

Wine Anthony Rose

The Sicilian connection



In the heart of Sicily, the island landscape is filled with contrasts: bright colours, dark shadows, poor

soils, rich earth, tiny villages set against rolling hills and mountainous outcrops. Sicily's bright and dark sides are similarly reflected in its wines and the contrast between their age-old notoriety and new-found fame. Its shameful legacy is based on the vast quantities of plonk it has consistently churned out. But now, thanks to the efforts of a handful of pioneers, Sicily is gaining a reputation for its high-quality and value-for-money wines.

And why not? Italy's largest

island is blessed with the natural advantages of a dry, sunny climate, cooling Mediterranean breezes and vineyards well-suited to wine grapes. It took action-men such as Diego Planeta and Count Giuseppe Tasca d'Almerita to overcome a legacy of inertia to match first native, then international, grape

varieties to the true potential of the land. Regaleali's innovative Giuseppe Tasca created Rosso del Conte with the native grape nero d'avola. Diego Planeta's vision helped turn the giant co-operative Settesoli into a thriving modern business. He also introduced premium French varieties "to show the world we could compete on the international stage and to stop local people saying 'my grillo [the Marsala grape] is the best in the world'".

Twenty thousand people in three western-Sicilian towns are involved in Settesoli. Sicily's largest company, with 6,000 hectares under vine, this massive co-op covers 5 per cent of the island's vineyards, an area that matches that of Chile's wine-producing regions.

The upshot is that this go-ahead co-operative today produces an astonishing array of drinkable reds and whites, not least the refreshing dry white, **Tesco's**

Finest 2006 Fiano, £4.99, a plum and blackberryish **2005 Tesco's Finest Nero d'Avola**, £5.99, and the bright, cherryish **2006 Casa Mia Sangiovese**, £4.99, Sainsbury's.

From just two names after the war – Regaleali and Corvo – Sicily now numbers 400 producers, among them Diego Planeta's own estate planted as part of the same process of modernisation. Planeta today produces an excellent-value **2006 La Segreta Bianco**, around £7.99, Philglas & Swiggot (020-7924 4494), Swig (020-8995 7060), Roberson (020-7371 2121) – a peachy, dry white blend based on grecanico, and a refreshing, strawberryish blend of nero d'avola and frappato, the **2006 Cerasuolo di Vittoria, DOCG**,

around £11.99, Carluccio's, Noel Young Wines (01223 844744), selected Waitrose stores. Count Tasca's Regaleali, too, makes a fine range of wines, among them the juicy, mineral dry **2005 Nozze d'Oro**, around £12.29, Hailsham Cellars (01323 441212), Whole Foods Market, Kensington.

Blends of merlot and cabernet sauvignon have brought extra character and depth to Sicily's native nero d'avola, which is by far Sicily's most widely planted red grape variety. With its slight Italianate, bitter twist of freshness, the quality of the cassis and black cherry-rich **2004 Abbazia Santa Anastasia Montenero**, £15.95, Lea & Sandeman, testifies to a superior Sicilian new-wave blend, as does Regaleali's minty, stylish **2004 Cygnus**, around £12.29, Flagship Wines (01727 841968), Whole Foods Market. The latter's flagship **2004 Rosso del Conte**, around £21.99, Harrods, Hailsham Cellars (01323 441212), Whole Foods Market, is the standard bearer for nero d'avola, showing how a small addition of the Bordeaux grapes can bring extra depth and finesse.

If Sicily has a struggle on its hands to convince a sceptical outside world that it can transcend its infamous past, it's wines like these that will do the trick. *

Thanks to a few pioneering modernisers, Sicily is gaining a reputation for its wines



PIRELLA GÖTTSCHE LOWE/STUDIO CITY/ASDA/EA

Something for the weekend?

Under a Fiver

2005 Gran Familia Rioja Tinto, Bodegas Castillo de Fuenmayor

A crowd-pleasing red at a scene-stealing price, this Spanish tinto blends tempranillo and garnacha. £4.99, Co-op, Sainsbury's, Tesco; £5.99, or buy 3 = £3.99 each, Thresher

Under a Tenner

2006 Los Molles Carménère, Viña Tabali

The winemaker Felipe Müller is a firm believer in Chile's carmenère grape, which brings a peppery undertone to the blackcurrant and plum flavours. £7.49, Marks & Spencer

Splash Out

2006 Maverick Trial Hill Riesling, Eden Valley

Eden Valley at its best: powerful, lime-like, floral scents make this the perfect match for sashimi, grilled salmon or tuna carpaccio. £13.95, Lea & Sandeman



LUCY VIGORAS

101 star bars by Katy Guest

The Pyramid Bar, Cairo

A popular story told by residents of Edinburgh relates how an American tourist arrived in the city and exclaimed, without irony, "How smart of them to have built the castle so close to the station." It's true, those early settlers showed remarkable foresight. A similar act of kindness has occurred in downtown Cairo, where the pyramids were thoughtfully constructed just a stone's throw from the main hotel district, and the antiquities museum conveniently located for the best cold beer in town.

This is very important, because there is nothing in the world more guaranteed to bring on a thirst than the Egyptian antiquities museum. The stride required for admiring thousands of caskets of teeny jewels puts untold strain on the knees. The air, swarming with the skin particles of the thousand-year dead, aggravates the throat. The echoing rooms of endless gold dazzle the eyes of the modern traveller. Thank Ramses the bar is only next door.

A brief stagger away across Cairo's crazy, honking streets is the air-conditioned oasis of the Nile Hilton, whose roof terrace is the perfect place from which to view the city. Perfect for being so loftily removed from it. Under a huge neon "Hilton" sign, the traditional mezze are deceptively cheap, the beer is crisp, cold and desperately welcome. No wonder the pharaohs insisted on having their permanent resting places constructed just around the corner. *The Pyramid Bar, Nile Hilton, Cairo, Egypt (00 20 2 2578 0444)*