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Mount Etna’s puffs of ash help create a soil that wine-makers now covet. We meet the growers going with the flow to make unique vintages.

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Those who live around Etna in Sicily do not fear the starbursts of lava that puncture the indigo night – sparks swelling occasionally into full rocket blasts of dark red fire. For many, it’s the reason they are here. “Etna either captivates you or sends you running,” says Silvia Maestrelli, a Tuscan wine-maker who was drawn to relocate to the area’s Tenuta di Fessina in 2007. She then launched her own winery and later a swish set of guesthouses on the property. “My decision was emotional,” she says. “I was pulled here by the volcano.”

Etna, the most active volcano in Europe, looms over the entire northeastern corner of the Mediterranean island, visible from the shore and from miles around. It’s a fuming pyramid of a mountain, whose frequent but rarely disastrous explosions fill the air with a frisson of menace and a powdery coating of volcanic ash.

For producers such as Maestrelli, this very ash is part of Etna’s charm. It is a natural fertiliser that makes these lands into an obsidian-flecked eden containing some of the Mediterranean’s most fertile territory, where tomatoes, cherries and, notably, grapes all ripen with a revelatory sweetness and unique minerality.

Twenty years ago only a handful of producers believed in the power of Etna’s terroir. Vegetable farmers had long abandoned the area and almost all of Sicily’s wine-growers were producing vast quantities of overpowering reds and saccharine-sweet whites to sell in bulk, although wine-making in the area is



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- 1. Sunrise as seen from Solicchiata
- 2. View of Castiglione di Sicilia
- 3. Jeudi 15 wine made by Vino di Anna
- 4. Kapok trees at Pianta Faro nursery in Giarre
- 5. Mario and Michele Faro, owners of Pianta Faro
- 6. Wine bottles at Vitis restaurant in Castiglione di Sicilia



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a tradition that stretches back to the ancient Greeks. But a few wine-makers, enchanted by the volcano, spearheaded a new approach of attentive, low-quantity viticulture and began turning out bottles with enough complexity and sophistication to reinvent Etna’s reputation. The revolution was so potent that a knock-on effect revived artisanal wine production across Sicily, which is now widely considered to be one of the country’s most interesting regions.

The first pioneers were outsiders, arriving from abroad and from Italy’s more celebrated wine territories in the early 2000s. They included well-known Barolo trail-blazer Marco de Grazia and Belgian Frank Cornelissen, who helped launch a natural wine movement that would proliferate around Etna. Later, even some of Italy’s most established wineries (Planeta, Gaja, Tasca d’Almerita) became interested in the hitherto forsaken volcano. “There’s no other place in Italy where, in just a few decades, the quality of wine has become such a draw,” says Sandro Dibella, whose Cave Ox wine bar is the most popular haunt for the area’s vintners. “It’s been a bit of a miracle.”

There were very few wine-makers on these slopes when Maestrelli arrived – a hectare of vineyards cost a quarter of what it would today – and she was the first female producer to set up in this part of tradition-bound Sicily. “I won’t be taking any orders from you,” Fessina’s farmhand informed her on arrival. “Around here, women stay in the kitchen.”

Yet he was soon converted by the intensity of her dedication. “He brought around the mayor, the sheriff and the town priest to bestow their blessings,” says Maestrelli, whose austere and elegant wines spring from stony and pumice-rich grounds, a valley of vineyards stretching out below the terrace, where tastings can be held.

When wine-makers Anna Martens and Eric Narioo arrived in the region, Etna put on a show. “We got here and witnessed lava erupting over the snow on the volcano,” says Martens, the Australian former wine-maker of the prestigious Ornellaia vineyard in Bolgheri. “We were enraptured.” Narioo, her French husband, is among the founders of the prominent Les Caves de Pyrene wine importer and distributor, and a series of natural wine-led London restaurants including Terroirs.

The regular rain, volcanic sandy soil and well-ventilated terrain of Etna have proved ideal for natural wine-makers such as Martens and Narioo, who employ biodynamic farming methods and use as few sulphites as possible. Martens says that the style is “simply what everyone’s grandparents made” before the post-war chemical industry introduced its agricultural pesticides and additives. “Natural wine?” says Narioo, sniffing at the term. “We should just call it ‘wine’ and refer to the rest of it as ‘chemical wine’ if we’re being honest.”

The vineyard’s methods reach back to antiquity, with a *palmento* in production. The ancient Greeks, settling in Sicily, built early



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versions of these wine-fermenting buildings, within which wine was crushed with a lava grindstone. They were built throughout the area until the 1800s. There’s a *palmento* at the heart of many wineries here but almost no one besides Martens and Narioo actually employs this painstaking, pre-industrial technique anymore. Like the vintners of antiquity, they also age many of their wines in clay amphoras that are buried in the ground to maintain a cool temperature. In the vineyard, the grapevines are trained in the *alberello* style that the Greeks introduced, in which they are grown tall so that the roots push deeper into the nutrient-rich lower layers of soil. The practice is common with artisanal producers in Sicily.

