



NERO d'AVOLA SICILY'S STAR PLAYER

**Learn how a once-lowly red wine
got new respect when crafted with
care to bring out its fruit.**

[By Patricia Thomson]

For me, Nero d'Avola is the flagship of Sicilian reds," says winemaker Alessio Planeta, a driving force behind Sicily's meteoric rise as a quality wine region. Searching for an apt metaphor, the enologist turns to Italy's favorite pastime, soccer: "It's on the National Team of red varieties in Italy."

Few would argue that Nero d'Avola is Sicily's star player, its internationally recognized native son surrounded by popping flashbulbs and adoring fans. But not so long ago, the grape was a nobody, a working-class stiff laboring anonymously in the bulk-wine industry.

Nero d'Avola's giddy ascent mirrors the transformation of Sicily itself. Sicily produces more wine than the entire country of Australia, but until recently only a fraction made it into bottle. Instead, rivers of mass-produced white wine flowed down Marsala assembly lines or into restaurant carafes and farmers' demijohns, while its reds were loaded onto ocean tankers and shipped north to France and alpine Italy, where the sun-kissed juice—rich in color and alcohol—added oomph to the pallid, tart bulk wines of the north.

Nero d'Avola was well suited to this role. The heat-loving vine is easy to grow and prolific—great for industrial-scaled wineries, but challenging for boutique producers. "You have to *dominate* nero, because it's so wild, so *selvatico*," says up-and-coming winemaker Giuseppe di Legami. "The bunches are quite big," notes Giuseppe Prisinzano, cellar master at Abbazia Santa Anastasia. "If you don't cultivate it well, it can be dilute and acidic." Indeed, industrial-scaled Nero d'Avola is often thin and wan due to overcropping, or else jammy and oxidized when harvested late. But even these lesser versions show Nero d'Avola's appealing fruit. When grown under the best conditions—low yields, old vines, clones matched to appropriate terrain—the results are stellar. These are inky purple wines that offer plum, amarena cherry, or mulberry flavors, often with chocolate notes, backed by refreshing acidity and smooth tannins. The best examples have a dark, briary depth combined

with elegance and polish.

