

## Return to the future. The volcano's vineyards, island model

Oct. 16 2016, 9:00 am | by Michela Becchi - Gambero Rosso



TIMING IS EVERYTHING. THE PACE IS SLOW, LIKE NATURE'S RHYTHM, LIKE THAT OF AGRICULTURE, OF THE VINES. TIME AND RHYTHM, LIKE THE SMOKE THAT FILLS EVERY BREATH, IS MEASURED BY THE VOLCANO. 'A MONTAGNA, IT'S CALLED AROUND HERE. ETNA'S VITICULTURE RENAISSANCE IS IN CONSTANT CONFRONTATION WITH THE PAST, THE VINES, THE VINEYARDS.

For centuries, the natural workings of Etna have created a unique environment for landscape and viticulture. Consider the altitude – since here grapes grow at over a thousand meters above sea level – and think about the soil and subsoil suited for growing certain great varieties. Remember the specific microclimate, with its powerful

### History

All this has deep roots and affected the regulations written for the first time in 1968 and modified only a few years ago. But to explain the fuller meaning of the Etna DOC, at the end

of the 1960s experts looked at a text from the end of the 16th century, *Storia dei Vini d'Italia*. There the volcanic wines were described as products “whose goodness is attributed to the ashes of Etna.” This – but not only this – determines what can be defined as great territorial winegrowing. The soil is igneous, in some zones stony, and in others sandy or ashy. Some vineyards are planted with ungrafted alberello etneo vines, which naturally produce small quantities but very high quality grapes: these plants can be a century old, or more. There are several traditional varieties: nerello mascalese is the most important for reds, followed by nerello cappuccio, which can account for a maximum of 20% of a blend. For whites, the carricante grape is the most typical, but catarratto can be used, for a maximum of 40%, but only 20% for the Etna Bianco Superiore. Perfect ripening of the vines in this area is guaranteed by the unique climate. Although this is southernmost Italy, its altitude is among Europe’s highest for grape growing – some of it over 1,000 meters above sea level.

Production areas are divided into *contrade*. On the northern slope, red-berried grapes dominate the vineyards, and the municipalities of Castiglione di Sicilia and Randazzo are the key zones.

## **Salvo Foti**

The whites are more common on the east, especially in the municipality of Milo, the only area where the Superiore category can be produced. To all this, add the work of growers. Consider not only the sum total of the cellar techniques of each single winemaker, but rather the entire heritage of experiences that start with the vine, are passed along from parent to child and make up the social texture of an entire community. **Salvo Foti**, a great enologist and Etna guru, has clear ideas on this matter. In 2000, he led the project I Vigneri, a name which derives from the ancient Maestranza dei Vigneri, an association of grapegrowers formed in Catania in 1435. “Fifteen years ago, talk about non-native species and upgrades, about mechanization, began growing. Although everyone continued saying that ‘wine is made in the vineyard’, the truth was that the work in the vineyard was no longer considered important. With I Vigneri,” said Foti, “we began with a model that put people at the center of everything. It was a social project that took a step backwards and started with the work in the countryside. I began together with two growers who worked with my father.

## **Vigneri**

Now there are thirty of us. Vigneri means cultivating the alberello etneo training system, building dry walls, not irrigating, and only using systems that are compatible with the environmental care of the vineyard. It means, therefore, cultivating a landscape, not only a vineyard, protecting it and gifting it to future generations. You don’t make wine to put a

particular label on the market, but to transfer an entire territory into a bottle, starting with the people that cared for that territory.” But if we had to define the wines that I Vigneri produces? “Today people use many adjectives to describe and sell wines,” the enologist commented. “But we make human wines. It doesn’t matter if they cost a few euros more. There are thousands of hours of work per hectare every year that go into it and professional care that protects a territory for the next generations.”

## **The project**

Now the I Vigneri project has moved down from Etna and spread to nearby zones – Lipari, Pachino, Pantelleria and even to California. Many winemakers ask Salvo Foti for advice and many emulate his work. To see the new vineyards planted alberello style, to see dry walls around the plots, and see indigenous rather than non-native grapes planted everywhere is a proof of his influence. If you travel around the contrade and taste the wines grown there, you see that they are more and more truly the children of the volcano. Even with their genuine imperfections, they are the true witnesses of an ancient grape growing territory and the people who live there.