

Vini di Sicilia

Some History

Sicily is Italy's southernmost region, and the largest island in the Mediterranean Sea. For more than 2500 years Sicily (*Sicilia* in Italian) has been a significant center of Mediterranean viniculture, although the reputation and style of its wines has changed significantly over that time.

The island's location has helped it become one of the world's most diverse melting pots. At one time or another, it was inhabited by the Sicilians (after which it was named), Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, Germans and the Spanish. All of these cultures contributed to Sicily's history and influenced the production of wine throughout the region -- though not all of their influences were positive.

Wine grapes have always grown on the Italian island of Sicily. The ancient island was covered in grapevines long before the Greeks got there. Ancient civilizations were producing wine on the island as far back as the 17th century BC. Many of the grapes considered to be native to the area were actually brought in by the Phoenicians. The Mediterranean climate with abundant sunshine, balanced rainfall, hilly terrain and soils made rich by Mount Etna's ash all create the perfect conditions for quality agriculture.

The Greeks arrived sometime around 8 BC, bringing other varieties in with them. They also brought innovations such as pruning, varietal selection and low vine training. Large quantities of wine began to flow all over the island. Very, very alcoholic wine.

For several centuries, the Sicilian wine industry fell into boom and bust cycles. As the Romans spread their empire, they carried wines from Sicily with them. A type of Sicilian wine called Mamertino was said to have been Julius Caesar's favorite. In the Byzantine Period between the 6th and 9th centuries, the religious communities held power over Sicily and wine production peaked (for ceremonial purposes). But once the Muslims took over between the 9th and 11th centuries, this booming wine industry was left to decay. During the Aragonese Empire from the 13th to 16th centuries, Sicilian wine once again became a hot trading commodity.

In 1773, British merchant John Woodhouse saw great potential in Sicily to produce a local fortified (brandied) wine. So, he introduced a perpetuum system, an equivalent to the solera system of blending wines from different vintages and produced the first Marsala to take home to England. This venture brought great fortune to both Woodhouse and the Sicilian economy.

Marsala and still wines began to boom in Sicily during the 19th century, and many historical wineries were established during this period, when the Catania province had become such a key viticultural zone.

Wine industry in Sicily – ups and downs

At about 25,700 square kilometers (17,100 miles), Sicily is the largest island in the Mediterranean Sea, a veritable country in its own right and blessed with ideal winemaking conditions, such as myriad exposures, altitudes, soils and grape varieties, plenty of sunlight and low rainfall. Not surprisingly, Sicily produces a lot of wine: about 12% of all Italian wine (including roughly 9% of Italy's reds and 10% of Italy's rosati).

The island accounts for roughly five million hectoliters of wine per year from what is Italy's largest regional vineyard area—about 103,000 hectares, of which close to 90% are located in western

Sicily. To put that in perspective, Sicily alone produces more wine than all of New Zealand or Greece.



Rural viticulture and blue skies, Sicily

Sicily's classic Mediterranean climate is ideally suited to the production of wine grapes. The warm, dry climate means that mildews and rots are kept to a minimum, particularly in well-ventilated areas which benefit from coastal breezes. This low disease pressure means that chemical sprays are hardly needed, so much Sicilian wine is produced from **organic grapes**.

Ironically, the island's near-perfect vine-growing conditions played a key role in the downfall of Sicilian wine in the late 20th Century. Reliable sunshine and low disease pressure have always made it easy for Sicilian winegrowers to push their vineyards into generating high yields. Unfortunately, when the Italian government offered subsidies for 'upgrading' to higher-yielding vine management techniques, the temptation was too much to refuse. Many thousands of acres of low-yielding bush vines were rapidly converted to high-yielding *tendone* (pergola) or *guyot* (cane-pruning) training methods. These higher yields naturally led to imbalanced, flavor-lacking wines – a drop in quality, which was soon mirrored by a drop in consumer confidence. The market was soon awash with low-quality, low-priced Sicilian wine, which gave Sicily a bad rap in the wine world for decades to come.

