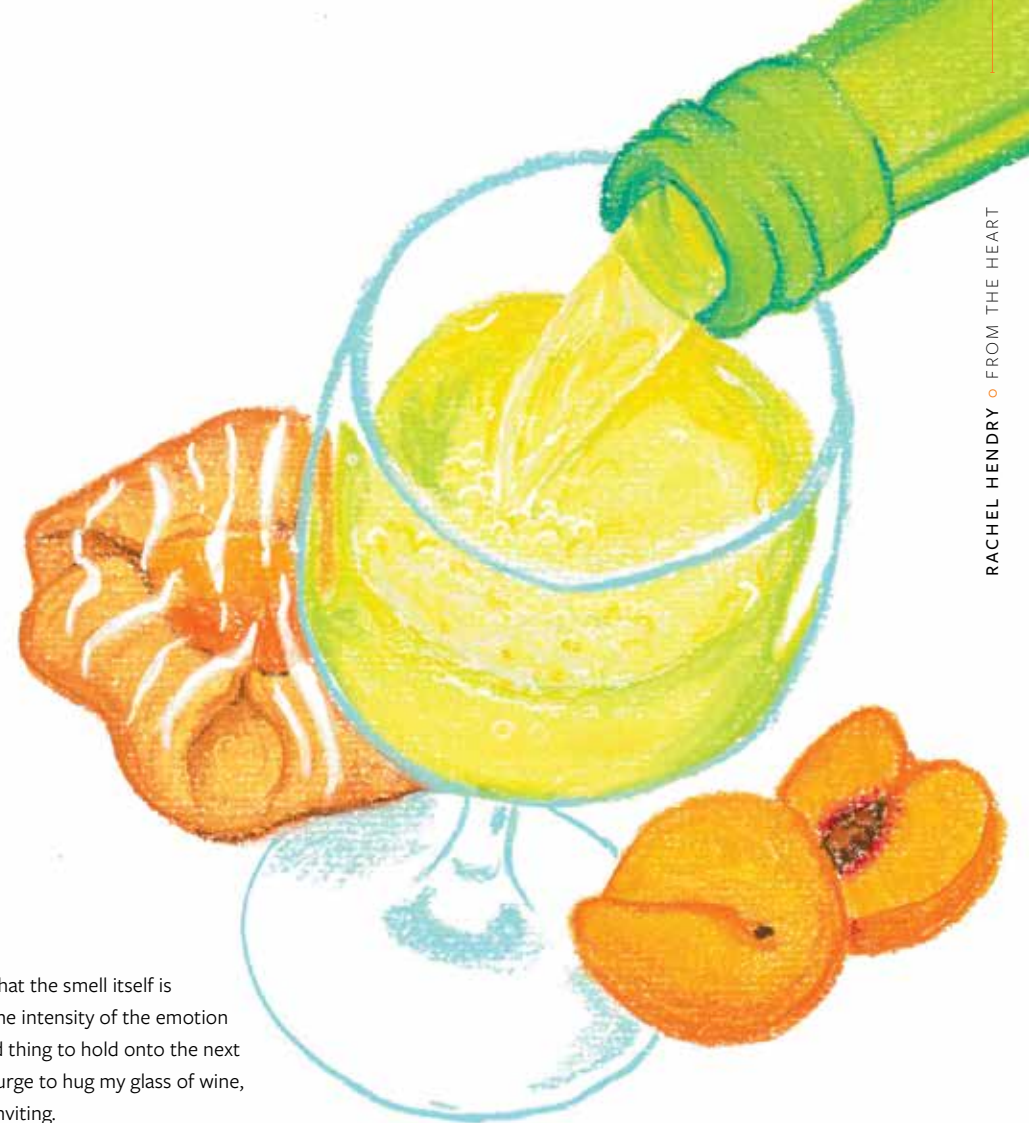
– often mean that the smell itself is surpassed by the intensity of the emotion we feel. A good thing to hold onto the next time I feel the urge to hug my glass of wine, the aroma so inviting.

