Sicily

HISTORY

According to legend, it was Dionysus himself who first brought vines to Sicily. Historians suggest it was actually the Phoenicians, and archeologists have found evidence of wine drinking in the 17th century B.C. but the Greeks did bring the technology to make it tastier and in volume. Phylloxera took its toll, as did politics, and Sicily lost its footing as an oenological crown jewel for a few centuries, but they're back and better than ever.

GEOGRAPHY

Sicily is the largest of all the islands in the Mediterranean Sea, comprised of diverse climates, topography and soils. It's separated from the mainland by the Strait of Messina which, at its narrowest, is only about 2 miles wide. The terrain is mostly hilly, although the impressive cone of Mount Etna dominates the eastern coast. Mount Etna is the largest active volcano in Europe, and the black ash cast by its recurrent eruptions has a noticeable effect on the character of the soils and, in turn, the wine. One supposes volcanic soils are a happy side effect to the threat of imminent doom and constant seismic activity. This dangerous Eden is heavily cultivated throughout, and boasts more vineyards than any other region in Italy.

CLIMATE

Sicily's Mediterranean climate is a big part of what makes it such a natural wine region. Hot summers when it rarely rains conspire with cool – not frigid – winters keep vines trucking along happily without the shock of freezes. Grapes prefer to be warm and dry on the vine, and Sicily's weather makes for a welcoming home.

GRAPES

When it comes to Italy in general, and Sicily in particular, emphasis is always on historically indigenous varietals. The key players in Sicily are Nero d'Avola, the primary red grape in the Cerasuolo di Vittoria DOCG, and its sibling Frappato with its captivating floral perfume. Nerello Mascalese holds a place of honor on Mount Etna, where the dry and zippy Carricante is used for white wines (sometimes called Etna Bianco).

WINE CHARACTER

Called a "microcosm of Italy" and a "viticultural continent," Sicily has more to offer than its size and reputation might have you believe. The wines of Sicily offer a distinct Mediterranean personality, full of vibrancy and elegance, that belie their southern roots. A modern focus on both quality and sustainability, applied to celebrated and unique varieties, the best of Sicily are bottled art – utterly unique and worthy of appreciation.

Sierra Foothills

HISTORY

In 1848, near Sutter Mill in El Dorado County, James W. Marshall discovered Gold and the American West was never the same. The news brought ambitious would-be miners in droves to the Sierra Foothills, where some found gold and others found fertile land and a more reliable source of income. European settlers brought vines and established vineyards that would outlast the Gold Rush.

GEOGRAPHY

The Sierra Foothills wine region is one of the largest AVAs in the whole of America, covering 2.6 million acres from Yuba County in the north to Mariposa County in the south. Vineyards dot the landscape along the full length of a 160-mile stretch of the north-western face of the Sierra Nevada Mountain range. Most sit at altitudes between 1,000 and 3,000 feet above sea level, overlooking the vast agricultural mecca that is the Central Valley. There are over 200 bonded wineries operating within the Sierra Foothills AVA, which includes eight counties and multiple sub-AVAs, but the actual acreage planted to vines is relatively small. Many of the producers are boutique, family-owned properties specializing in hand-crafted, small batch wines well worth seeking out.

CLIMATE

The vastness of the mountainous AVA provides a complex jumble of exposures and a bevy of microclimates to operate within. The region leans hot, with warm, western-facing locations supporting heat-loving varietals like Zinfandel while shady spots cool things off just enough for Chardonnay and Merlot to thrive.

GRAPES

Zinfandel takes the top prize in this warm region, historically accounting for about a third of all the wine grapes crushed each year. Diversity is on the upswing, though, with Rhone, Italian, and even Iberian-style reds popping up in tasting rooms. Among white grapes, you'll find those that don't mind a little warmth are thriving best, with Viognier and Albarino rising in popularity.

WINE CHARACTER

Zinfandel from the foothills tends toward three main styles built to serve the depths of your cravings. You can find blockbuster expressions with big alcohol and gorgeous ripeness right alongside easy-going, gulpable Zins that pair perfectly with burger night. As Napa Valley's known talents explore this region, it's becoming even more exciting.