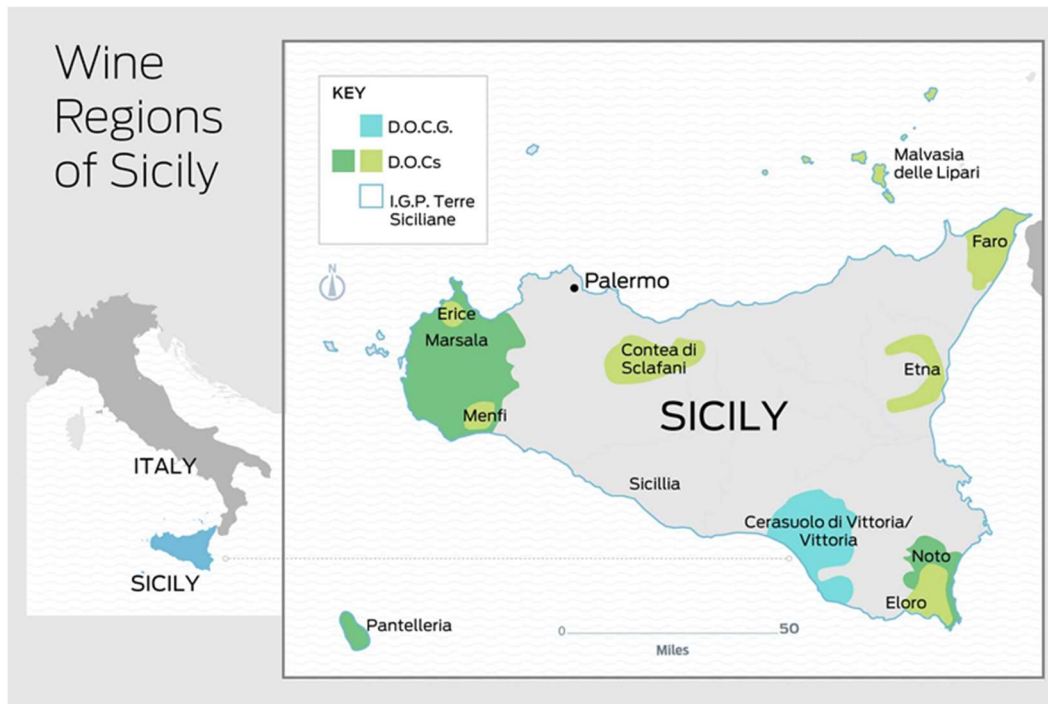
Happily, the movement to reverse this reputation is well underway: by the end of the 20th century, Sicilian wines had come to show great promise, and more recently it appears that, at long last, many of the island's estates (though certainly not all) are finally starting to harness that potential.

Nero d'Avola and Nerello Mascalese have rightly gained fans the world over, and Carricante, a white grape, is now rightly viewed as one of Italy's three or four best native white varieties, capable of giving highly mineral and very age-worthy wines. Furthermore, the great potential of other cultivars such as the Catarratto, Perricone and Grillo has not yet been fully tapped, so it is likely that there are many new and exciting wines to come from Sicily.

Key wine regions and terroirs

Sicily has 24 different appellations; one of them, Cerasuolo di Vittoria, is a Denominazione d'Origine Controllata e Garantita (DOCG) while the other 23 are Denominazione d'Origine Controllata (DOC).

Many of the DOC are virtually unknown even to Italians, and only a handful are actually well known (Etna, Malvasia di Lipari, Marsala, Moscato di Noto, Moscato and Passito di Pantelleria). The island's best known wines are now its dry table wines produced under the regional *Indicazione Geografica Tipica* (IGT) title *Terre Siciliane*. Sicilia DOC is a broad, island-wide appellation launched in 2011 by a consortium of wine producers who promoted the Sicilia IGT to a DOC, more as a marketing tool.



