

UNDER THE VOLCANO

Etna is Sicily's latest hot wine region, thanks to creative and dedicated winemakers who are bringing out the best in the grapes of this extreme microclimate.

Story and Photos By PATRICIA THOMSON

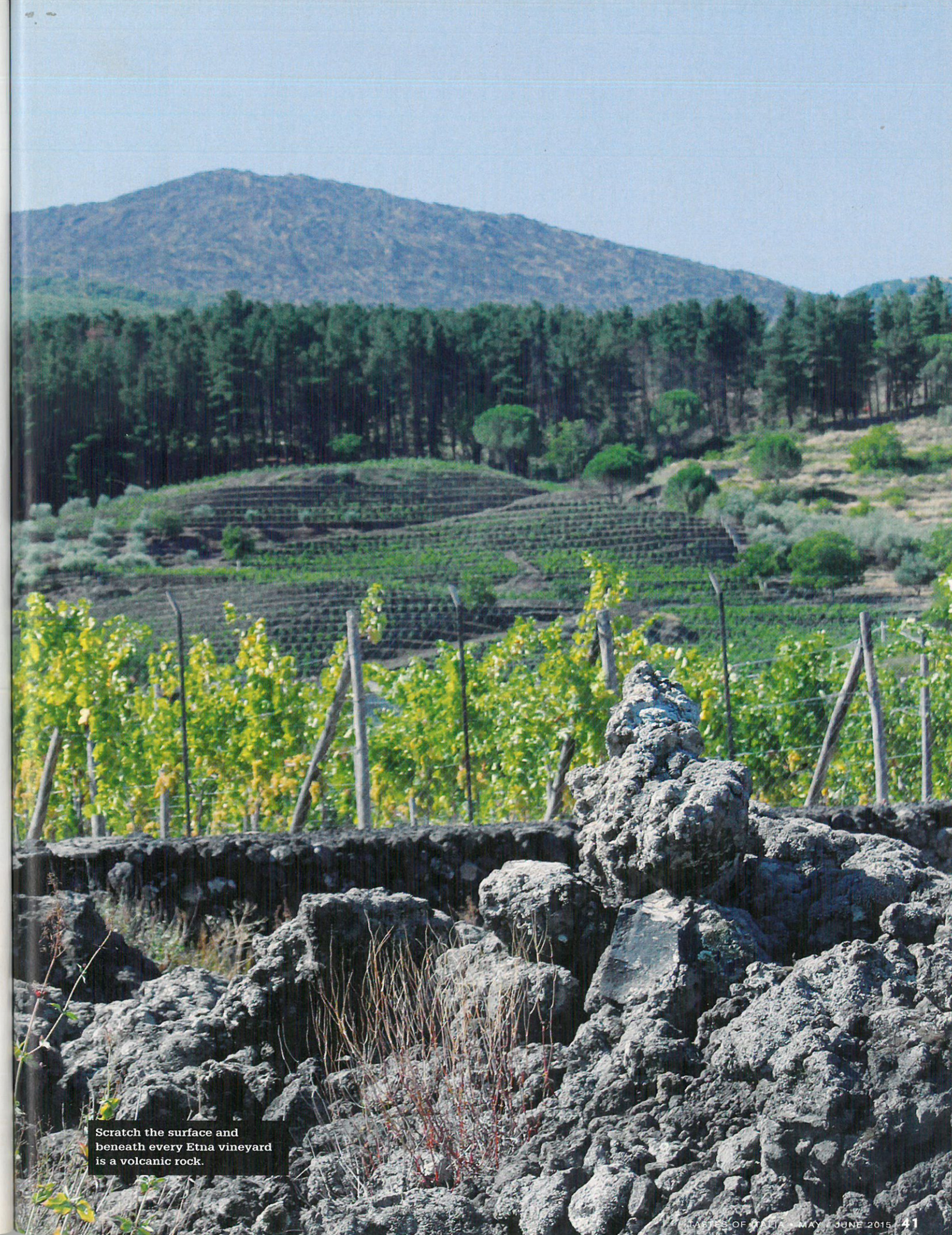
A piano sonata lies open on the baby grand in Giuseppe Russo's living room, a remnant of the career he abandoned a dozen years ago. Since returning to his hometown of Passopisciaro on the north side of Mount Etna, this studious Sicilian has become one of the area's top winemakers. It was an unanticipated metamorphosis. And it mirrors that of Etna the wine region, which has reinvented itself virtually overnight. Russo is part of a close-knit coterie of winemakers who have repopulated the volcano's northern slopes over the past 15 years and are now crafting stunning wines from the native nerello mascalese grape. Elegant, supple, and expressive, these new Etna Rossos are catnip to lovers of nuanced, site-specific wines. (Burgundy and Barolo fans, take note.)