2014 Antichi Vinai 'Koine Riserva' Rosso Etna

APPELLATION:
Sicily

VARIETALS:
85% Nerello Mascalese and 15% Nerello Cappuccio

VINEYARDS:
Three districts produce the grapes. The old vineyards cover high terraces on the north and south slopes of the volcano, the best areas of Passopisciaro and Biancavilla

WINEMAKERS:
Viviana and Sebastian Gangemi

AGING:
24+ months in oak and chestnut barrels, 24 months in bottle

BEST FROM:
Enjoy now

ULTIMATE FOOD PAIRING:
Bucatini with tuna

ORDERING INFO:
1049925 | $59.95

DESCRIPTION:
The winery itself goes back over a century, standing among the sprawling vineyards that line the slopes of Mount Etna, the tallest active volcano in all of Europe. For five generations, the Gangemi family has watched over the estate's lands, dedicating themselves to the production of Sicily's indigenous varietals. They call themselves "children of Etna," as the volcano has played such a large and positive role in the story of their family and their winery – not to mention the island as a whole. For the Gangemis, sharing their wine means showing the world a unique place and illustrious history forged by hard-working people and centuries of dedication. They want to bring back the prestige of Sicilian winemaking, which was once the toast of Europe.

Combining the riches of three districts, this stems from old vineyards covering high terraces on the north and south slopes of the Volcano. Minerals from the volcanic soil come through in persistency and elegant tannins. On the nose, red and black berries are laced with underbrush and baking spice. In the mouth, fresh, juicy fruit flavors are lightly smoky on a velvet palate with some cocoa and orange zest notes.

2015 Keplinger 'Lithic' Red Sierra Foothills

APPELLATION:
Sierra Foothills

VARIETALS:
41% Grenache, 32% Mourvedre, and 27% Syrah

VINEYARD:
Shake Ridge Vineyard

WINEMAKER:
Helen Keplinger

AGING:
16 months in neutral and once-used French demi muids

BEST FROM:
Now through 2027

ULTIMATE FOOD PAIRING:
Pizza with fresh tomato slices, oil cured olives, feta cheese, sprinkled with parmesan cheese

ORDERING INFO:
1049916 | $89.95

DESCRIPTION:
Helen Keplinger grew up with an intense curiosity for science, a huge appreciation for art, and a love of the outdoors. She was lucky enough to also grow up immersed in wine culture, which is the perfect outlet to combine those leanings into one pursuit. Thanks to her work at Grace Family, Bryant Family, Carte Blanche and, of course, her eponymous Keplinger brand, she's a household name in Napa Valley. For the wines of Keplinger, Helen leans on her experience and her connections to bring together all the necessary elements for a beautifully balanced wine: extraordinary vineyards, mindful farming, and attentive, focused winemaking. Lithic brings Ann Kraemer's organically farmed Shake Ridge Vineyard at 1700' in the Sierra Foothills, right to your glass.

Shake Ridge Vineyard's uplift soils are loaded with quartz, basalt, soapstone, and shale – all of which contribute to the purity, richness and natural minerality at play here. Aromatics are absolutely vibrant with layers of red fruit, lavender, and mountain scrub. Tannins are broad and plush on a palate laced with brambly blue and red fruit and heady floral notes that linger on the finish.

2016 Easton Zinfandel
Amador County

APPELLATION:
Amador County

VARIETAL:
Zinfandel

WINEMAKER:
Bill Easton

AGING:
10 months in French oak

BEST FROM:
Now through 2025

ULTIMATE FOOD PAIRING:
Slow cooked beef barbacoa

ORDERING INFO:
1049918 | $24.95

DESCRIPTION:

Husband and Wife team Bill Easton and Jane O'Riodan founded Terre Rouge and Easton Wines together, in the late 80's, after years of running their own artisanal wine shop and bistro in Berkeley, California. Running the shop and travelling extensively helped Bill to expand and refine both his own palate and his style of winemaking. His goal is balance and elegance, capturing an inherent complexity that develops with time in the bottle. Bill also happens to be one of the original Rhone Rangers, spreading the good word about Rhone varietals up and down California. Jane, the house chef, ensures that the wines are always table ready and food friendly. Attend one of their winery events and you'll enjoy the best of both talents.

In its 20th vintage, this popular Beaujolais-styled Zinfandel earns its place in the portfolio with a big, sumptuous wine that's juicy and delicious. A little extra time in the bottle has helped to bring out even more complexity to the bright fruit. Full aromas of black cherry and blackberry fruit with a full complement of spice, lead into a creamy textured wine that makes a mouthwatering impression.