Key appellations under the Terre Siciliane. Map by Scott Lockheed.

With the turn of the new century, Sicilian wine really began to change for the better. The Istituto Regionale Vino e Olii di Sicilia (IRVOS), an agricultural research center, employed some of Italy's brightest wine minds and carried out a great deal of the research (both viticultural and enological) that ultimately led to huge improvements in Sicilian wine. New generations at the helm of many of the island's family estates have contributed to Sicily's wine renaissance, in an effort to make wines that speak of the island's many subzones rather than a nonexistent "generic" Sicily;

Sicily's soils, and the mountains from which they came, are of particular interest when it comes to studying the island's viticulture. Mount Etna, the towering stratovolcano, dominates the island's eastern skyline, and is responsible for the mineral-rich, dark soils which characterize the Etna DOC vineyards; vines are now being planted higher up on the volcanic slopes, to capitalize on the cooler air and richer soils there. Fifty miles south, the Iblei Mountains stake their place in eastern Sicilian wine. On their lower slopes and the coastal plains below them, the DOCs of Siracusa, Noto, Eloro and Vittoria sweep from east to west, forming a crescent which mirrors the arching coastline.

In western Sicily, the volcanic hills are less individually dramatic but just as influential to the soil types. The western fifth of the island is covered by the Marsala DOC, and also within this area fall other small DOCs.

The unique Etna DOC

Etna has been the single most exciting development in Italian wine in the last decade, with Etna Rosso becoming Italy's single hottest red wine. Unsurprisingly, the Etna DOC has grown at an impressive rate in recent years, reaching a production of 22,000 hectoliters of wine, and land under vine of roughly 650 hectares, compared to only 442 in 2007.

The Etna DOC covers the slopes of Mount Etna, the 3330m active volcano that dominates the northeastern corner of Sicily.

The Etna DOC was the very first in Sicily, created in August 1968 and followed nine months later by that of Sicily's most famous wine, Marsala. Producers now seek DOCG status, but they've yet to receive it.

The most commonly produced form of Etna wine is the standard Etna Rosso, a red made predominantly from the Nerello Mascalese grape variety with up to a 20% addition of Nerello Cappuccio (also known here as Nerello Mantellato).

Its white counterpart Etna Bianco is composed of at least 60 percent Carricante, backed up by Sicily's most widely planted white grape, Catarratto, and a host of minor additions including Trebbiano and Minnella. There is also a relatively rare rosato (rosé) form also based on Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Capuccio.



Mount Etna, Sicily

The Etna wine-producing zone arcs around the eastern side of the volcano, from Randazzo in the north to Santa Maria di Licodia in the south. The graduated topography creates a smooth spread of mesoclimates, as the land climbs up from near-sea-level to more than 1200 meters (3940ft). The highest of Etna's vineyards now rank among the highest in Italy (and even the world), easily matching those of Alpine Alto Adige.

Etna's wine producers are experimenting with vineyard sites further and further up the volcano's slopes, to gauge the effects of the richer, blacker lava flow soils and increased altitude.

Each flow leaves a unique mineral profile, giving rise to the notion of various terroirs, or crus, here called *contrade*. Producers are making wines with grapes grown in these specific terroirs.



The five main Contrada in which vineyards of different ages are grown on a lava flow with different minerals, grain size, and altitudes.

From almost anywhere on Etna's slopes, looking eastwards will reveal quite how much light the glistening Mediterranean reflects back onto the vines here. They talk about how it helps to ripen the grapes more completely, even at cooler, higher altitudes. Etna's higher slopes are almost the only place on the island where temperatures fall sufficiently low to cause concern for ripeness. In fact, far from posing problems, the cooler temperatures are actually helpful, and offer the luxury of a cooler, longer growing season.

