

Sicily

Mount Etna enjoys an eruption of fine wine

Old lava tracks wind between vineyards on the spectacular slopes of Sicily's fiery mountain. **Fiona Sims** raises a glass (or two) and tests the grapes

This is extreme winemaking. I'm standing more than 4,000ft up Mount Etna, which only a month ago billowed out black smoke and as recently as last week sent a tower of sparks into the sky, prompting those who live here to think that the volcano could be recharging for another major eruption. Yet I'm looking at rows of vines.

It seems that as well as grabbing the headlines for its regular firework displays and for gaining Unesco World Heritage status recently, Mount Etna is producing some notable wines. So good, in fact, that sommeliers from around the world have been beating a path to its *palmenti*, the

traditional wineries made of black lava stone that dot the landscape, along with its old bush vines heavy with tough little nerello mascalese grapes.

You probably won't have heard of this variety — it grows only in Sicily and especially well on Etna — but it's the main reason wine lovers flock here. The grape makes elegant, light-bodied, minerally reds that whiff of the wild, herb-strewn forest floor, while the carricante variety is the standard-bearer for Etna whites, taut and tangy with a zesty bite. Nowhere else in Europe are the harvests this nerve-

rackingly late, or at this elevation, with vines that average 100 years old, within sniffing distance of the sea.

"I don't know anywhere else in the world where the vines are this old and the grapes this good," says Eric Narioo, owner of the Guildford-based wine merchant Les Caves de Pyrène who, with Anna Martens, his Australian wife, makes a wine on Etna called *Vino di Anna*.

It was in Narioo's London wine bars that I first discovered Etna wines. So I was interested to take a trip up the volcano to explore this extreme winemaking, with a few nights in a couple of those *palmenti*, an increasing number now turned into stylish B&Bs.

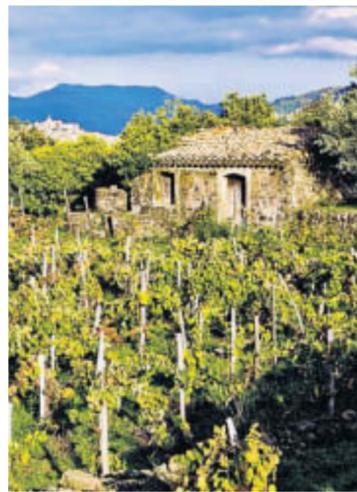
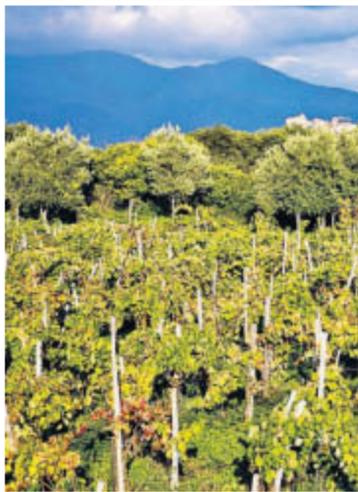
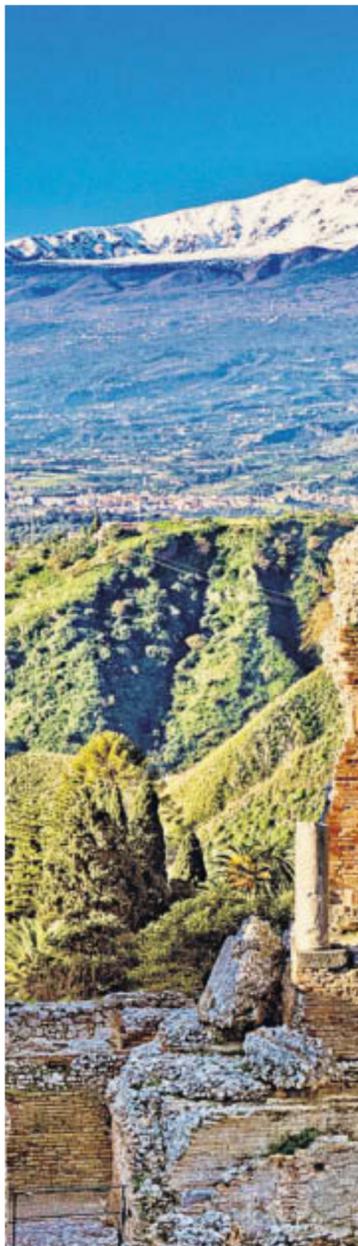
If Sicily feels like another country, then Etna feels otherworldly, with its lunar landscapes and wildly unpredictable weather. The volcano-battered black stone towns and villages cling determinedly to Etna's slopes, which in recent years have mercifully avoided the lava. You don't have to go far to find it, though. Once you start climbing above the town of Linguaglossa, the newly tarmacked roads (thanks to Etna's frequent belching) cut through the fiery spillage that tore up swathes of chestnut forest, long since hardened into a dense black.

In between the lava flows, life continues seemingly magnified. Vineyards are planted high on the mountainside on steep terraces, set among oak and chestnut forests, hazelnuts and apple trees, wild flowers and fragrant herbs, in a landscape oddly bursting with life.

It's mid-October and the harvest has barely started. Sicily and mainland Italy have long since finished picking, but the harvest on Etna will continue well into mid-November, when the birch trees turn dramatically gold against the big, black, volcanic boulders that litter the slopes. The temperature drops five degrees in just five minutes as we drive up the winding narrow roads from the coast. It's a good ten degrees cooler by the time we reach Solichia, Etna's winemaking heartland on its prized northern slopes, about 40 minutes from Taormina.

