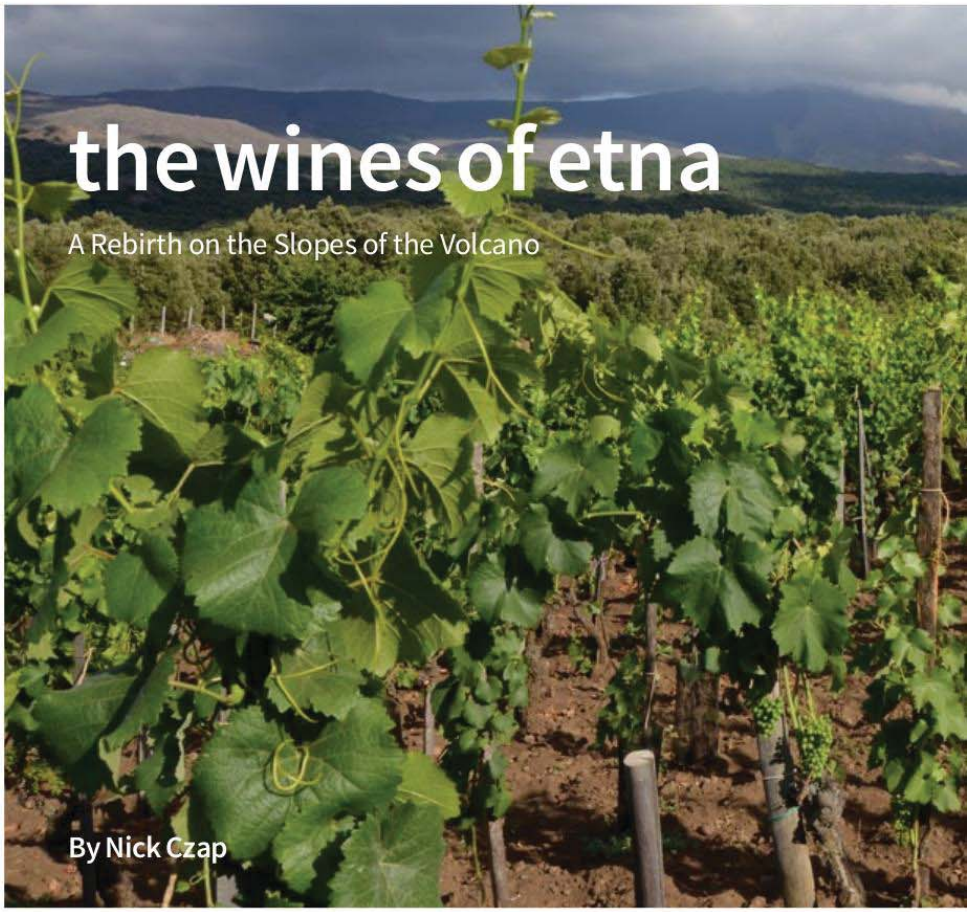

the wines of etna

A Rebirth on the Slopes of the Volcano

By Nick Czap

On a late July morning, the sun was intensifying over Piazza Belvedere, the main square in the village of Milo on the eastern slope of Mount Etna. A group of what appeared to be Sicilian Girl Scouts milled about in the piazza, whose far edge afforded a view of the Etna foothills and, jutting into the sea like a finger, the port of Riposto, which for centuries served as the departure point for Etna wines bound for cities throughout the Mediterranean and beyond. The vantage was appropriate, as I was waiting for Salvo Foti, a Sicilian winemaker who has played an instrumental role in Etna's enological renaissance.

I recognized him from a distance as he made his way across the square, having met him a few months earlier at Tosca Café in San Francisco. I had ordered a bottle of Foti's Vinupetra — a blend mainly of Etna's indigenous Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Cappuccio grapes — and was told by the wine director that Foti was in town on business and would be coming by the restaurant at any moment. And then just as the wine arrived at the table, so did Foti. Tall, lanky, with an unruly bush of gray hair, he seemed slightly discombobulated, as anyone might when making the transition from the Sicilian countryside to a crowded San Francisco eatery. Our conversation consisted of little more than my mentioning that I was hoping to visit Sicily in the summer, and we said good-bye. I took a first sip of the Vinupetra, and by the time it completed its arc, revealing layer upon layer of fruit in shades and gradations from dark and ponderous to bright and shimmering, the notion of a trip to Sicily had become a certainty.