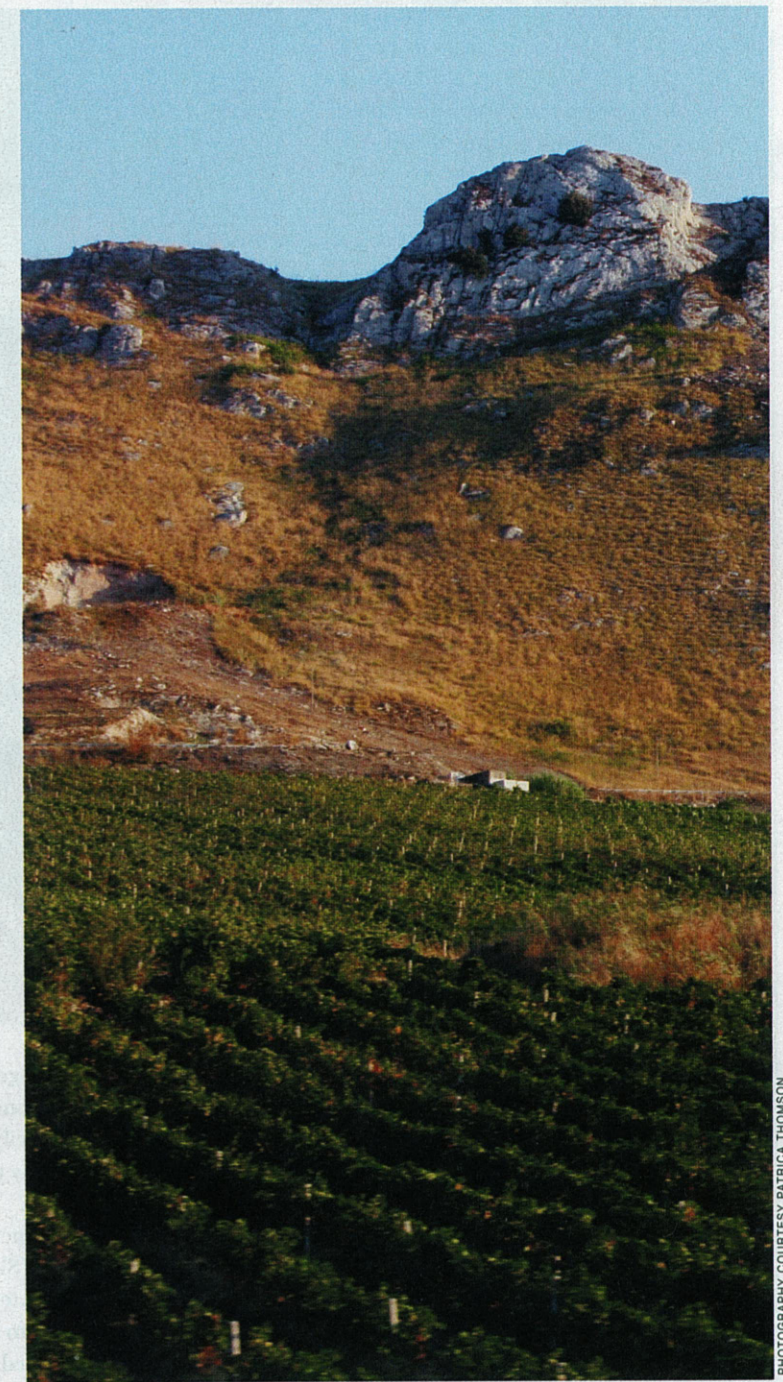
But for centuries, no one bothered to bring out the best. The first signs of change came when two historic wineries chose to create high-end wines using Nero d'Avola. In 1970, Tasca d'Almerita launched Rosso del Conte from its Regaleali estate, then Duca di Salaparuta debuted Duca Enrico in 1984. Nero d'Avola was finally treated with respect...except the grape received no billing. Rather, both wines became known by their aristocratic brand names.

A decade later, Nero d'Avola still drew blank stares when Donnafugata's José Rallo began presenting her family's wines at international exhibitions. After one too many "huhs?", she changed her pitch. "To the next customer I said, 'Listen, I won't tell you what grapes I use. Instead, we want you to experience a trip to Sicily. These wines are made by a family business called Donnafugata. Think about *The Leopard*. Think about the beautiful story of this escaping woman—*donna fugata*—and drink this wine. Then we'll talk about the rest.'" Storytelling was their entry point, not the grape. Today each of Donnafugata's labels use evocative names that reference Sicilian literature, history, and other tales. *Mille e una Notte*, or 1001 Nights, is their much-lauded Nero d'Avola. Only bottles destined for the U.S. market specify the grape variety.

Planeta used a different Trojan horse to penetrate the marketplace. "The question was how to start a winery in 1995 as a group of 30 year olds and catch the attention of folks at a wine fair in Düsseldorf," says Chiara Planeta, cousin of Alessio. "We couldn't really do it with Nero d'Avola. No one knew nero then. Even here in Sicily, it was considered a lowly table grape. So we needed to compete where the competition mattered and would draw attention. That meant Chardonnay." As the Planeta name gained in stature, the winery began shifting emphasis to indigenous grapes—first in blends, then on their own. Planeta's Santa Cecilia was launched in 1997 as a Nero d'Avola/Syrah blend; today it's pure Nero d'Avola. "Santa Cecilia is my favorite child, because I saw how difficult it was to make a wine I like with the Nero d'Avola. It's not like playing with Merlot," says Alessio



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HOT STUFF: The heat-loving Nero d'Avola grape is easy to grow and prolific in the Sicilian landscape. Winemakers say the grape must be well-managed to produce elegant wines with smooth tannins. In the 1970s, wineries began crafting high-end wines with the Nero d'Avola grape, but it has taken time to establish its new reputation.

