

IMPORTANT WINEGRAPE VARIETIES OF SICILY, ITALY

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Summary

Sicily is an island to the south and west of Italy that is close to the “toe of the boot”, in the Mediterranean Sea. Its physical characteristics are representative of the Mediterranean region with its mountainous terrain and volcanoes, rugged coast, numerous beaches and blue water, scenic villages, and a diverse agriculture including wine grapes, citrus, olives, herbs, grains and seasonal vegetables. The climate is warm to hot, and the growing season is long. Located at the 36-38 degree latitude, Sicily is only about 160 kilometers (100 miles) from the north coast of Africa near Tunisia. It is also the midpoint east and west in the Mediterranean Sea. Through history the region was controlled by Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Greeks, Saracens, Arabs, Romans, Normans and other Europeans. All have made contributions to the culture and language that give this region its own uniqueness compared to the rest of Italy.

Sicily was an important wine growing region as early as the 8th Century B.C., when it was a famed agricultural colony of ancient Greece. Winegrowing has continued since then, and styles have changed numerous times. The region was famous for producing sweet wines known as Mamertine and Tauromenium, which were exported in labeled amphora around the Mediterranean region. Even today, Marsala, Moscato di Panterelleria (Zibbibo) and Malvasia Delle Lipari are associated with the Sicily and the islands around it as internationally recognized sweet wines.

With 112,484 hectares (281,210) planted in vineyard area, Sicily is second only to Apulia in acreage planted and total wine production. Vineyard planting systems and wine grape varieties are very diverse. Approximately 73% of the area are planted to local varieties (53% white and 20% black). The other 27% of the vineyards are planted to international varieties (14% white, and 13% black).

The region has changed considerably in the past 30 years both in viticultural practices and wine quality. Vines traditionally were head pruned and wines were fermented in cement and stone tanks and large oak oval barrels. Today, there are many vineyards planted on modern trellis systems, with drip irrigation. New wineries are state of the art with stainless steel, cellars with climate control, small oak barrels and sophisticated marketing and distribution for many of its high quality wines.

In the recent past, many of the vineyards were cropped heavily to produce wines of average quality for blending with wines produced in cooler European regions. Until recently, there was limited interest in appellation based wines (less than 3%) and Marsala was the most internationally known wine. Sicily continues to be the most commonly noted appellation on wine produced from this region.

Now with modern technology, Sicily is producing many good wines including excellent reds from the varieties Nero d'Avola, Nerello Mascalese, as well as Syrah, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon. Very clean, crisp white wines are being made from Catarratto bianco, Ansonica (Inzolia), and Grillo, varieties that formerly were used mostly blended in Marsala wines.