Wine production on Etna reached a peak in the 18th and 19th centuries; in 1844, according to the land register, over 50 percent of the farmland on Etna was planted in grapes, more than in any other region of Sicily. At higher altitudes, such as in Milo, which is 750 meters above sea level, the figure exceeded 70 percent. Between 1880 and 1890, the Etna region produced more than 100 million liters of wine. Rather than selling in bulk, a number of properties had begun to bottle their own wines, but by the early 1900s, just as these wines were beginning to

Looking toward the slopes of Etna from Salvo Foti's Vigna Bosco.

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win medals at major expositions in Italy and France, phylloxera had begun its march through Etna's vineyards. The destruction wrought by the louse, as well as the decline of the export market to France, due to the expiration of the 1881 Treaty of Commerce and Navigation and a mass emigration of agricultural workers, ended efforts to produce high-quality Etna wines for the better part of a century.

Fifteen years ago, Foti founded Consorzio I Vigneri, a group of winegrowers dedicated to preserving traditional Etnean viticulture. The consortium takes its name from Maestranza dei Vigneri, a winegrowers' guild founded in Catania in 1435, which in the context of Sicily's winegrowing history qualifies as a fairly recent event. Archaeological evidence indicates that the Greeks and Phoenicians were tending vines and making wine in their coastal settlements as early as the 8th century BC. Three centuries after that, coins depicting Dionysus's tutor, Silenus, along with bunches of grapes, suggest that winemaking was an important part of Etna's culture and economy.

The modern consortium includes nine producers farming a total of just 38 hectares of vines. About half are on the slopes of Etna, while half are in southeastern and southern Sicily or on the islands of Lipari and Pantelleria. Foti himself owns three small vineyards on Etna, including one in Milo, where we were. He bottles his own wines under the label I Vigneri di Salvo Foti.

Sitting at a table in Piazza Belvedere over plastic cups of espresso, Foti explained that Milo was the best place to grow Etna's principal indigenous white grape Carricante, and per the official *disciplinaire*, it is the only place where you can grow fruit for Etna Bianco Superiore DOC, which must contain at least 80 percent Carricante. The wine tends to be light-bodied and not particularly aromatic, with a crisp, sometimes bracing, acidity. Production is rather limited though, as Carricante has fallen out of favor in recent years.

"Carricante is difficult to vinify," Foti said, explaining that its high acidity makes malolactic fermentation difficult. That post-alcoholic fermentation is important because it converts malic acid into lactic

Salvo Foti standing on the *pista* of his restored *palmento*.

acid to produce a softer, rounder taste. Partly because of the difficulty with Carricante, Foti said, a lot of Sicilian winemakers have given up on it, planting non-indigenous varieties instead. Foti, however, had a certain literary advantage. He had gleaned a description of how to ferment Carricante from the writings of Domenico Sestini, a Florentine who traveled throughout Sicily in the 1770s, studying its indigenous grape varieties, viticultural practices, and vinification methods. Foti didn't seem keen to go into the specifics — which entail leaving the wine on the lees during barrel fermentation in the spring following the vinification — saying simply, "If you know how to do the fermentation, it's very easy. But when you don't, it's not." More to the point, he added, "Now, people want elegant wine — not high alcohol." And when properly cultivated and vinified, Carricante fits the bill perfectly.

In a way, Foti's loyalty to the idiosyncratic grape could be viewed as that of one Etnean native to another. The son of a winegrower, Foti was born in 1962 in the port city of Catania. In the 1960s, the increasing mechanization of agriculture led to an exodus of farmers and farm workers from Sicily. Remaining winegrowers were hard hit, Foti explained, by a sharp drop in wine consumption due to the influx of soft drinks. When Foti was four, his parents moved to Switzerland in search of work, and he went to live with his grandparents on their farm in the town of Agira, below the foothills on the inland side of Etna. Foti's grandfather was a winegrower too, selling the wine in bulk.

Every October during the harvest, Foti would accompany his grandfather and a team of workers to the family's *palmento,* a traditional stone winemaking building whose design dates to Roman times. Foti and his young friends would join the workers in carrying baskets of grapes from the vineyard up the *palmento*'s stairway to its *pista,* one of whose meanings is dance floor. They watched the men singing songs to keep their rhythm as they trod the grapes in a choreographed series of steps that Foti once described in an essay as "an incredible ballet." A few days after that, the fermenting must would begin to exhale a perfume that to the young Foti was intoxicating, as was the juice, literally, when he sipped it illicitly.

