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In the cellar at COS winery, co-owner Giusto Occhipinti checks the grapes from a terra cotta amphora.

island treasure

BY ANTHONY GIGLIO

ON A STEAMY SUMMER NIGHT last August in the Sicilian seaside town of San Biagio, my wife, Antonia, and I stole away from the dinnertime circus of her parents' home—imagine a table set for 30 inlaws, their inlaws and their inlaws' inlaws, plus all of their kids, who aren't put to bed until midnight. Instead, we snagged a table for two under a tent pitched just feet from the lapping water of the Messina coast at Sapore di Mare, a local seafood restaurant in the Portorosa marina in Furnari.

When our waiter, an unusually affable and tall Sicilian named Antonio, brought the wine list, I noticed it was made up entirely of wines from the island. I asked him how he handled tourists looking for more familiar Italian wines from, say, Piedmont or Tuscany. Sicilians are fiercely independent, by the way. When people ask my wife her nationality, she says Sicilian—even though the "Kingdom of Sicily" has been an Italian state since 1861. This attitude could have something to do with the mainland's tendency to chide its southern neighbors with jokes about the position of the island with respect to the toe of Italy's boot, as in, "We kicked it as far away as we possibly could." Without missing a beat, Antonio's response to my question was perfectly Sicilian: "I tell them we don't import." So I did what the locals do and ordered fantastic regional wines, many of which I can't find here in the U.S.

Thankfully that reality is changing as more and more wines from Sicily gain recognition, and with it, the attention of American importers. The interest in Sicily to connoisseurs of Italian wine might seem instantaneous, given that not much quality Sicilian wine is exported to the U.S., and really, that little wine of quality was being made there as few as 25 years ago. After World War II, most vineyards on the island were controlled by government-backed co-ops and northern conglomerates that encouraged farmers to pool their resources. The resulting wines were, for the most part, subsidized plonk destined for church chalices and salad dressing, or, more incredibly, shipped north to help bolster thinner wines with more important appellation names. But in the 1970s, the government finally woke up to Sicily's potential and in 1973 awarded the island's first DOC to Cerasuolo di Vittoria. Serra-what? I know, Italian can be hard to pronounce. Break the word into three parts, the first being "chair," the second "ah," and for the third, think of "swollen," then replace the "en" with an "o." Got it? You're close enough (even though my wife will still squint at you).

The name Cerasuolo comes from the word *cirasa*, or cherry in Sicilian dialect,

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and describes the wine's "cherry red" color, which is as good a place as any to start describing this wine. In color, aroma and flavor it is brimming with cherries, but there's much more to the wine. It is, in fact, a blend of Nero d'Avola and Frappato, two very different grapes. I'd gamble that if you're at all familiar with Sicilian red wines you've heard of Nero d'Avola, since it's Sicily's most widely planted grape, as well as its most popular. It typically produces deep, dark, concentrated wines that bring to mind dried fruit (think plum and fig), a hint of spiciness and a food-craving tannic finish.

In Cerasuolo di Vittoria, Nero d'Avola traditionally plays the lead grape, making up 60 percent of the blend, with the remaining 40 percent going to Frappato, a much lighter but highly aromatic red grape that lends Cerasuolo its brilliant, bright color, mouthwatering acidity and telltale cherry aromas. With its sunny disposition, Cerasuolo is sometimes compared with the cherry-scented wines of Chianti Classico, though Chianti's Sangiovese grape is generally more tannic than Nero d'Avola.

In 2005, in response to the increasing quality of Cerasuolo di Vittoria, the government elevated it to its highest ranking, from DOC to DOCG. The new DOCG guidelines for Cerasuolo allow winemakers more flexibility in the percentage of their Frappato/Nero d'Avola blend than they had under DOC regulations. This lets winemakers craft their wines with more individuality and gives Cerasuolo a dynamic and exciting character.