The fertile land, coated in cinders and volcanic debris, gave root to a wine renaissance and to much more besides. Tourism helped to revive small towns, such as Linguaglossa, Randazzo and Castiglione di Sicilia, where lovely but crumbling homes are among those famously sold for €1 in an attempt to repopulate an emptying village. Flourishing viticulture and the

botanical garden that hosts six-month-long garden-design biennials – the only festival of its kind in the Mediterranean.

It was almost as an afterthought that the Faro family launched the now-prominent Pietradolce winery, along with the ritzy Donna Carmela resort, the grounds of which are suitably lush with palms and banana plants from the Faro nursery. “We can leave the car-makers and the factory businesses to the north of Italy,” says Mario Faro, crunching black sand under his feet as he walks a path through the resort’s herb garden. “Sicily, and especially the Etna region, is a place for agriculture and tourism,” he says. “Our family’s mission was to invest in this area because it had to become a destination. There’s no other place like it on Earth.”

The previous evening’s explosions have deposited a silty haze in the sky. As Faro speaks, this mist cloaks the setting sun and obscures its burning corona, so that it becomes a spectral white that looks more like the moon. It’s a mystical vision of elemental nature that can be witnessed only here, in the shadow of the volcano. ——— K

**Cool off**

Long before the Etna region was famed for its artisanal wines, it was already known as the home of Sicily’s best *granitas*, icy concoctions sweetened with the island’s flavours. In Roman times, they were made with snow from the volcano’s peak. Debate centres around which *granita* is the finest but it’s best to try as many contenders as possible, such as the pistachio *granita* at Caffè Cipriani in Acireale, the almond one at Musumeci in Randazzo and the mulberry version at Bar Le Palme in Linguaglossa.



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magnetism of the volcano have forged a destination for travellers seeking superb experiences. And Etna’s modern offerings reflect that, from Cave Ox and the unexpectedly ambitious plates at Vitis, to indulgent resorts, such as Zash, Monaci delle Terre Nere and Donna Carmela, which have revived historical structures with contemporary panache.

“Wine’s success has made even vegetable farming attractive to the young generation now that they see how unique this land is,” says Mario Faro who, with his brother Michele, heads the Piante Faro garden centre, which has seen rising interest in agricultural crops including citrus fruits, heritage grains and even the new Sicilian arrival of avocado trees, all of which the growing number of farms in the area are sowing. “The ashes work wonders for wine and other crops here,” he adds.

Founded by the brothers’ father 50 years ago, Piante Faro is Sicily’s largest horticultural site, with sprawling fields of palms, jacaranda trees and more, springing from Etna’s volcanic soil and Sicily’s vast biodiversity. Additionally, they founded Radicepura, a sprawling

**Etna address book**

**Stay:**

**Zash**

One of the first emblems of the trail of luxury boutique hotels on Etna, Zash has renovated an old rose-pink villa into a contemporary hotel with a Michelin-star restaurant in its *palmento*, the historical winery. There is a snug but stylish spa in the former wine cellar and a dramatic pool set amid Sicily’s citrus groves. [icastelli.net](http://icastelli.net)

**Monaci delle Terre Nere**

Spread over 25 hectares with vineyards, olive groves, woodlands and views to the sea, the small lava-stone cottages of this resort extend behind a central pool. A patrician 18th-century villa hosts a fine-dining restaurant and stunning bar in the former *palmento*. Etna rumbling and looming just behind adds to the sense of occasion. [monacidelleterenere.it](http://monacidelleterenere.it)

**Tenuta di Fessina**

This working vineyard’s six enchanting guest houses are in converted grey-stone stables, a former bakery and farm lodges, all set around a stone *palmento* with a straight view of the north side of Etna’s fiery caldera. [tenutadifessina.com](http://tenutadifessina.com)

**Eat:**

**Cave Ox**

Simple dishes pair with wines from perhaps the region’s best-stocked cellar at this legendary haunt of the area’s vintners, who pal around with owner Sandro Dibella on the grapevine-covered patio. [caveox.it](http://caveox.it)

**Vitis**

A natural-wine haven in Castiglione, Vitis this year gained a talented new chef, Ignazio Giurdanella, who serves remarkable dishes at the restaurant’s outdoor tables. Expect spaghetti with fermented garlic harvested in nearby Randazzo and a version of the island’s typical cannolo turned ethereally light with an air-fried shell. [bottegavitis.com](http://bottegavitis.com)

**Vico Astemio**

The towns of Giarre and Riposto share a fish market that is known as the best in the area, which makes many of the surrounding restaurants top choices for thrillingly fresh seafood dishes. But none have more imagination than Vico Astemio, which matches a creative kitchen with an extensive cellar of wines from Etna. [vicoastemio.it](http://vicoastemio.it)