

Palmento



A SICILIAN WINE ODYSSEY

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New Wine

THE THIRD SUNDAY OF MARCH 2009 was set as the date when the 2008 Etna vintage would reveal itself—at least to Sicily and a slice of the Italian wine trade and press. The second edition of *Le Contrade dell'Etna* would unfold at Andrea Franchetti's Passopisciaro winery, with producers from all over the mountain showing off their wines. Mass wine tastings—the kind where professionals gather to swirl, sniff, spit, take notes—aren't generally my kind of thing. The business-like routine sends my blood sinking to my feet, and after about fifteen or twenty mouthfuls of wine I find it hard to taste much of anything—let alone get pleasure from the experience.

Still, I'd become fond of Etna and felt close to some of its wine-makers; I'd seen the vineyards play out in all their seasons and didn't want to miss the final act. On Friday afternoon, two days before the gathering, I drove up the mountain to Sandro's bar. A cold rain was falling, and by the time I arrived in Solicchiata, the Friday night tasting was under way. I filled up on sausages and homemade pizza at the bar and caught up on news of the regulars: Frank, Alberto, Pippo the mechanic, Brandon the retired American Navy technician who had been based in Catania and never left. I learned that Frank and Alberto

would not be producing wines from their five-acre vineyard at 1,000 meters in the Barbabecchi *contrada* (from which Alberto planned to make his “Nicole Kidman” *cru*). This high-elevation vineyard had been the last they were planning to harvest, but before the grapes had a chance to reach maturity someone else had taken the washed-out rugged trail up the mountain and done the harvest themselves. In other words, the year’s crop had been *stolen*.

“We’re still in Sicily,” Frank said with a weary grin. “In early November they were the only grapes left on the vines. So some people probably just came along and said, ‘Look here’s some grapes that haven’t been picked. Let’s take them.’” As a result he and Alberto would be putting up more fences—not just to keep out rabbits or stray cattle or sheep, but Sicilians who perhaps disagreed with waiting until November for the wine harvest.

Those next few nights I spent in Sandro’s *casetta*—a little house in the vineyards and olive groves west of Passopisciaro that he and his wife, Lucia, rented out by the day. The place was sealed up tight with a padlocked door and steel window shutters that were barred from inside. It was a charming bungalow: one large room with a couch, fireplace, and kitchen; the dishes, pots, and pans were all neatly arranged in their drawers, and the cabinets stocked with pasta and canned tomatoes and spices. There was a small bedroom and bath off the main room, and, up a set of wood stairs, a sleeping loft under the exposed roof beams.

That very day was the first day of spring, a time when I’d expected gentle breezes, sunshine, and the music of songbirds. Yet that night it felt as damp and wintry as it had at Mr. Purello’s apartment more than a year earlier. In Sandro’s place, heat was supplied by one source: the fireplace that had been crammed with olive branches ready to be lit and was eager to consume the pile of firewood stacked in the corner by the like-new stereo with turntable. The concept of warmth was complicated in that I was wearing light cotton clothes (which, I was told, would have been appropriate the week before when everyone was running around in shirtsleeves) and Alitalia had left my suitcase—and my sweaters and parka—behind in Rome. Though

Rome to Catania was little more than an hour's flight, I knew that my bag was now in the hands of Italian bureaucracy. Getting anything to Catania and then up the road to Solicchiata would take a couple of days. So all weekend I stoked the fire. That first night I piled blankets on the upstairs mattress and went to sleep with the shadows of flames dancing on the ceiling.

The next morning, I awoke early to add some logs to the smoldering coals and ran up the stairs to fall back into bed. After a shower, timed to the mood of the fifty-liter hot water tank, I dried off while standing as close as I could to the hearth without grilling my flesh. A wind from the west was blowing cold and wet, covering Etna's north face and the Alcantara Valley in mist. After breakfast of a hot cappuccino and a marmalade-filled cornetto (the sweet Italian version of a croissant) while standing at Sandro's bar, I headed off for my first wine of the day at Azienda Terre di Trente.

While it may sound like a wine operation that's been there forever, Terre di Trente was in fact part of the newest of Etna's new wave, where the international art set met the volcano. I drove through Linguaglossa, followed another car the wrong way down a one-way street, splashed through a running stream, idled through a flock of sheep, and then arrived at the lush, steep amphitheater of the Contrada Mollarella vineyards.

