

DIVERSIONS

STORY DANIEL SCHEFFLER

EXPLOSIVE VINTAGE

Volcanic soil produces top-quality wines with rich flavours and aromas





In Sicily, on the slopes of Mount Etna, among volcanic soil and high altitude lies Italy's most interesting wines.

RIGHT

Throughout the Soave area, the garganega is the principal grape variety.

BELOW

Winemaker Frank Cornelissen believes that man will never be able to fully understand nature's complexity and interactions.

FAR RIGHT

Volcanic soil is either from rock material that has been ejected into the air and cooled before settling on the earth or the product of lava flows from a volcano.



The essence of wine is romance. Apart from its ancient roots, it is the visceral production process and that deep enjoyment of the final product that lend it its ardour and mystique. Most of us are familiar with the long trusted wine regions of the world – Bordeaux, Napa Valley, Stellenbosch – but lesser known are the small groups of vintners rediscovering alternative fountainheads to wine creation, such as vineyards located in regions known primarily for their volcanic activity.

The making, and enjoyment, of wine is absolutely ancient – it has been around

almost since the beginning of man. There was rarely a time on the planet that humans didn't have some involvement with wine. There is archaeological evidence that shows that the earliest production of wine from fermenting grapes was during the late Neolithic or even early Chalcolithic period in the Caucasus area and into the northern parts of the Middle East.

The first chemically attested grape wine, according to Patrick McGovern, the scientific director of the Biomolecular Archaeology Project for Cuisine, Fermented Beverages, and Health at the University of Pennsylvania Museum in Philadelphia, dates back to 5400BC and was found at Hajji Firuz in the

northwestern Zagros Mountains of Iran. In recent years, the world of wine has dramatically opened up. Wine aficionados now have easy access to wines from all over the globe thanks to buoyant economies, better quality vintages and improved grape yields on all the continents. But this has led to the desire for vintages sourced off the beaten path and the need for wine devotees to find the most interesting and unusual bottle of wine – not only at the local wine store or while dining, but also in their explorations of the unorthodox wine regions of the world. That is how volcanic soils came up for consideration.

One of these regions is in Soave, close to the city of Verona in Italy, where a band of ancient volcanic soil lies among the chalk, clay and alluvial soils. Although the hills around the Soave region are not as dramatic as the more active volcanoes of the world, the vineyards benefit nonetheless.

According to Soave Consortia's lead oenologist, Giovanni Ponchia, it is quite easy to find great wine

THE MAIN VARIETY FOR THE SOAVE HAS FLAVOURS OF PEACH, APRICOT, TROPICAL FRUIT **OENOLOGIST GIOVANNI PONCHIA**

productions in volcanic and former volcanic areas. "The only risk is if you plant a vineyard in a soil covered by a recent lava flow, it will be probably completely without organic matter".

As organic matter increases in the soil, so does the soil's ability to hold water – necessary for grapes to grow extremely well.

Volcanic rocks constitute high levels of macroporosity in soils and according to Ponchia, "these pores allow the rocks to store water up to 100 per cent of their weight and then release it very slowly, thanks to their high water retention coefficient. This makes them a water supply of notable importance for the root systems of the vines, especially in years with





MOUNT ETNA IS AN IMPORTANT WINE PRODUCING AREA FOR THE DIVERSITY OF ITS LAND AND MICROCLIMATE

little rainfall or even drought". He goes on to say that when the roots breathe actively, they derive benefit from the contact with porous gas-filled rocks that are "released to meet the needs of the plant".

Of the three types of soil in Soave (sandy, calcareous and volcanic), the volcanic wines come from dark volcanic soils that produce wines that are said to be riper, weightier, richer, and with texture and minerality that are the most age worthy, according to Jamie Goode in his book *The Science of Wine: From Vine to Glass*.

"There is, however, not a unique flavour profile attributed to volcanic soil, but is quite normal that the wines produced there are often salty, good for ageing and come with aromas more complex – compared with wines produced with the same variety in

different soils," Ponchia explains. "The main variety for the Soave, the garganega, is able to express flavours of peach, apricot, tropical fruit and, after some years, some interesting hint of pouring stone or hydrocarbon. Whereas outside the Soave area, in sandy soil, the ageing is really short and garganega can mainly express green apple."