Foti went on to study viticulture and enology at the Scuola di Viticoltura e di Enologia di Catania, earning his diploma in 1981 and later an advanced degree in enology. While he was pursuing his degrees, Foti worked at a number of wineries, among them the former Etnea Vini in Catania, which specialized in bottling Etnean wines, and Donnafugata, one of Sicily's best-known family-run wineries, in the western port city of Marsala. He then began a collaboration that would prove instrumental.

In 1988, Giuseppe Benanti, a businessman from Catania, set out to make high-quality wine from an Etnean vineyard that his grandfather had farmed

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in the 1880s, reviving an effort that had been abandoned in the early years of the 20th century. Benanti hired Foti as his agronomist and enologist. In 1995, Benanti's first Etna wines — Rovittello Etna Rosso DOC, Pietramarina Etna Bianco Superiore DOC, and Bianco di Caselle Etna Bianco DOC — won awards at expositions in Zurich and Milan. In the years that followed, they continued to perform well at competitions elsewhere in Italy and Europe, raising awareness of the region's potential. A small wave of investors and winemakers eventually followed, notably three non-Sicilians — Marc de Grazia, Andrea Franchetti, and Frank Cornelissen — whose wines and marketing savvy further burnished Etna's reputation.

In 1990, Foti proposed a scientific and technical study of eastern Sicilian, and in particular, Etnean, grape varieties, viticulture, and wines. Benanti provided financial backing. The study examined the ways in which climate and cultivation techniques affect the relative concentration of polyphenols — the compounds that give wines their color, tannins, and bouquet — in Etna's most important indigenous varieties, the red Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Cappuccio and the white Carricante, Minella Bianca, and Vesparola. Foti and his collaborators, including Rocco Di Stefano of the Istituto Sperimentale per l'Enologia in Asti and Jean Siegrist of the French Institut National de Recherche Agronomique in Beaune, published their results in 1993.

One finding was that Nerello Mascalese, which must make up at least 80 percent of Etna Rosso DOC, produces the most desirable color and texture when grown in Etna's rocky, sandy soils and trained in the traditional *alberello,* "little tree," shape. While smaller than Nerello Mascalese grapes from trellised vines, grapes from *alberelli* contained higher levels of the polyphenol cyanine, found in varieties that produce richly colored wines that age well. You might argue that Foti and his colleagues merely provided a scientific explanation for why Nerello Mascalese became established on Etna in the first place.

In 1991, a new Italian law banned making wine in *palmenti* on the double grounds that they were insufficiently hygienic and that they posed a safety risk to workers. Inside the *palmenti,* the traditional fermentation vats tended to trap carbon dioxide gas, which was especially dangerous to someone wading in several feet of grape must. But the law contained no provision that would have allowed winegrowers to modify their *palmenti* to bring them into compliance. The effect was immediate and drastic. Many Etnean winegrowers could not afford to buy modern equipment, and they abandoned the vineyards that had sustained their families for generations.

Today Etna is littered with the ruins of countless *palmenti,* their size reflecting the size of the vineyards surrounding them. Occasionally you see one neatly restored, converted into a vacation house, but most *palmenti* are wrecks, and the higher you go on the mountain, the more difficult it becomes to distinguish between a fully collapsed *palmento* and a heap of rocks deposited by one of the volcano's frequent eructations.

"When you shut down a *palmento,*" Foti asserted in an online video in 2013, "often, you also abandon a vineyard. If you abandon a vineyard, it means you are abandoning a territory, the system of terraces for the soil. It destroys a way of life. It is something more than simply closing a *palmento* — before you do something, you have to think about the consequences."

When we had finished our espressos, we drove in Foti's car to his Vigna di Milo, planted in Carricante. As we walked toward the vineyard gate, the ground crunched beneath our feet; it was covered in jet black cinders, one of the materials that Etna ejects at a rate of 30 million cubic meters per year. At the time, the volcano was in the midst of an energetic Strombolian eruption. Every 20 seconds, one of its craters sent streaks of lava hundreds of meters into the sky. In Linguaglossa, a town about 20 kilometers to the north, where my wife and I had rented a house, the shock waves rattled the windowpanes and shook our innards.

