

National Post Travel: A small taste of Sicily

By John Karastamatis
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Stepping off the plane at Palermo Airport in Sicily, I wasn't sure I'd made the right decision.

Sicily isn't the first place that comes to mind when thinking of a food and wine tour. The triangular-shaped island in the Mediterranean does not share the attributes of more prominent wine regions -- the rolling hills, warm sunlight and manicured vineyards of France or California, for example. Sicily is rugged, barren in spots and mostly mountainous.

But I liked the notion of going against the trend. Let others visit the celebrated and overrun vineyards of Burgundy and Napa Valley. I wanted a more unconventional setting for my culinary adventure.

Still, I was not expecting the chaotic mess of the airport terminal building. Signage was nonexistent and the equipment looked like something left over from the 1960s. Luckily, Steve Thurlow was there to greet us. Mr. Thurlow is an amiable, down-to-earth, middle-aged wine crusader. When he is not leading tours to little-known but exciting wine destinations, he teaches wine appreciation in Toronto, designs wine menus for hotels and restaurants and writes for Wine Access magazine.



The Scilio Winery at the foothills of Mount Etna has among its grapes an indigenous variety that grows in the rich lava soil.

"I first came to Sicily 10 years ago," he told us on the bus from the airport to our first hotel, in Marsala. "I fell in love with the place and have been coming back regularly ever since.

"Sicily's high-quality table wine industry is very young, only about five years old, but it is one of the most exciting in the world. It offers superb wines at unbelievably great value," he said.

Any reservations I still had about the place dissolved on the first night when we were treated to a lavish Sicilian feast under a starry sky around the pool at our hotel. We sampled dozens of antipasti, pastas, grilled fish and meats, cheeses and breads.



Sicilian cuisine has many influences. The island was first settled by the ancient Greeks, who established a number of important cities -- Seracuse, Naxos, Agrigento, Taormina -- that were among the largest in the Magna- Graecia civilization. The Romans followed, then the Arabs, the Byzantines, the Normans and a few other northern European conquerors. The result is a rich culture, best noticed in its cuisine.

Olive oil is at the base of the cuisine, but butter and cream, remnants of the Norman occupation, are also in many dishes. Similarly, the traditional pasta of mainland Italy shares the table with couscous from northern Africa. Fish dishes are ubiquitous, but there are also many recipes with lamb and beef.

Lunch at the Planeta Winery was simple but delicious, including luscious tomatoes, cucumbers and onions.

Vegetables are usually eggplant, zucchini and green beans; the tomatoes are deep-red and juicy. Olives and capers are used in almost everything. The fruits -- figs, prickly pears, melons -- are bursting with flavour because they mature in a strong sun. Desserts are simple and not too sweet -- ricotta cheese is a common ingredient.

Mr. Thurlow had organized a selection of six wines to accompany the feast, from light whites and full-bodied reds to the traditional Marsala dessert wine. Each wine was paired with a particular course. On hand were three winemakers from nearby wineries who shared the meal with us.

Despite several millennia of winemaking (the Greeks introduced wine to the island and had an insatiable thirst for the stuff), the only thing Sicily was known for was Marsala, an invention of John Woodhouse, an enterprising 19th-century Briton, who stepped forward when the supply of port and sherry was disrupted by wars with Spain and Portugal. He used a local Sicilian grape to produce a sherry substitute that became popular in Britain.

When diplomatic relations with Spain and Portugal resumed, the lucrative Marsala industry had to reinvent itself: Marsala became a cheap dessert wine mostly used for cooking.

That was Sicily's wine reputation until the last decade, when sophisticated and well-travelled Sicilians began altering the use of the grapes to create delicious vintages.

We learned the most popular indigenous grapes were Insolia and Grillo for white wines and Nero d'Avola for red.

We would spend four nights in Marsala, each one a feast in spectacular settings, paired with spectacular wines. The winemakers were gracious hosts, treating us to multi-course meals in their private dining rooms and opening rare wines for us to sample. We had a barbecue dinner in an old wine cavern beautifully appointed with antiques. At the Pellegrino estate, the ultra-modern, minimalist dining room had at one time been a massive vat for old-fashioned Marsala.

We visited at least one winery each day, sometimes two. We also stopped to tour some of Sicily's historic sites.



The Hotel Capo dei Greci is built into a cliff on the south coast of the island overlooking the sea.

The island has many Hellenistic archeological sites, including Segesta, which dates from the 6th century BC and includes a magnificent temple and an amphitheatre that is still used to stage ancient tragedies.

We visited medieval towns perched on hilltops, such as Erice. Its gorgeous cobblestoned streets have changed little, except for the addition of ATMs on the sides of 500-year-old buildings.

By the time we reached Taormina, on the south coast, I thought I had seen and tasted all this island had to offer. Once again, I was wrong. Our hotel was built into a cliff above the spectacular Mediterranean sea. I watched the sun rise in the mornings; and in the evenings, with a glass of vino in hand, watched it set.

Behind us, like an omnipresent goddess, was Mount Etna, Europe's highest active volcano. We had visited her, too, stopping to pick up samples of the volcanic rock from the last eruption in 2002. We lunched at a small but charming winery at the base.

The last morning, as I drank my final cappuccino, I began to contemplate life back in Canada. Would I be able to function without six different wines at every meal? Could I subsist on a single-course lunch? How would I survive without Insolia and Nero d'Avola?

IF YOU GO:

- Steve Thurlow is conducting a similar tour of Sicily during the harvest, Sept. 28 to Oct. 9, 2005. The price is \$3,600 per person and includes airfare, accommodation and most meals. Go to www.stevethurlow.com for details, or email steve@wineaccess.ca or call 416-360-8200.

- Alitalia flies direct from Canada to Rome and Milan with many connecting flights to Palermo and Catania in Sicily.

- For more information, see: www.italiantourism.com; www.regione.sicilia.it/turismo; www.sicilytourist.net.