The city of Vittoria, in the heart of the Cerasuolo DOCG region, is located in Sicily's southeastern province of Ragusa. The area has been prized for its agricultural wealth as far back as 589 B.C., when the Syracusan aristocrats Dascone and Menecolo founded the Greek colony of Kamarina there. Vittoria didn't get its name until 1607, though, when an apparently immodest countess, Vittoria Colonna Henriquez, founded the town and named it after herself. She granted two hectares of land (nearly 5 acres) each to early colonists, provided they plant vineyards on their plot. Then, at the end of the 19th century, after the phylloxera grape vine epidemic decimated Europe's vineyards, Vittoria profited by exporting its wines to the thirsty continent. Eventually, the epidemic caught up with Sicily and nearly destroyed every vine on the island. Many grape growers in the area decided to pull up their vines and grow more dependable crops, but those who persevered reap the benefits today.

The Jacono family owns one such winery, Valle dell'Acate, whose vineyards were planted before phylloxera, replanted after phylloxera, and replanted once more under the current generation of owners, led by Gaetana Jacono. In addition to their rich, mouthwatering Cerasuolo di Vittoria (70 percent Nero d'Avola and 30 percent Frappato), they also bottle a juicy, 100 percent Frappato called Il Frappato, and a brooding 100 percent Nero d'Avola called Il Moro. Opening the three alongside each other offers a brilliant comparative study. You'll notice immediately after tasting the solo versions of Frappato and Nero d'Avola how much better they taste when the grapes are blended in the Cerasuolo (to be fair, though, all three bottles are fabulous).

Cerasuolo di Vittoria's medium body, anchored by fruit up front, soft tannins and lively acidity in the finish, makes it the perfect wine for Sicilian cuisine, whether paired with fresh-caught roasted tuna with capers and olives, or with a plate of the iconic eggplant- and tomato-based pasta alla Norma.

What dictates the depth of body and richness of these wines has less to do with the grapes than with how they are aged. Some producers, like Planeta, prefer the clean imprint of stainless steel tanks, while modern winemakers, like Manenti, experiment with small oak barrels and traditional large oak casks. Then there are those who prefer to go really old school, like COS, who age their wines in terra cotta amphorae, and FiàNobile, who use glazed cement amphorae, both of which are modeled on the vessels used by the ancient Greeks, who made wine here two millennia ago. All of these wines share the unmistakable characteristic of Cerasuolo di Vittoria: the explosive cherry fruit that emerges from the wine. With a wine this delicious, Sicilians really don't need to import anything else. □

suggested bottles

The juicy, cherry-rich Cerasuolo di Vittoria is a Sicilian jewel. After garnering the island its first DOCG, it has continued to evolve, with the island's group of innovative winemakers giving the wine new dimension. Here are five picks from the leaders of the pack.



COS
"Pithos," Cerasuolo di Vittoria, 2006
The three partners who founded COS started out as hobbyists and wound up creating one of the most well-known wineries in Sicily. Pithos' rich berry nose shows hints of heather, followed by clay, a direct reflection of the terra cotta *giare* in which it ages for nine months. Juicy, yet powerful, with great aging potential. $35.



FIÀNOBILE
Cerasuolo di Vittoria, 2007
FiàNobile is the name of the area where the Alia and Corallo families set up shop in the 19th century. Their winemaking tradition continues today. This wine brims with cherry and earthy aromas, punctuated by a whiff of salumi. The tannins are soft, with dried fruit and a touch of violet candy on the chalky finish. $19.



MANENTI
Cerasuolo di Vittoria, 2006
This is the 3rd vintage from wife and husband team Marita and Guglielmo Manenti, who set up shop at this 40-year-old vineyard in 2005. The '08 is still a bit young, but it's lean and bold with a breath of menthol and cranberry. Firm tannins brace a core of black plum that finishes with a hint of ginger. $22.



PLANETA
Cerasuolo di Vittoria, 2007
The Planeta family crafts this Cerasuolo at their Vittoria outpost on land near their grandmother's ancestral home in Dorilli. Without fail, this wine is consistently and intensely aromatic, with cherry blossom and violet aromas, a soft, chalky mineral core and a rich, mouthwatering finish. $24.



VALLE DELL'ACATE
Cerasuolo di Vittoria, 2007
Gaetana Jacono, who comes from one of the oldest winemaking families in the area, makes a Cerasuolo that is remarkable for its brambly, earthy, sarsaparilla-infused bouquet. Cherry emerges in the rich mid-palate, and there's a solid beam of acidity that props up the soft tannins for a long, satisfying finish. $21.