Depending on their composition, Foti said, different types of volcanic material require more or less time to break down into soil. A ten-foot-tall vein of basaltic lava that loomed nearby would take many centuries; the cinders on the order of 200 years. A succession of flora helps the process along. Foti pointed out lichens, low clumps of pink-flowered saponaria and purple-petaled valeriana, the mint *nepitella,* the thyme *satra,* and the broom *ginestra,* whose yellow blooms burst like fireworks from the black terrain.

The vineyard's iron gate was decorated with I Vigneri's symbol, the gnarled profile of an ancient vine. To get a sense of the consortium's guiding principles, one had only to glance around the vineyard. Each vine was supported by a chestnut stake and trained in the *alberello* style, with a small canopy of leaves up top and the grapes hanging freely below,

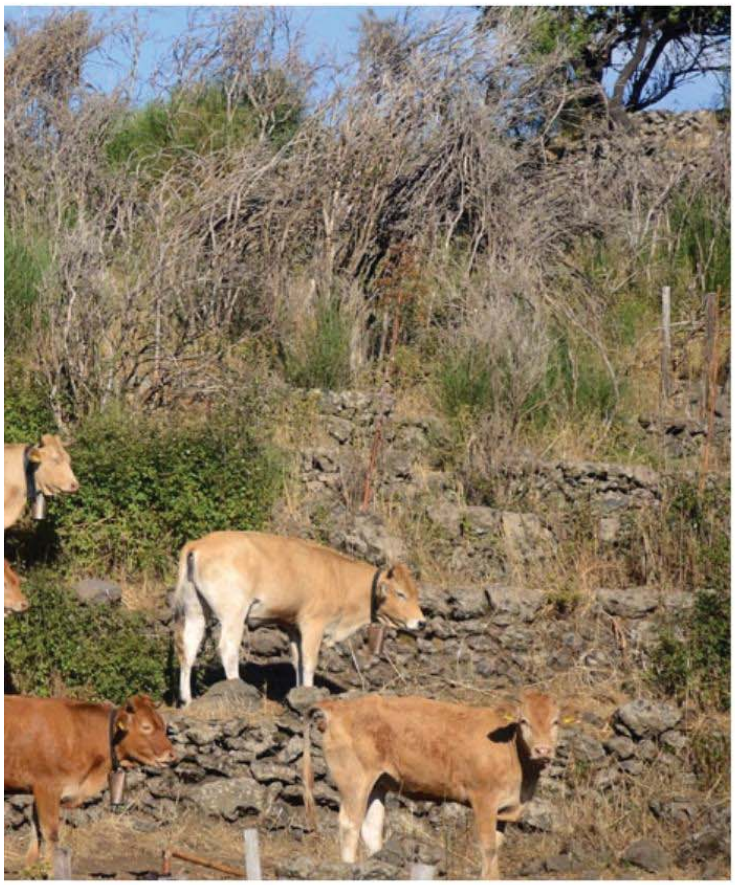
maximizing their exposure to sunlight and radiant heat from the soil, which concentrates their sugar, minerals, and other elements. Unmortared lava stone walls, *muri secchi*, corralled the fine volcanic soil into terraces, slowing the flow of rainwater down the slope and preventing erosion. As in all of I Vigneri's vineyards, there was no irrigation, but the area around Milo receives more rain than any other part of Etna, so the vines have it relatively easy. The workers less so.

Traditionally, *alberelli* are planted only one meter apart, making 10,000 vines per hectare. There's no room for a tractor. The work can be done only by a person or, depending on the task, sometimes a person and a mule. For instance, the soil between the vines can be tilled only by a small, hand-guided rototiller or a mule-drawn plow. It takes one person 200 days per year to maintain one hectare of *alberelli*, Foti said, while it takes one person and a tractor just 50 days to maintain a hectare of trellised vines.

In Vigna di Milo the only visible concession to modernity was an electronic weather station mounted atop a metal pole, and nestled among its instruments, a surveillance camera, a necessary precaution given the country's ongoing financial crisis and a regional tradition of opportunistic criminality. Foti said that thieves not only help themselves to ripe fruit but to the chestnut stakes that support the vines. The going rate for a properly seasoned stake is slightly more than one euro.

The vines looked healthy and vigorous; the grapes, a little more than two months away from harvest, were vibrant and firm. Each vine sat in a cone-shaped depression. Foti explained that periodically the vineyard workers rake the soil up the sides of each concavity, lifting out the bigger particles of soil and encouraging the smaller, finer particles, whose nutrients are more accessible, to fall back toward the roots. I asked Foti what he uses in the way of fertilizer. He paused for a moment, searching for the words. "Sheep shit," he said, and then with emphasis, "*Fermented* sheep shit."