"Smells appear to be intimately tied to memories," Venkatesh continues. "One thing to keep in mind is that the memories triggered by smells are usually not about the smells themselves – rather, they are about events and places we experienced in the past, in conjunction with those smells. Indeed, the famous example of Marcel Proust's madeleine episode (in his masterpiece *À la recherche du temps perdu*) involves a vivid description of the landscape and events in his past, but not about the actual smell or taste itself."

Perhaps this goes some way to explain my tendency for preciousness when it comes to tasting notes. When someone critiques a flavour

I've come across in my wine as wrong I find it very difficult not to respond as if they have just told me who I am is wrong.

You see, when I tell you this wine tastes of apricots I am telling you about the apricots I have eaten. Apricots condensed into tiny pots of Bonne Maman jam I bought at the airport in Marseille, desperate to cling onto holiday breakfasts for just a little while longer. Whole apricots embedded into Danish pastries, amber jewels that burst, their syrup sticking to my lips. Dried apricots presented with good intentions, eaten with sullen reluctance. How can something so intrinsic to my being be called into question? >



“None of us are the same and as a result we do not drink the same – that is the unequivocal joy of it all

Curious to know if being precious is perhaps an overreaction on my part, I ask Venkatesh if the relationship between past and present via smell is ever strengthened in some people over others.

“Memories are personal, by definition!”

Venkatesh exclaims in response, and I breathe a sigh of validated relief. “Some people seem to have more evocative memories in relation to smells, and that could be because such people pay more attention to smells. It could also be that they have been recalling those memories more frequently.”

“I also think a lot of intangible and inexpressible feelings attributed to smells and thoughts they evoke might come from the very nature of smell perception. In many cultures, there seems to be an impoverished vocabulary for smells, which we perhaps compensate by more visceral interpretations of odors - which might feel more emotional!”

Very early on in any formal wine education you will be presented with a lexicon, a set of words that you may use to describe how a wine smells and how it may taste, that you will later be examined on. It is a vocabulary of assumption: that we all approach a strawberry in the same way, that we all share the same relationship with coffee, that medicinal flavours, and all the hang ups that come with it, are universally unchanging.

None of us are the same and as a result we do not drink the same – that is the unequivocal joy of it all. Flavour is a way to curiously engage with differences, with our histories, our likes

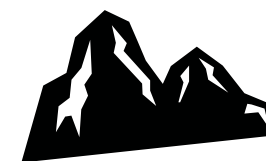
and dislikes, vocabulary and experiences! Smell is us, as people, who can only ever taste as we are. Wine is a gift that will help us to access that, in ourselves and in each other. There can be no examined language for that.

In learning to lean into a wine smelling like the woods near my parents house an hour after it rains, I receive a gift. A new friend, Blair, shares his tasting notes. “A good garden with some flowers and lots of herbs during/just after a light rain,” he has written. I think how lucky I am to connect this way, with someone else who has stood outside and let themselves feel the air moments after the rain and who has felt it again later on, in the swirls of their glass. I wouldn’t get this with gooseberries.