We've arranged to meet Salvo Foti, a Catania-born oenologist and another pioneer of Etna winemaking, at Cave Ox. This pizzeria-cum-wine-bar is worth the trip alone for its extensive wine list packed with Etna gems courtesy of its proprietor, Sandro Dibella, and for its wood-fired pizzas, each named after a vineyard area or producer. We try the "Graci", named after Alberto Graci, whose winery in a beautifully renovated *palmento* is in neighbouring Passopisciaro.

"You have to understand that Etna and Sicilian wines are very different," Foti explains. When he first started making wine here 25 years ago there were only four wineries on Etna. Now there are 85,



Wine and gourmet trips to Mount Etna

Vineyard visits

The big names in wine here also include Marco de Grazia and his Tenuta delle Terre Nere, Passopisciaro's Andrea Franchetti and Frank Cornelissen, the Belgian expat whose controversial views and wines split critics and consumers alike. You can visit the winery and vineyards of Tenuta delle Terre Nere outside the town of Randazzo by appointment only (00 39 95 924 002, tenutaterrenere.com).

Cornelissen's winery in Solichia offers a tour by appointment for €15pp (£12.84) (e-mail to arrange a visit at info@frankcornelissen.it). And you can try Salvo Foti's I Vigneri wines at his wine store-cum-osteria (in Randazzo, L.go Signore Pietà 17, 00 39 952 962 202, ivigneri.it). If you aren't keen on negotiating the narrow roads (and Sicilian driving) then get off the Round-Etna Railway (circumetna.it) at Passopisciaro and walk 100m or so to see Alberto Graci (graci.eu) at his beautifully renovated *palmento* (winery). E-mail to arrange a tasting at info@graci.eu.

You can take a day tour from Catania with Etna Experience (etnaexperience.com), which offers a guided hike on the volcano followed by a winery visit, from €59pp.

Where to eat

San Giorgio e Il Drago in Randazzo (00 39 95 923 972) is a gem of a trattoria that serves fresh, handmade tonnacchioli pasta with wild mountain greens, followed by rabbit cooked with tomatoes, olives and capers, below. Meals are from €20.

Osteria Nero d'Avola in Taormina (00 39 942 628 874) has generous plates of pan-fried ceps served with sweet cherry tomatoes from Pachino, and grouper served with wild mountain fennel and pine nuts. Meals are from €30.

The Principe Cerami in the San Domenico Palace Hotel in Taormina (00 39 942 613 111, san-domenico-palace.com) has simple dishes given an elegant, two-Michelin star twist and a great Etna wine list. The tasting menu is €125pp.

Cave Ox (00 39 942 986 171, caveoxristorante.com) in Solichia has an extensive wine list and great pizzas from €8pp.



with more opening all the time.

Etna was actually the birthplace of wine in Sicily, and once the island's biggest grape growing region, the wine being transported in bulk up north to boost production in pre-regulation days. There's a fraction of that vineyard action in Etna today, although the abandoned terraces are being brought back to life with spectacular effect: it's become a great winemaking area in just over a decade, which is quite something, we muse, as we stroll the dark streets of medieval Randazzo later.

Built entirely of lava, Randazzo is the closest town to the volcano's summit as the crow flies, yet it has never been engulfed (it did come perilously close in 1981, and the lava flow is easily visible just outside town). On the way there we saw one of Etna's two ski runs near the top of one of the craters, giving a whole new meaning to the term "black run". On a Sunday the weekly market hits town, and stalls groan with vividly coloured, intensely flavoured vegetables — giant purple cauliflowers and wild mountain greens, lantern-shaped

Etna seen from Taormina's ancient Greek theatre; the volcano looms over the town, far left; a vineyard, left, and dining in Taormina, above right

“Twenty-five years ago there were four wineries on Etna. Now there are 85”

aubergines and yellow beans. The next day we explore the eastern slopes of the volcano, basing ourselves in another winery with rooms, Tenuta San Michele. Just above us is the town of Zafferana Etna, which boasts 700 honey producers. The beekeepers were attracted to the area more than a century ago by the lush plants that grow in abundance, the slopes thick with lemon and chestnut trees. Zafferana is also famous for its Pizze Siciliana, a sort of fried calzone stuffed with anchovies and young pecorino cheese, which is what we sample after our three-hour hike.

As the clouds gather, it's time to head to the coast. Taormina is Sicily's best-known resort, and doesn't it know it. Still, you can't help being seduced by the picturesque hilltop town that D. H. Lawrence once made his home. Etna looks at its best from here, too — particularly from the terrace of the two Michelin-starred Principe Cerami in the San Domenico Palace Hotel, where old-school charm meets new school cooking under the chef, Massimo Mantarro. The Etna-

born Mantarro can't get enough of the volcano's produce, taking simple dishes, such as mountain greens and wood-oven baked bread, and elevating them into something fine. Combine that with wine suggestions from Alessandro Malfitana, a local boy, and you have the ultimate Etna experience. I'll raise a glass of Etna bubbly to that.

Need to know

Fiona Sims was a guest of Sunvil Discovery (020-8758 4722, sunvil.co.uk) which has tailor-made itineraries throughout Sicily. A six-night trip similar to the writer's costs from £968pp, including two nights' B&B at the Tenuta San Michele in Santa Venerina, the Feudo Vagliasindi in Randazzo and the San Domenico in Taormina, return flights and car hire.

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