There is a simple elegance to the system. Water falls from the sky, walls are made of stone extruded by the volcano, and fertilizer comes from the same animal that gives the region its delightfully pungent



Cattle in terraces with abandoned vines along the road leading to Vigna Bosco, on the north side of Etna.

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Pecorino Siciliano. "Today, we can make wine on the moon: you bring the soil, you bring water, then you have grapes, and then you have wine," Foti said. "But it is not sustainable. In order to be sustainable, winegrowing has to be biocompatible with the place."

Foti's ambitions go beyond the preservation of traditional farming techniques. A short distance away, several of I Vigneri's workers were finishing the restoration of a two-century-old *palmento* in which Foti was planning to oversee a vinification that October. A few years earlier, Foti said, he wouldn't have publicized the project, given the *palmento*'s illegal status. But today, with growing interest in Etnean wines and the Italian government's awareness of the economic benefits they bring, Foti was willing to take the risk.

Compared with many *palmenti,* this one was quite substantial, about 300 square meters in all. A wall divided the space into two roughly equal rooms, one for crushing and fermentation, the other for *botti,* huge chestnut barrels. The roof timbers were clad in sheets of tightly bound reeds, which were in turn topped with mortar and finished with terra cotta tiles. As Foti talked with the workers, I climbed the steep steps to the *pista*. Imagining the same trip with a big basket of fruit balanced on my shoulder gave me an immediate sense of how physically hard the labor used to be, and would be again in a few months' time.

The *pista* was constructed of massive, precisely fitted blocks of lava. After stomping the grapes, the workers would mound them up and press them more thoroughly using a *seccu,* a sturdy disc of woven willow branches, placed on top. The workers would step onto it together and, moving in unison, spring up and down, using their collective force to squeeze the mass even further. From the *pista,* the juice would flow into a chiseled-out channel and through two stone spouts called *bocche di cane,* or dog mouths, to fill a pair of fermentation vats, or *tini,* on the floor below. The *tini,* made likewise of stone, were about two and a half meters by by five meters and about one and a half meters high.

After the one- to seven-day fermentation in the *tini,* in contact with the grape skins and stalks, the juice would be run off and the pomace subjected to a final pressing using a *conzu,* which is an integral part of the *palmento*. High above a third *tina* was a huge oak beam, parallel to the *palmento*'s floor, with a stone weight attached to the end inside the vat and a massive wooden screw threaded through the other. Turning the screw by pushing against wooden poles inserted into its base, the workers would lift the stone and then lower it to provide the weight for the final pressing. The *conzu*'s design, like that of the *palmento* around it, was ingenious.

In the *palmento*'s cellar, the largest of several enormous *botti,* made of Etnean chestnut, once held 12,000 liters of wine. Sadly, Foti said his *botti* were no longer sound, and no one in Sicily today is making new chestnut casks of that size. Foti spoke a few words to the crew, glanced at his watch, and said it was time to go. Lunch and some friends of his from Lombardy were waiting at his house in Passopisciaro, a village 30 kilometers away, and we were running late.

In the countryside near Passopisciaro, we turned into the dirt road leading to Foti's house, in a vineyard named Vigna Calderara, near the edge of the plain stretching between Etna and the Nebrodi Mountains to the northwest. The sun was beating down, and the prospect of refreshments was exciting. Foti's wife, Rita, and their housekeeper had prepared a beautiful lunch of golden semolina bread, cheese, olives,

spicy marinated peppers stuffed with anchovies, a green bean salad with lots of olive oil, and an eggplant caponata with potatoes.

Foti opened a bottle and poured a splash of pale pink and slightly *frizzante* wine into each glass. The subtle aroma resembled rose hip or cranberry. In the mouth, beneath the wine's delicately sweet-sour surface, flavors of cherry and berry and something vaguely tropical mingled with a mildly tart acidity that gave each sip a crisp finish indicating fermentation and aging in stainless steel. Called Vinudilice, the wine was a blend of Grecanico, Alicante (Grenache Noir), Minella Bianca, Minella Nera, and two yet-unidentified varieties from Vigna Bosco, a 0.6-hectare vineyard 1,300 meters above sea level, not far from Passopisciaro. The wine takes its name from the forest of *ilice,* holly oak, that surrounds the vineyard. Given its isolation, Foti explained, the soil is particularly unspoiled. And because of the altitude, temperatures are quite cool, which slows ripening, preserving the grapes' acidity as well as the aromatic compounds in their skins.