Etna's international profile received a particular boost in 2001 when Mick Hucknall (of British pop group Simply Red) established his Il Cantante winery there. Today, the terraces of alberello-trained bush vines are of age and have contributed to the rising fortunes of Etna wines. A similar story has unfolded on another Sicilian volcano, Lipari, to the north in the Aeolian Islands, where designer Carlo Hauner has helped to bring attention to the near-extinct Malvasia delle Lipari wines.

Since its inception, the Etna DOC document has remained unaltered, despite myriad changes in winemaking, viticulture, politics, wine markets and consumer preference, which might be interpreted as an example of how Italy's DOC system has been less carefully managed than the French appellation system on which it was based. It might equally be a sign that the original laws were so carefully written that they have remained robust despite the changes going on around them. A third option is that so little wine is made under the title, and what there is typically of such good quality, that there has been little motivation to spend time and administrative funding on updating the laws.

Cerasuolo di Vittoria Wine DOCG

Cerasuolo di Vittoria is one of the most distinctive wines produced on the Italian island of Sicily, and the only one considered worthy of DOCG status. This intensely colored red wine, from the

island's south-eastern corner, is made from Nero d'Avola and Frappato grapes combined in roughly equal measure.

Good Cerasuolo di Vittoria wine should live up to its name (*Cerasuolo* means 'cherry-like') and have a deep, cherry-red color complemented by pronounced berry-fruit flavors.

Cerasuolo di Vittoria's Frappato content is responsible for the style's bright, idiosyncratic flavor (of black cherries and strawberries). But Frappato contributes little in the way of structure; pure Frappato wines are almost always light-bodied and low in tannins, due chiefly to the variety's thin, delicate skins. The Nero d'Avola component brings weight and body, grounding Frappato's frivolous fruitiness into something more serious and cellar-worthy. This explains why the best Cerasuolo di Vittoria wines typically contain a slightly higher proportion of Nero d'Avola. The best examples will reward up to 20 years of bottle ageing, although most are best consumed within 5-10 years of vintage.

In September 2005, 'Cerasuolo di Vittoria' became Sicily's very first DOCG title, having been a DOC since 1973. This promotion was justified on the grounds that the general quality of Cerasuolo di Vittoria wine had shown marked improvement during the 1980s and 1990s and had become something of a showcase wine for Sicily.



On the whole, quality has remained high since the promotion. Among producers, COS (Cilia-Occhipinti-Strano) stands out in particular, for its unusual choice of wine-maturation vessels – terracotta *amphorae* like those used in ancient Greece.

Grape varieties of note

The key grape varieties used in Sicilian viticulture are a combination of 'native' varieties (those historically cultivated on the island) and newer, more fashionable imports.

The signature red native grape is Nero d'Avola and its white counterpart is Catarratto, occupying 16% and 32% of Sicily's vineyard area respectively in 2008.

Other grapes considered to be native to the island are: Frappato (Cerasuolo di Vittorio DOCG), Mantellato, Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Cappuccio (Etna Rosso DOC), Nocera (Faro DOC),

and Perricone (reds), and Carricante, Grecanico, Inzolia, Grillo, Malvasia delle Lipari, Moscato (for the dessert wine of the nearby Sicilian territorial island, Moscato di Pantelleria DOC), and Zibibbo (whites).

However, conservatively, the estimate is that there are, at the very least, another 50 cultivars that are not currently being used to make “monovariety” wines in commercially significant volumes (for the most part, these grapes are added to various blends). The song remains the same for many other little-known island varieties that are just waiting for their day in the sun.

Syrah has been brought here from its home in southern France, where hot summer sunshine and sandy, rocky soils are also key components of the terroir. The robust red Rhone Valley variety shows every sign of adapting well to the Sicilian heat, and certainly better than Chardonnay, which is less able to produce balanced wines here. Trebbiano, the ubiquitous, high-yielding white variety found all around Italy, is also present in the wines of Sicily, although it has no role of particular distinction among them.