Winemakers always talk about microclimates, but few are as extreme as Etna's. "It's one of the few places on earth where you have an active volcano at your back, snow under your feet, and the sea in front," says Patricia Tóth, winemaker at Planeta's new Sciarà Nuova estate, a few miles up the hill from Azienda

Girolamo Russo. Climatically, Etna is often described as "an island within an island." Rising to 11,000 feet and snow-capped in winter, Europe's tallest volcano offers cool-climate growing conditions on an otherwise sun-baked Mediterranean island. Not only that, it provides winemakers with black volcanic soil of every type and precious plots of gnarly bush-trained vines that are easily 80 years or older, sometimes on pre-*phylloxera* root stock.

Back in the 1800s, every farmer had his plot, and vineyards stretched halfway up the volcano to 6,000 feet (some 2,000 feet above today's highest vineyards). Everything not drunk by the *contadini* was sold as *vino sfuso*, bulk wine traveling from the port of Riposto to northern Italy and beyond for blending. But hard economic times and the vicissitudes of history took their toll. By the 1990s, acres of stone-terraced vineyards had been abandoned, deemed too small, too costly, and too difficult to work profitably. Except for a few names on the eastern side—Benanti, Barone di Villagrande—commercial wine production had dried to a trickle.

In 2003, when Russo was faced with the choice of keeping or selling his father's vineyards, he hesitated. "I had a negative im-



Scratch the surface and beneath every Etna vineyard is a volcanic rock.

pression of Etna wines formed by listening to the merchants who bought my father's wines: that nerello mascalese wasn't a good wine for bottling because it had acidic berries, green tannins, and was a bit thin," says the wine-maker, as his mother brings a tray of espresso and settles on the couch to listen. Undecided, Russo punted, selling the family's grapes for two vintages while keeping his teaching job. "Meanwhile, the first bottles of Franchetti and Terre Nere were starting to come out," he continues. "These were absolutely the opposite"—fat, juicy, succulent wines made from fully ripened, carefully selected clusters. It was just the eye-opener he needed.

Etna's modern history starts here, with the arrival of three *stranieri* in the early 2000s who recognized Etna's potential and, just as importantly, knew how to run a professional winery, distribute wine internationally, and spread the word on a worldwide stage. From Belgium came Frank Cornelissen, an eccentric natural-wine advocate willing to take the road less traveled. Then came Andrea Franchetti, a Roman who'd had success with his Tenuta di Trinoro estate in Tuscany before launching the Passopisciaro winery. From the U.S. came Marc De Grazia, a wine importer with deep connections to the pioneering producers of Barolo and an abiding love of Burgundy. For De Grazia, who now lives in Sicily full-time running Tenuta delle Terre Nere, the idea of *cru* wines that speak eloquently of terroir came as naturally as breathing.

"I'm a wine-truffle guy," says De Grazia of his knack for sniffing out promising parcels. More important for the region, however, is his bedrock belief in the distinctiveness of Etna's *contrade*—those old geographic zones whose borders are defined by lava fields and other natural landmarks. Calderara Sottana, Santo Spirito, Guardiola, Feudo di Mezzo: These and other *contrada* may one day be as familiar to Italian wine lovers as Barolo's Cannubi, Brunate, and Cerequio *cru*. It was thanks to De Grazia's dogged efforts that the wine authorities in Rome finally recognized the *contrade* in 2012 and now allow Etna DOC wines to include the *contrada* name on the label.

What lies ahead is the hard work of constructing publicly available, geologically specific *contrada* maps with an overlay of vineyards (as found in the Langhe today). But first things first. The Ministry of Agriculture's recognition gives credence to what any old *contadino* could have told you: Different *contrade* give different wines. As native son Russo says, "If you talk about wine to someone here who's 80 years old, he can talk perfectly well about the wine of San Lorenzo



Old barrels from another time displayed at the Graci winery.



The star of Etna Rosso:
nerello mascalese

versus Guardiola. The *feeling* of the *contrada* has always belonged to the culture of wine here: terrain that changes from one meter to the next, microclimates, differences in altitude—this gives a personality, as does the force of the old vineyards.” In his father’s day, he notes, merchants recognized those differences and paid higher prices for grapes from certain *contrade*. “The knowledge that some zones were more important than the others, that they had diverse characteristics—that’s always been here. It’s too strong not to be seen.” Those differences are readily apparent in the tasting room of Terre Nere. Under a frescoed ceiling vault, with the bleeps and

whirs of his daughter’s computer game in the background, De Grazia lines up a squadron of bottles. Of all Etna wines, the one you’re likeliest to find in U.S. shops is Terre Nere’s basic Etna Rosso. Terre Nere is the largest winery around, and half its total production of 180,000 bottles goes into this label. Fortunately, it’s a lip-smacking introduction to nerello mascalese, offering generous red fruit, an ethereal texture, and an easy-on-the-wall price of \$20.