Foti ferments all his wines with indigenous yeasts he selected years ago and has maintained because they produce good results. Perhaps because of these "tame" yeasts, his wines have none of the funk or other surprising characteristics that you sometimes encounter in so-called "natural wines." Foti himself balks at the term. Not only is it absurd, he says, beginning with the fact that wild or untended vines don't produce fruit suitable for winemaking, but it obscures the enormous body of knowledge, as well as the labor and skills of everyone from the grower to the winemaker, that are essential to its production.

Next Foti poured his Carricante from Vigna di Milo, the vineyard we had visited that morning. Because Carricante's high acidity inhibits spoilage, Foti doesn't add any sulfur during vinification or before bottling. Pale yellow and not especially aromatic, the wine had a taste that began with invigorating acidity and was followed by a kind of lemony minerality, a hint of almost-ripe peach and a whisper of honey. It was a perfect foil to the hot afternoon and the rich little dishes.

A third bottle appeared, of red. Foti opened it and poured another round of glasses. He swirled and sniffed, thought for a moment, and with an expression somewhere between surprise and mild amusement, he said, "It smells like feet." Made from Nerello Mascalese with a small quantity of Nerello Cappuccio and Grenache, it had a dusky taste, round, earthy and softly tannic. Called I Vigneri Vino Rosso, it is the wine the consortium gives to its workers for their own consumption at a rate, stipulated by tradition, of a liter a day. A small amount of this wine is exported and available in the States. Since 2005 Foti had been making I Vigneri Vino Rosso near the medieval town of Randazzo in a rented *palmento,* which has since been demolished. From now on, he would make it in the newly renovated *palmento* in Milo.

Finally, Foti opened a Vinupetra, the Etna Rosso DOC I had first tasted on that serendipitous occasion in San Francisco. Made of the fruit of ancient vines from the vineyard surrounding the house, its color was more black than red, and its bouquet was similarly deep and dark with elements of dried plum, dried fig, cherry, and blackberry. The flavor was dense, almost but not quite sweet, with a bit of earth and a hovering of vanilla — a characteristic of Nerello Cappuccio — which persisted pleasantly on the tongue. After two to three weeks of fermentation on the skins, Foti ages some of the Vinupetra in oak *botti* and some in chestnut and bottles the two separately. The wine from oak is somewhat smoother with a more pronounced vanilla note; the wine from chestnut is notably more tannic.

Foti suggested a post-lunch walk, and I followed him out into the vineyard, stepping carefully along the top of a low lava stone wall, which served as a path. Looking over his shoulder, he said, "Now we are going to meet the grandparents." Reaching the end of the wall, I stepped down into the soil, sinking, rather startlingly, halfway up my calves. The soil was like moon dust, incredibly fine and light, the slightest movement sending it airborne. Foti pointed to a vine, thick and twisted, its shaggy bark reticulated like that of an ancient olive tree. "This is the grandfather," he said. I asked how old it was. "Two hundred years," he said. Another vine nearby, similarly convoluted though less massive, was a mere centenarian. And there, amid their forebears, were tender green vines in their first season, each supported by its own chestnut stake and protected from rabbits by a collar of plastic webbing. Foti gestured to each category in turn. "Here you have the grandparents, the parents, and the children, all together."

It was hard to see how the vines slaked their thirst in such seeming dryness, but Passopisciaro has a secret. Melting snow from Etna's summit and rain that falls on the northern slope flow into the subsoil between Randazzo and Solicchiata, where subter-

Etna, seen from the town of Linguaglossa.

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ranean rock traps the water like a sponge, releasing it upward in the form of humidity during the growing season. The vines must work for that moisture, though. Foti said that the oldest vines in Vigna Calderara sink their roots as deep as 15 meters. The notion of a network of roots extending five stories down was almost as hard to fathom as the fact that some of these vines, just green shoots in the early 19th century, were already well into their wine-producing years when Garibaldi presented Sicily to King Vittorio Emanuele in 1861. They had also rather neatly evaded phylloxera, which Foti attributed to the sandiness of the soil, which inhibits the spread of the louse, to the immunoresistance of individual vines, and to the antagonistic action of the symbiotic fungi that live in close proximity to the roots of the vines.