Whites:

Catarratto is mostly used in the production of light, easy-drinking white wines. Despite being grown almost exclusively in Sicily, it is one of Italy's most commonly planted grape varieties, making up around 60 percent of the island's total vineyard area.

The variety is commonly regarded (and widely used) as a lower-quality blending component, or an ingredient in Marsala wines, as well as grape concentrate. Catarratto is high-yielding and rather neutral-tasting, with low acidity – hardly the benchmarks of a top-quality grape. That said, careful “vinification” from dedicated producers has shown that the variety is capable of producing interesting wines with juicy texture and crisp lemon flavors.

The sheer volume of Catarratto juice created each year means much of it is shipped to cooler Italian wine regions, where it is used to increase the body and weight of otherwise thin, over-acidic wines. Although less famous than Marsala, another sweet wine of significance to the island is Moscato di Pantelleria, the Moscato grape in question being Muscat of Alexandria. Catarratto is permitted in Alcamo and Etna DOC wines, the latter blended with Carricante.



Catarratto was long thought to be two distinct grape varieties, Catarratto Comune and old-vine Catarratto Lucido. DNA testing in 2008 suggested that the two are genetically identical and, instead of being separate varieties, they are in fact different biotypes, clones of the same grape variety. There is some argument as to whether or not one is superior: both are high yielding, but Comune is used more often as a bulk wine and is distinguished by a white bloom on the berries. However, we now know that Catarratto Comune planted at 700 to 800 meters or old-vine Catarratto Lucido planted at lower altitudes can give very interesting white wines. This sort of information was simply not available 40 years ago, and that goes a long way toward explaining why there are more exciting Sicilian wines to try today than ever before.

The same research suggested that Catarratto is probably a descendent of Garganega, the key white-wine grape variety in northeastern Italy's Soave wines.

Synonyms include: Catarratto Bianco, Catarratto Bianco Comune, Catarratto Bianco Lucido, Catarratto Bianco Extra Lucido.

Food matches for Catarratto include:

- Tuna and caper salad
- Hainanese chicken rice
- Sautéed prawns with chilly

Carricante is an ancient white wine grape variety from eastern Sicily, thought to have been growing on the volcanic slopes of Mt Etna for at least a thousand years. The variety is known for its marked acidity, and the high yields which gave rise to its name (carica means "load" in Italian). The best examples come from vines grown in volcanic soils, at high altitude (Etna's vineyards stretch up as high as 3940ft /1200m).

Carricante vines are well-adapted to the high variations in diurnal temperature that characterize the climate around Mt. Etna. The grapes ripen slowly and steadily, retaining their trademark high acidity well into September.



On the whole, Carricante wines offer a broad range of refreshing citrus aromas – anything from lemon and lime to grapefruit to orange – alongside cooling herbal notes such as mint and aniseed. An underlying mineral, 'slatey' character is also to be found in the finest examples. When aged in stainless steel and without lees contact, notes of tart green apple shine through – a searing reminder of the variety's naturally high acidity. Weightier Carricante wines (particularly later-

harvested examples) are complemented by honeyed hints and the creamy texture that results from contact with silts.

Carricante is the key grape behind white wines made under the Etna DOC title. It is required in all of the denomination's white wines: 60% minimum in the standard Etna Bianco and 80% in Etna Bianco Superiore. The most common blending partner here is Catarratto, a variety for which Carricante is often confused.

Synonyms include: Catanese Bianco, Catarratto.

Food matches for Carricante include:

- Grilled white fish with lemon
- Snapper ceviche
- Fennel and apple coleslaw

Inzolia (or *Ansonica*) is an Italian grape variety grown in both Sicily and Tuscany. While it is most famous traditionally as an ingredient in the fortified Marsala wines, it is now seen more and more as a crisp, dry white wine, in blends and as a single variety.

Inzolia wines are moderately aromatic, and tend to display nutty, citrusy characters with herbal notes.