Ponchia now gathers the wine cognoscenti of the world in hope that "volcanic wines" will become an official wine category. He called their convocation "Volcania" (after the Roman god of fire) and they now include participants from Sicily (Mount Etna), the greater Ischia and Naples area (Mount Vesuvius), Israel (Golan Heights), Cape Verde (Fogo), Hawaii's Kilauea and even Portugal's darling Madeira. The sci-fi like Canary Islands and the North Island of

New Zealand, and all their constituents, are next on the list of contributors.

In fact many of the world's famous wine production areas are of volcanic origin, including the Willamette Valley in US and Santorini in Greece as volcanic rock soil covers around 124 million hectares around the globe (1 per cent). But it is Mount Etna in Sicily and the zones of Vesuvius that are now receiving interest. "Volcanic soils are distributed predominantly along the edges of tectonic plates or in proximity to them. All of these areas have a very strong vocation for vine-growing and winemaking, and the products they engender are of absolutely top quality, especially in regards to white wines," Ponchia says.

"It is evident that a relationship exists between soils composed of basalts, tuffs and pumices and the richness of flavour and balance that one habitually finds in the white wines they yield."

Etna has a long history of winemaking – and is so described in Homer's *Odyssey* – but has suffered under a label of "cutting wine" that was shipped to



LEFT
The soil in Soave contains a high percentage of limestone that retains the heat from the afternoon sun and delivers a fuller, fruitier wine.

TOP
Classico is the oldest classic wine-making zone in Verona.

ABOVE
Amarone grapes dry for at least 120 days, adding to its quality and price.

Italy as an additive to vintages produced there. The vineyards here are up to 1,000 metres above sea level, rich with volcanic nutrients and, even though exposed to an extreme variation from day to night temperatures, produce a fine indigenous varietal called Nerello Mascalese. With oenologist Salvo Foti, Giuseppe Benanti pioneered the new wines of Etna in 1988 and the industry has slowly grown over time.

The same goes for Etna, in the Northern valley, where we can talk about great wines as we have many different vineyard sites that produce wines with different character, such as in Burgundy or Barolo. According to Frank Cornelissen, a winemaker from Mount Etna, "volcanic soil is not necessarily better or less compared to limestone. It has its own specifics in terms of working soil as it varies from sandy/powdery to rocky/stony. When talking great terroirs, we have to include the microclimate, altitude ... which makes a

**DRINK, ANYONE?
 CHOOSE YOUR OWN VOLCANIC WINE
 ADVENTURE IN ITALY:**

- Find the controversial winemaker Frank Cornelissen's sulphur-free Magna wines from Mount Etna in Sicily: Right on the water in a perfect little bay is the Belmond Villa Sant'Andrea. For a tour to the beautiful volcano in a classic Ape Calessino and a day spent with the vintner on the sunny slopes, the hotel's "Dolce Vita Sicilia" combination is idyllic (belmond.com/villa-sant-andrea-taormina-mare).

- Indulge in Cenatiempo with their philosophy of sea and volcanic beauty in Ischia: Easily accessible by boat or (helicopter from Naples), the Regina Isabella is where Hollywood greats such as Elizabeth Taylor came to hide away and enjoy wine. Besides all the volcanic wine exploration, the thermal spa holds equal value (reginaisabella.com).

- Explore the producers Pieropan, Pra, Suavia, Ca' Rugate and Monte Tondo around Soave: Just outside Romeo and Juliet's romantic city of Verona is the Byblos Art Hotel Villa Amista in perfect boutique splendour. With daily tours into the Soave region and access to the best vintners and vintages, this is Utopia (byblosarthotel.com).

difference". He adds that the Northern valley of Etna is great terroir for producing "profound wines", due to the numerous lava flows in the past that have brought different materials to the surface.

According to Giovanni Nastasi, the general manager at Belmond Villa Sant'Andrea, Mount Etna has become one of the most important wine producing areas in Italy for the great diversity of its land and its microclimate.

"Because of the wine cultivations at high altitude, wines produced are similar to the best Burgundy pinot noir," Nastasi explains.

Today Etna is considered the "Burgundy of the Mediterranean" by some – moreover thanks to the unique black soil rich with minerals from the lava sand and, of course, that magical and unnamable view across the ancient lands that allows for a beautiful taste of romance. **T**