The rarer *cru* (7,000 bottles each) each speak in distinct voices. Santo Spirito, grown on volcanic ash, is the most friendly and accessible (“I call it the Ava Gardner: lots of

curves,” says De Grazia. “Luminous, but with structure.” Calderara Sottana, coming from the appellation’s rockiest soil, is more brooding. (“It’s never floral, even when young, but goes towards tobacco and spices. It fans out in a million directions and is the most profound of my wines.”) Guardiola, from the winery’s highest vineyard, is focused and intense. (“Monolithic, like a zoom lens.”) And so it goes, the soil distinctions compounded by vintage variations. Initially when De Grazia would buy another vineyard and add another *cru*, his importers would grumble. “They’d say: ‘Not another one!’” he recalls with a laugh. “Now they’re happy.”



Giuseppe Russo of the
Girolamo Russo winery.



Terre Nere's Marco De Grazia

ITALIAN WINES

It doesn't take a degree in geology to see the infinite variety of volcanic soil. Just take a hike up any Etna lava field. (There are plenty. In the past five years alone, this hyperactive

wines. Everybody has to cooperate to elevate the general quality of the wines. And that's much slower work."

That cooperation is happening. Dialog

The number of Etna wineries in 2002 could be counted on one hand. Today, there's more than a hundred.

volcano has erupted 44 times.) I trekked up the 2002 eruption with a naturalist guide from Etna People and saw every imaginable shape and density of lava: airy black pumice, red oxidized magma, spiky high-viscosity rocks, water-smooth low-viscosity flows, vast craters lined up like buttons. We felt earth still warm to the touch. We ran down dunes of black pumice, as soft as Sahara sand. And all this was from a single eruption. Factor in age, and the variations between lava spills multiply, as pioneer plants take root after a century then others slowly follow, creating organic matter and arable soil.

Volcanic soil is just one field of investigation for Etna winemakers. How to mature the wine is the other huge question. Though Etna has a long tradition of winemaking, it was sold in bulk until 15 years ago. "Which means the whole area doesn't have a tradition of aging the wine," says Planeta's Tóth. "That, for me, is a very curious point. What to use?" Large oak cask versus small French barrique, stainless steel versus cement tank: Every combo is being tested. "We're very good friends with Giuseppe Russo and Alberto Graci [of Azienda Agricola Graci, another rising star]," says Tóth, "and we're tasting a lot together, trying to figure out what would be the right thing for nerello mascalese." For her part, Tóth is leaning towards a less-is-more approach, aging the major part of nerello in large 36-hectoliter casks and another part in stainless steel tanks ("for freshness"). She's also experimenting with old-style basket presses, sorting tables, and extending hang time before harvest.

"We're still at the first steps for premium wine," says Tóth, voicing an oft-heard refrain. "We still have a lot of work to do—everybody in the area. It's not enough to have six, seven, eight producers who are making some top

is constant between friends, of course. But more formalized confabs are happening, too. Foremost among them is the Contrade dell'Etna, an annual gathering where winemakers fraternize and taste each other's wines. Launched in 2008 by Franchetti, it has since outgrown his Passopisciaro winery and in 2013 moved to Graci's more spacious quarters, where some 3,000 press and wine enthusiasts showed up.

Undoubtedly, Etna's time has come. According to the Etna DOC consortium, the number of estates bottling wine in 2002 "could be counted on one hand." By 2012, there were 80. Today, there's more than 100.

Only a fraction are on the market, however. "Two-thirds of the wines right now are hobbies," De Grazia points out. "They make a few thousand bottles and probably won't exist in the next four to five years. But there's going to be more coming in. If you have a half a dozen or 10 producers who make premium wine, there's a snowball effect."

Already, established Sicilian wineries like Planeta, Tasca d'Almerita, and Cusumano have set down stakes. New entrepreneurs from Catania and beyond are currently building cellars. Abandoned vineyards are being reclaimed. Mount Etna, long associated with destruction, is having a moment of rebirth. For wine lovers, that's something to celebrate, Etna Rosso in hand.

Patricia Thomson is a wine writer who lives in Brooklyn and Piedmont, and runs wine tours through her company La Dolce Vita Wine Tours. You can read more stories about Graci, Planeta, the agronomist Salvo Foti, and trekking up Mt. Etna on her blog, Living La Dolce Vita.