The grape has a long and complicated history. It is thought to have originated on the island of Sicily and is related to other Sicilian natives like Grillo and Nerello Mascalese, but other sources have argued that Inzolia is related to the Roditis and Sideritis grape varieties of Greece.



Today, Inzolia is found across Sicily, particularly in Palermo and Agrigento. It is permitted as a blending grape in many of the island's DOC appellations, adding a nutty weight to wines made with Catarratto and Grillo. Inzolia's tendency to lose acidity late in the season means that it has long been a building block of Marsala wines, but improved winemaking techniques and a change in fashions has seen Inzolia's place in Sicilian winemaking change significantly.

Synonyms include: Ansonica, Ansonica Bianca, Insolia, Nzolia.

Food matches for Inzolia include:

- Risotto with mushrooms and walnuts

- Salmon sashimi
- Steamed clams with butter

Grillo is a Sicilian white grape variety most famous for its role in the island's fortified Marsala wines. It is still widely planted on Sicily despite Marsala's fall from fashion and is now used most commonly in a variety of still white wines, both varietal and blended. Grillo, when vinified to a high standard, makes a fresh, light white wine with nutty, fruit-driven flavors that include lemon and apple.

There is some debate as to the origins of Grillo, as its earliest mention comes as recently as the mid-19th Century. Some believe that the variety is native to Sicily, suggesting it is the progeny of Catarratto and Muscat of Alexandria. Others have hypothesized that it was brought to the island from the southern Italian region of Puglia. There is even some evidence to suggest that this was the variety in the Roman wine Mamertino, a particular favorite of Julius Caesar.



Grillo is well suited to the hot, dry Sicilian climate. Its high levels of sugar and the ease with which it oxidizes make it a good option for fortification. Unfortunately, Sicily's other great white contender, Catarratto, yields more highly and so became the preferred choice for Marsala, which led to a decline in plantings of Grillo in the 20th Century.

Happily, as focus has shifted from quantity to quality, Sicilian producers are beginning to revisit and replant Grillo, particularly as viticultural and vinicultural techniques have improved. Winemakers are now able to control thiols more easily, giving Grillo wines with more pleasant, fruit-driven aromas rather than the more earthy styles that were previously available. Some commentators have suggested that this is not a true expression of the variety.

Grillo has become a viable contender for the quintessential Italian table white: light, easy-drinking and often associated with very good value. In this regard it competes with Soave, Gavi and IGT Pinot Grigio.

Synonyms include: Riddu.

Food matches for Grillo include:

- Macaroni with fresh lemon and cream sauce
- Lemon chicken

- Walnut-rolled goat cheese with honey

Reds:

Nero d'Avola (also known as *Calabrese*), is indigenous to Sicily. The dark-skinned grape is of great historical importance to Sicily and takes its present-day name from the town of Avola on the island's southeast coast, where it was first identified. The area was a hotbed of trade and population movement during the Middle Ages and Nero d'Avola was frequently used to add color and body to lesser wines in mainland Italy.

Translated, Nero d'Avola means "Black of Avola", a reference to the grape's distinctive dark coloring, but its exact origins are the subject of debate. The region of Calabria can lay claim to the variety via its synonym *Calabrese* (meaning "of Calabria"), though this term may be a derivation of *Calaurisi*, an ancient name for someone from Avola.

It is the most important and widely planted red wine grape variety in Sicily. Vast volumes of Nero d'Avola are produced on the island every year and have been for centuries. But besides local consumption, it was not widely known outside of Italy for a long time, as it was mostly exported to France to bulk out lighter red wines (they call it "le vin medicine"). It was largely ignored in the 1980's but has recently made a big comeback in worthy varietal releases and is now considered the main local red grape of Sicily.

Nero d'Avola produced as a varietal is often compared to Syrah because it likes similar growing conditions (Sicily has a hot Mediterranean climate) and exhibits many similar characteristics.