Foti excused himself to attend to some business, and I climbed the stairway of a viewing mound, recently built of lava. Looking across the plain, I could make out the dent of the Alcantara River and beyond it the flanks of the Nebrodi Mountains. With binoculars and a better sense of direction, I might have been able to spot the properties of the three newcomers who established Etna wineries in the early 2000s. When Marc de Grazia, a wine merchant based in Florence, visited Benanti's winery in 1999, he tasted wines from several growers and was struck by both the character of the wines and the beauty of the Etnean landscape. He became friends with Foti, and in 2002 he founded Tenuta delle Terre Nere in Randazzo, taking up residence there in 2004. Andrea Franchetti, from Rome, built his winery just a stone's throw from Foti's Vigna Calderara in Passopisciaro, naming it after the town. Frank Cornelissen, a wine broker from Belgium, built his winery in the village of Solicchiata, where he farms about 15 hectares, mostly of old *alberelli*. Of the three, Cornelissen's wines — unsulfured and fermented on native yeasts — are the most idiosyncratic, ranging from an astringently cidery *rosato* called Susucaru to a massively complex red called Magma Rosso, made exclusively from Nerello Mascalese. Taking a last look from the top of the viewing mound, it was intriguing to think of all the wines, each with its own facets of terroir, that might one day emerge from Etna as other adventurous winemakers revive abandoned vineyards.

I made my way back along the stone wall, rejoined Foti, and we drove up into the foothills toward the vineyard that produces the fruit for his *rosato*. Leaving Passopisciaro, the road traversed a lava flow the size of a major river. The product of an eruption in 1981, had the lava curtsied only slightly westward, it would have obliterated the better part of Randazzo. The road hiked upward through dun-colored slopes and stone terraces so ubiquitous they seemed almost a natural feature of the landscape that was in fact slowly devouring them. As we climbed, ducking into the forest of holly oak, the air grew noticeably cooler. We emerged onto a dirt track, stopping by an iron gate with a hand-painted tile inscribed "Vigna Bosco." Here was another mix of old vines, some as old as 140 years, with brand-new ones.

As we walked gingerly in soil as dusty and deep as that in Passopisciaro, I noticed that each newly planted vine, rather than growing from the base of a dug-out concavity like the vines at Milo, instead had a little mound of soil heaped around it. I asked Foti about the difference, and he let out a little sigh, a sort of nonverbal form of the versatile Italian word *allora,* often uttered by someone about to embark on an explanation. Foti plunged a hand into the side of one of the little mounds and pulled out a fistful of soil. He squeezed it gently, and opened his hand. Rather than blowing away in the breeze, the soil held together in a humid lump. The simple act of mounding up the soil, Foti explained, concentrated enough moisture for the cuttings to survive their first growing season and establish the roots that would one day dive to great depths.

The day was getting long, but before we left Vigna Bosco, Foti wanted to share something. Digging about in the trunk of his car, he retrieved a beautifully forged and rather fearsome-looking pair of two-handed shears. The *forbice a due mani* are used for pruning the woody parts of the grapevines between late fall and winter, and this particular pair had belonged to his grandfather. As he held them up so I could take a closer look, the intimidating blades gleamed in the sun, their antique design in need of no improvement. Foti, however, had made a small modification, two words carefully engraved in the handle: I VIGNERI.

Back at the house in Passopisciaro, Foti gave me a parting gift of a bottle of Carricante Vigna di Milo and of 2006 Vinupetra aged in chestnut *botti*. I carried them back to Linguaglossa. The end of our visit to Etna was coming, and to celebrate, or mourn, my wife and I had planned a dinner party with some new acquaintances. As the day approached, Foti's wines were joined on a kitchen shelf by several bottles we picked up in Linguaglossa.

Although Etna's wine industry was devastated in the early 20th century and again in the 1960s, small-scale winemaking was never entirely eradicated. Many families in towns such as Linguaglossa have small plots of grapevines, and they happily sell or give away the wine they don't drink themselves. Some of the wines are quite rough, so much so that they are improved upon by adding a bit of water. Among the bottles in our growing collection was a white wine, made by the owners of the local hardware store, and two reds, both of them, like Foti's Vinupetra, blends

A glass of Vinudilice.

of Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Cappuccio. One red was a gift from the owner of Linguaglossa's car rental agency and the other, which was particularly smooth-drinking, from the manager of the town's gas station.