Planeta. "Clonal selection is the most important thing. It's like if you want to win the Olympics: You could pick an athlete. Or you could pick someone who's walking along the road and ask him to run. You could be lucky and find the right one. But maybe not. So selection is very important."

Most winemakers will tell you that the turning point for modern Sicilian wine—and Nero d'Avola—came in the 1990s with Giacomo Tachis, the legendary winemaker behind Sassicaia, Tignanello, and other iconic Italian wines. Tachis had a sweet spot for Sicily, having honeymooned there. So after his retirement from Antinori, he came to Sicily in 1992 at the invitation of Diego Planeta, then president of Sicily's Istituto Regionale della Vite e del Vino, and began a decade of work as consultant to IRVV in a research and development role, laying the basis for the island's rejuvenation. Tachis worked with Duca di Salaparuta, Santa Anastasia, Donnafugata, and Ceuso, among other wineries, both officially and as a friend, and ushered in greater precision in the vineyards and modern advancements in the cellar.

The next frontier of Nero d'Avola is clones and *cru*. IRVV is collaborating with Donnafugata, Planeta, and other leading wineries on experimental vineyards, planting four biotypes of Nero d'Avola in different soils and microclimates. "We planted in 2009, so it's brand new," says Rallo. "We're going to have the harvest in two years. But we're already studying the ripening period, the different vegetation, everything, under (scientific) controls." In the past, she notes, "within the same vineyard, you could find different clusters shaped in different ways with different ripening periods. We made selections, but it was not so scientific. If we solve the clonal selection, we'll be much more secure about single vineyards."

Even now, Nero d'Avola winemakers are started to place a new emphasis on terroir. Nero d'Avola grown around the UNESCO heritage site of Noto in southeast Sicily can now be labeled Noto Nero d'Avola DOC, which plays up the grape's place of origin, near the eponymous town of Avola. Planeta, which lobbied for this new DOC, will introduce it on its Santa Cecilia label start-



José & Antonio Rallo

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY DONNA FUGATA

ing with the 2011 vintage. Meanwhile, Nero d'Avola producers from Canicatti and Caltanissetta in central Sicily announced a new consortium at VinItaly this past April. Surely more will follow.

Sadly, American consumers see only the tip of the iceberg. Many of Sicily's boutique wineries still have no stateside distribution. Nonetheless, it pays to know that not all Nero d'Avolas are created equal. Alessio Planeta likens it to Syrah, both as a plant and in the spectrum of styles: "From Syrah, you can make rosé, and you can make Châteauneuf-du-Pape." Likewise, there are simple, quaffable Nero d'Avolas and seductively concentrated and complex ones. (The price tag is usually a clue.) Nero is also beautiful in blends and is frequently combined with Cabernet, Merlot, or Syrah. When mixed with indigenous Frappato, it's called Cerasuolo di Vittoria, Sicily's only

DOGC.

For a Nero d'Avola starter kit (under \$15), look for **Morgante's** basic Nero d'Avola, **Ceuso's Scurati**, and **Abbazia Santa Anastasia's Contempo**. All represent excellent price/value and are perfect for pizza, cheese plates, and simple pastas. For a step up (\$15–25), bake some lasagna and try **Cusumano's** luscious nero/syrah blend, **Benuara**. For a special treat (\$25+), grill some beef, lamb, and sausage and go for **Donnafugata's Mille e una Notte**, **Planeta's** benchmark **Santa Cecilia**, or the old-time aristocrats **Tasca d'Almerita Rosso del Conte** and **Duca di Salaparuta Duca Enrico**. You'll be saying perfetto before you know it.

Patricia Thomson is president of La Dolce Vita Wine Tours and author of the blog *Livin' La Dolce Vita*.

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GREAT POUR: Nero d'Avola lends itself to blends with other wines, as well as standing alone. The grape is frequently combined with Cabernet, Merlot, or Syrah. Cusumano has a nero/syrah blend, Benuara. Alessio Planeta (at right, above) likens Nero d'Avola's spectrum of styles to Syrah: "From Syrah, you can make rosé, and you can make Châteauneuf-du-Pape."