Nero d'Avola wines are dark, full-bodied, rich, velvety, with notes of black currant, blackberry, boysenberry, blueberry, black pepper, clove. Depending on production methods, Nero d'Avola can be made into dense and dark wine that is stored in oak barrels and suitable for aging, or young and fresh wines. Younger wines show plum and juicy, red-fruit flavors, while more complex examples offer chocolate and dark raspberry flavors.

Nero d'Avola typically has high tannins, medium acidity and a strong body. However, it can also be very smooth if grown at higher elevations where cooler temperatures restrict the alcohol levels.

Food matches for Nero d'Avola include:

- Chicken salad with pomegranate, pine nuts and raisins (rosé)

- Caramelized barbecued pork patties (*bun cha*)
- Charcoal-grilled rump steak

Nerello Mascalese is a highly regarded, dark-skinned grape variety that grows most commonly on the volcanic slopes of Mount Etna. Its wines, which have had a rapid upsurge in popularity in the last decade, tend to reflect their surroundings, giving taut, fresh red wines with fruity, herbaceous flavors, excellent minerality and an earthy nuance. Nerello Mascalese wines often have a perfume reminiscent of those of the noble wines of Barolo and Burgundy.

The variety takes its name from the Mascali plain between Mount Etna and the coast where it is thought to have originated – a small portion of older vines predate the *Phylloxera* epidemic of the 1880s. The prefix Nerello refers to the black color of the grapes, and is shared by Nerello Cappuccio, Nerello Mascalese's most common blending partner.

Both grapes are found in Etna DOC wines, with Nerello Mascalese making up the bulk of the blend and easily surpassing plantings of Nerello Cappuccio.



The hugely variable volcanic soils of Etna combined with elevations of up to 1000m above sea level – some of the highest vineyards in Europe – help produce wines with immense character and complexity, and without the excessive weight that often characterizes Sicilian red wines from lower altitudes. Nerello Mascalese is a late-ripening variety, and most vines are trained in the traditional bush-vine method, which works well in the terroir.

Nerello Mascalese vines also dominate the neighboring Faro DOC surrounding the port city of Messina. Set in the hills above the city, vineyards reach impressive altitudes here too, if not quite the dizzying heights of Etna.

Outside the two aforementioned DOCs, Nerello Mascalese is used in a variety of blends under the Sicilia IGT banner, often alongside the island's dominant Nero d'Avola grape variety. These wines are most often red, but rosé (rosato) is also made.

Recent DNA testing has suggested that the variety is quite probably the offspring of Italy's famous Sangiovese grape variety, and a connection to Carricante has also been suggested.

Synonyms include: Niureddu, Negrello.

Food matches for Nerello Mascalese include:

- Pigeon breasts in red-wine sauce
- Wild mushroom and eggplant filo parcels
- Linguini with tomato and clams

Frappato is a light-bodied red grape widely grown on the southeastern coast of Sicily. The grape is of great historical importance, both for its wines and its legislative influence. In 2005, the Cerasuolo di Vittoria region became Sicily's first and only DOCG. Cerasuolo di Vittoria wines are a blend of Frappato and the region's main grape, Nero d'Avola.

Cherry-colored, aromatic and low in tannins, varietal Frappato wines are light bodied and slightly reminiscent of good Beaujolais. However, Frappato is found in more blended wines than varietal examples, and this is where the variety really shines.



Nero d'Avola is its prime blending partner, because of its complementary bodyweight and concentration of color; the two varieties combine to produce a red wine that is typically designed for short-to-medium term cellaring. Frappato wines may also be blended with Nerello Mascalese, Nerello Cappuccio and Nocera.

Synonyms include: Frappato Nero, Frappato di Vittoria.

Food matches for Frappato include:

- Pizza with anchovies and caramelized onions
- Potato pancakes with pork
- Lamb-stuffed courgettes.

Sources of information:

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