There didn't seem to be much of a local market for the wines made by Etna's new enological pioneers. For the most part, their bottles were gathering dust on shelves of the few grocery stores that carried them. Business also seemed slow at a small wine boutique, clearly aimed at enological tourists with some affluence who have yet to materialize in significant numbers.

For our going-away dinner, I tried to replicate the simplicity of the meal at the Fotis' house. Visiting my favorite shops, I first bought a *cucciddatu,* a ring-shaped semolina bread, then some mild cow's-milk provola, some Pecorino Siciliano with peppercorns, spicy green olives, and marinated roasted peppers. At the produce shop, I found green beans for a salad, fresh figs that needed no embellishment, and squash blossoms, which, fried and dusted with a bit of pecorino, would make a perfect addition to a frittata.

The food was well if quietly received. I was curious what our friends made of Foti's wine, and the consensus was that it was good. But the discussion went no further. That may have been because one of our new friends had several hundred liters of her own wine sitting in tanks in her cellar, down the street. And, although wine is ubiquitous on Etna, connoisseurship doesn't seem to be, or perhaps not yet. That's not to say that Etneans, even those with the most modest vineyards and equipment, are not intensely proud of their wines. When I inquired at the gas station in Linguaglossa about the wines that sat unselfconsciously alongside bottles of motor oil and antifreeze, the owner drew himself up as if readying for a fight. "This wine wasn't made in a winery. This is our own wine made at home, made with love!"

In late November, Foti was back in California, where I live, and I joined him at dinner along with Keven Clancy, his California distributor, and some other friends in the wine business. We met at Dopo, an Italian restaurant in Oakland. The owner, Jon Smulewitz, is of Sicilian descent and had met Foti on a recent trip to Etna. After years of serving a somewhat pan-Italian cuisine, he was testing out an all-Sicilian menu that he planned to launch early in the new year. One thing that had been holding him back, he said, was the limited availability of Sicilian wines. Only in the last year or two, Smulewitz said, has the selection grown diverse enough to enable him to put together an all-Sicilian wine list, including several bottles from Etna.

A pair of appetizers arrived: swordfish crudo garnished with sultanas and octopus cooked in white wine. Foti opened his Carricante Vigna di Milo, whose delicate flavors nicely complemented those of the seafood. As the meal progressed, Foti and Clancy opened two Vinupetras, one aged in oak and the other in chestnut. I opted for the latter, whose astringency made a perfect match for the rich earthiness of a dish of *lolli,* a type of hand-rolled pasta, made in this instance with carob flour, as is typical of Modica in southern Sicily.

I was curious to learn how the vinification had gone in the renovated *palmento* in Milo, and I asked Foti how the wine had turned out. He thought a moment and gave a smile that seemed tempered by the memory of a long exertion.

"È buono," he said. "It's good."

Some Recommended Etna bottles

2013 Rosso di Verzella, Benanti, Etna, about $20 (imported by Lyra Wine) — Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Cappuccio.

2010 Pietramarina, Benanti, Etna, about $50 (imported by Lyra Wine) — 100 percent Carricante.

2012 Magma, Cornelissen, Etna, about $225 (imported by Zev Rovine Selections) — 100 percent Nerello Mascalese.

2014 Susucaru, Cornelissen, Etna, about $29 (imported by Zev Rovine Selections) — Malvasia, Moscadella, Cattaratto, and Nerello Mascalese.

2011 Etna Bianco Cuvée delle Vigne Niche, Tenuta delle Terre Nere, Etna, about $35 (imported by de Grazia Imports) — 100 percent Carricante.

2011 Etna Rosso Calderara Sottana, Tenuta delle Terre Nere, Etna, about $50 (imported by de Grazia Imports) — Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Cappuccio.

2014 Vinudilice, I Vigneri di Salvo Foti, Etna, about $45 (imported by LDM Wines) — Alicante, Grecanico, Minella, and other minor varieties.

2013 Vigna di Milo, I Vigneri di Salvo Foti, Etna, about $45 (imported by LDM Wines) — 100 percent Carricante.

2012 Vinupetra, I Vigneri di Salvo Foti, Etna, about $55 (imported by LDM Wines) — Nerello Mascalese, Nerello Cappuccio, Alicante and Francisi.

2013 Etna Rosso, I Vigneri di Salvo Foti, Etna, about $35 (imported by LDM Wines) — Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Cappuccio. ■

Nick Czap