Trente is Trente Hargrove—the female African American part of the couple with her partner, the Belgian art dealer Filip Kesteloot. Tall and fit with flowing dreadlocks and a warm, soft handshake and smile, Trente greeted me at the door of the renovated *palmento* with a glass of wine. The place was done in great taste—from the mammoth modern Spanish oil painting of nudes over the fireplace to a great gather-round kitchen, to the living room with artifacts and instruments from South Asia, to the sleek bathroom with the double shower. There was no winery here. The pair farmed their grapes organically with the help of a local vineyard man, and then brought them to Marco de Grazia's winery, where they were vinified and bottled under their own label.

Filip was up on the terraces somewhere above the *palmento*, using

a chain saw to clear brush for some new vine plantings. Trente sat with perfect posture on a plump sofa and told her abbreviated life story. She was born in Bridgeport, Connecticut, a decade before I was, yet she could pass for someone twenty years younger than her age. Given that calculus, I wondered if Filip—who has boyish looks and appeared about my age—might be old enough to be my father.

The story of how Trente landed on the north face of Etna begins, “I was living in Pakistan . . .” and from there it becomes a tangle of places and coincidences. As a youth in Manhattan she studied music and art in high school and later got her real estate broker’s license. At one point there was the marriage to an Italian diplomat—a Sicilian—hence the diplomatic move to Pakistan. In Pakistan, Trente told, she developed herbal treatments, co-founded the country’s first woman-owned business, wrote anti-aging tracts, and played the sitar. She was, she said, working on a formula for an herbal equivalent of Viagra when her husband left her and headed to Brussels. Because she was in Pakistan on her husband’s visa, his departure meant she had to leave the country immediately—so she followed her husband to Brussels to sue for divorce. To pay her divorce costs she sold an Erté sculpture to the only dealer around qualified for such a transaction—it was Filip’s gallery.

After their relationship blossomed they might have lived happily as Brussels art dealers, except they had decided to buy a vacation home in Sicily. But the deal fell through, and one day in October 2003 they were lost in a rainstorm on Etna and fell upon de Grazia’s winery. Marco offered them a cup of tea. He told them about a property with about five acres of vineyards that he knew of, but they were not interested. Then—Trente gave me a wide-eyed look as she recounted this part—a man showed up at Marco’s door and had the same last name as her ex-husband. That simple fact changed everything and convinced her they needed to look at this property and what was then the rat-infested pile of stones of an abandoned *palmento*.

It would be easy to cynically mock this kind of story—to interpret it as seekers weaving coincidence out of air. But after experiencing the seasons of Sicily, I was somewhat sympathetic. I had my own share

of personal odd experiences in which fate seemed to have played no small role. Adding to the sense of destiny, Trente also likes to point out that their terrain is divided, as is their couple, into “ebony and ivory”: half the vineyard is white calcareous soil, and the other half—on the other side of the stream—black volcanic earth.

When Filip returned to the house, wet from the rain that had begun to fall and covered in dust, he explained how he had first seen wine as a sort of novel accessory to his gallery. “We bought a lot of wine and champagne for the gallery anyway, so I figured why not make something we could give away.” Now, several years down that road, they were producing a red wine sold in Europe that was a somewhat brighter version of de Grazia’s.

SUNDAY MORNING—THE DAY OF *Le Contrade* and the third day into spring—I opened the front door of the *casetta* to a sight that took my mind a few moments to comprehend. The front terrace of the house and the nearby olive groves and vines were covered in a blanket of several of inches of snow that was falling from a heavy sky.

About an hour later, I edged slowly down the hill—the thigh-high weeds and spring wildflowers were bent and wilting in the cold. I drove toward Passopisciaro and then turned down the road to Solicchiata, which was covered with a slushy soup. Through the fogged windshield I noticed the morning’s second odd sight, which took a few seconds to process: standing by the road in the snow was a hooded monk in Franciscan habit. A wooden cross dangled from the rope belt slung around his waist, and his feet were bare and raw in a pair of leather sandals that looked as though they had been made a thousand years ago. He was facing with his right hand outstretched—the thumb extended heavenward. In summary: here was a Franciscan monk hitchhiking on a snowy day in spring.

I stopped the car and rolled down the window, explaining in Italian that I was going to Solicchiata. “Not Linguaglossa?” He responded in Italian with a funny accent I couldn’t pin down. Was it some sort of mountain Sicilian dialect? No, I shrugged. While Solicchiata was only a couple of minutes away, Linguaglossa was at least another