

BILL NESTO*, FRANCES DI SAVINO**

The rebirth of Sicily's wine culture

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(Sintesi)

In 1812, Domenico Sestini, a native son of Florence, delivered a series of lectures titled “Recollections of Sicilian Wines” (*Memorie sui vini siciliani*) to the Georgofili Academy. As a young man of twenty four years old, Sestini left Florence to study in Catania, Sicily. From 1774 to 1776, Sestini traveled around the island and observed Sicilian agriculture and viniculture. Sestini had intended to write a manuscript chronicling his observations about the Sicilian wine industry, but there is no evidence that one was ever written. However, while in Sicily, he wrote dozens of letters (later published) describing his explorations to his Florentine mentors, including the librarian of the Georgofili Academy. These letters are filled with observations about the variety and quality of Sicily's agriculture, including citrus fruits, Indian figs, and many other crops. Sestini paid particular attention to Sicily's wine culture and industry. At a time when Tuscany was striving to export its wines abroad, especially to Great Britain, the young Florentine found a vibrant culture and industry of wine in Sicily. In addition to visiting much of the island, Sestini studied the writings of the sixteenth century Sicilian historian, Tomaso Fazello, and of the seventeenth century Sicilian botanists, Francisco Cupani and Paolo Boccone.

Much to the astonishment of his audience at the Georgofili Academy thirty six years later, Sestini asserted that Sicilian wine had been prized since ancient times for its “exquisiteness and richness”. By the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, Sicily was selling an enormous quantity of its wine, including fortified wines from Marsala and dry red and white wines from the eastern slopes of Mount Etna, to the British fleet. In his

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introductory lecture on the general state of Sicily as a wine producing region, Sestini announced that he would be presenting a total of seven lectures on the following distinct wine areas in Sicily: Mascalì (Mount Etna), Vittoria, Siracusa, Castelvetro, Milazzo, Messina, and Catania. But Sestini only gave two additional lectures, one on Mascalì, the other on Vittoria. Following his lecture on Vittoria, Sestini cancelled the remaining lectures. He perceived that his audience was disinterested and dismissive of his research and of Sicily.

In 1991 the texts of Domenico Sestini's three lectures at the Georgofili Academy were published by a Palermo-based publisher, Sellerio editore, in a booklet titled, *Memorie sui vini siciliani* (the title of Sestini's original lecture series). While Sestini's Florentine contemporaries were not prepared to believe that Sicily's winegrowers were capable of teaching Tuscans and other northern Italians something about growing wine grapes and making wine, the modern world of wine has come to recognize Sicily as one of the most exciting wine regions in Italy and Europe as a whole.

Beginning in the 1980s, under the dynamic leadership of Diego Planeta, Sicily's Regional Institute of Vine and Wine (IRVV) invested in far-reaching research and a commercial strategy to transform Sicily from a producer of inexpensive bulk wine to one of world-class bottled wine. And it would be the enologist of Tuscany's Sassicaia and Tignanello wines, Giacomo Tachis, to whom the IRVV turned for guidance and expertise in charting the future for Sicily as a modern wine region. Tachis became the technical architect for the quality Sicilian wine industry of the 1990s and early 2000s. Both Planeta and Tachis understood that for Sicilian wine to be respected on the world stage, the island would have to develop internationally-accepted wines with a Sicilian identity. Consistent with his strategy in Tuscany, Tachis advised Sicilian wine growers to marry their native red vine varieties, particularly Nero d'Avola, to French ones such as Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon. These foreign varieties added color, texture and structure to Nero d'Avola. He also explored blends of native white vine varieties such as Catarratto, Inzolia, and Grillo. For centuries, Sicily was recognized for fine specialty wines such as Marsala, Malvasia delle Lipari, Moscato di Siracusa, and Passito di Pantelleria. To producers of such wines, Tachis recommended production protocols that allowed them to express more freshness and fruitiness.

Marco De Bartoli followed Diego Planeta as President of the IRVV in the early to mid-1990s. De Bartoli maintained that Sicily should focus on developing its own native vine varieties. He was a proponent of Grillo, the premier vine variety in Marsala wine. He passionately believed that Sicily needed to distinguish itself as a unique wine culture. In the first decade of

the twenty-first century, the Region of Sicily supported research to rescue near extinct indigenous vine varieties as well as to identify biotypes of well-known Sicilian varieties such as Nero d'Avola and Grillo. This research also focused on the development of a protocol of vinification for these varieties. Dario Cartabellotta was the political force behind this research. By the end of the first decade of the 2000s, Cartabellotta served as the Director of the IRVV, and then later as Minister of Agriculture for the Region of Sicily. As of 2014, Sicily's native vine varieties, particularly Nero d'Avola, Nerello Mascalese, and Grillo, are known worldwide. The world wine market also has recognized unique Sicilian terroirs such as the volcanic slopes of Mount Etna, the dry sandy plains of Vittoria, the wind-swept coastal vineyards of Marsala, and the *alberello*-covered terraces of Pantelleria.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the excitement and potential of Sicily also drew investment from northern and central Italian wine producers, both large companies, such as Zonin, Mezzacorona and Gancia, and smaller scale private investors – Marzotto, Moretti, Mazzei, and Franchetti. The capital, technology, and commercial expertise brought by these “outsiders” complemented the internal achievements of Sicilians.

Celebrated for its fertility since the epic tale of Homer's *Odyssey* in the eighth century B.C., Sicily has long been recognized for its exquisite raw material (*materia prima*). Sicilian winegrowers are now expressing that fertility in a way that befits the richness of their land and culture. Sicily's identity was long obscured by the complex circumstances of history. Its twenty-first century winegrowers are now distinguishing this fabled island by producing wines with aromas and flavors only found in Sicily. The culture of wine in Sicily has been reborn.

We dedicate our lecture to the memory of Domenico Sestini and his seminal research. We are grateful to the Georgofili Academy for inviting us to present our book, *The World of Sicilian Wine* (University of California Press, March 2013), at its headquarters in Florence, and thereby to honor the learned work which Domenico Sestini presented to the Georgofili Academy a little more than two centuries ago.