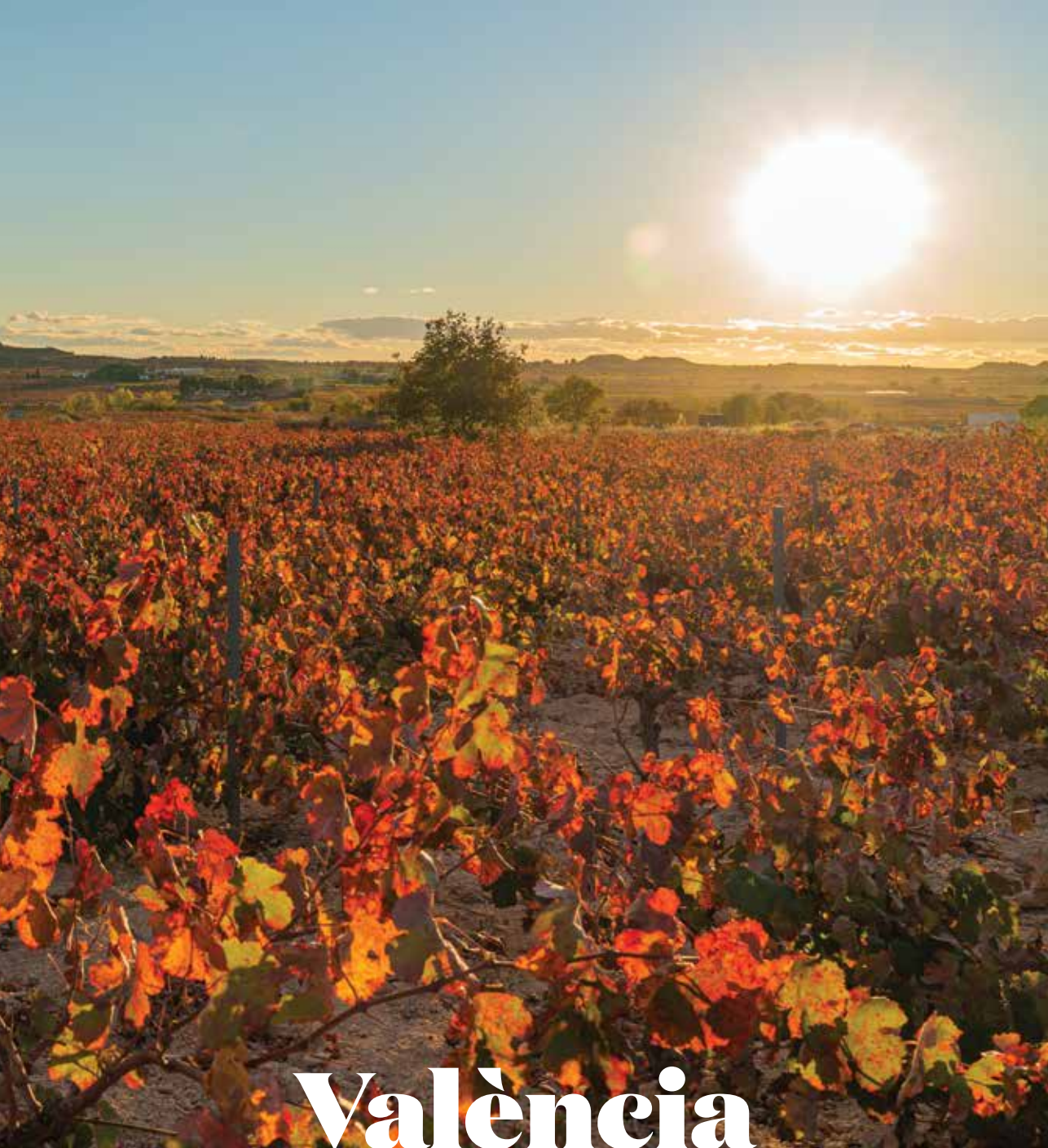
I think perhaps if I have a lifetime of connections like this I can handle a lifetime of being told my tasting notes are too personal, that who I am is wrong, of failing future wine exams. I think perhaps, if anything, I will make it more so.

Blackberry jam from my mother, labelled made with love, August 2021. A tobacco dusted pillowcase, evidence that nothing good ever happens past 2am. Blackening lemons on the hob to dress a salad, my best friend hovering in the doorway. Trying, and failing, to love espresso. Mint choc chip ice cream on the walk home from work, in an attempt to pacify an anxious heart.

All are points of reference for me now. Past flavours I can anchor a present one to. Fleeting moments I have captured in order to tell you – outside of what we are used to – who I am. ☕



CAIRNGORM.COFFEE



# València

Next month we head to Spain, to experience the vibrant wine, food and culture of **València**. Join us.