2017 Mazzei 'Zisola'
Noto Rosso Sicily

APPELLATION:
Sicily

VARIETAL:
Nero d'Avola

VINEYARDS:
130 m.a.s.l.; S/E exposure, 9-14 year old vines, head-pruned bush vines

WINEMAKER:
Giovanni Mazzei

AGING:
10 months in French oak, 33% new

BEST FROM:
Now through 2030

ULTIMATE FOOD PAIRING:
Spicy fish soups, savory pasta and rice dishes, grilled red meats and vegetables

ORDERING INFO:
1049924 | $39.95

DESCRIPTION:
The Mazzei family has been producing wine at Castello di Fonterutoli for a mere 24 generations. Documentation of their wine reign goes back ages, with Ser Lap Mazzei being the first known soul to use the "Chianti" denomination in 1398, in a documented sale of 6 barrels. Philip Mazzei, a little further down the line, is known to have buddied up to a few friendly up and comers from America: Jefferson, Franklin, Adams and Washington – the latter having invited him to plant some vines in Monticello, VA. Today, the Mazzei family remains true to their illustrious history while preparing for the future through a program of sustainable and organic farming that is changing the landscape of their vineyards for the better.

If you love full bodied, fruit-filled reds (think Syrah or Cab Sauv) then Nero d'Avola is for you. This well-built example is rife with bold, black fruit and sunny orange peel flavors. Tannin makes itself known, but with an easygoing approach that's been further tempered by time in the bottle. Proximity to the sea and limestone rich soil balance the wine's natural exuberance with excellent freshness.

2018 Chacewater Cabernet Sauvignon Sierra Foothills

APPELLATION:
Sierra Foothills

VARIETAL:
Cabernet Sauvignon

VINEYARD:
North Ponderosa Vineyards

WINEMAKER:
Paul Manuel

AGING:
14 months; 65% 2 year old French barrels, 35% new American oak barrels

BEST FROM:
Now through 2025

ULTIMATE FOOD PAIRING:
Lamb burger

ORDERING INFO:
1049917 | $29.95

DESCRIPTION:

Chacewater Winery & Olive Mill is a family operation in Kelseyville, California, a little town tucked away in Lake County. The family business was once based more in minerals than 'minerality', coming from tin mining in Cornwall, England to make a new life in Gold Country. When a devastating fire in 1988 cleared the land around the family's business, Paul Manuel decided to take a chance and grow some grapes. They quickly earned a reputation for quality, which encouraged them to expand the operation and, eventually, to crush their own grapes and make their own wine. If their grapes were good enough for big name wineries, they figured they could make something truly special if they gave the fruit the individual attention it deserved.

With a swirl of the glass, this releases deep concentrated aromas of cassis, raisins, stewed, fruit and leather. The palate is a little brawny and rustic, but with a satisfyingly smooth mouth feel. On the midpalate, notes of dark berries, olives and tea arise, leading to firm but subtle tannins and a long earthy finish. A perfect pairing with grilled meats and hearty dishes.

2018 Planeta
'Eruzione 1614'
Nerello Mascalese Sicily

APPELLATION:
Sicily

VARIETAL:
100% Nerello Mascalese

VINEYARD:
Sciaranuova

AGING:
12 months in 25 hl and 36 hl oak casks

BEST FROM:
Now through 2028

ULTIMATE FOOD PAIRING:
Eggplant cutlets

ORDERING INFO:
1049926 | $49.95

DESCRIPTION:
Three enthusiastic Sicilans, Alessio, Francesca and Santi Planeta, took on the family estate (Sambuca di Sicilia) and began a winemaking transformation in the 1980's. Today, Planeta encompasses six distinct estates across Sicily, each plot of terroir matched to its ideal varietal. For Mount Etna, the Planeta team chose Nerello Mascalese. The soils of Mount Etna are marked by the eruptions which shaped it, and the eruption of 1614 is legendary; it lasted for 10 years! That's the longest ever recorded. The vines at the heart of this wine grow on the actual lava flow, with roots reaching deep into lava rock. Nerello Mascalese grown on these black soils creates an intensely aromatic red wine with elegant structure.

The luminous, almost transparent ruby belies the real depths of this variety, which is sometimes compared to a fine Pinot Noir. The bouquet is sweet and generous with buckets of wild fruit and classic currant aromas mingling with incense, beeswax and a hint of salinity. In the mouth, an explosion of red fruit is laced with hibiscus and wild herb nuances. The tannins are compact and elegant, making for a deliciously drinkable wine.