

Salvo Foti-I Vigneri

Profile

When you speak about the wines of eastern Sicily and especially the wines from the soils of Mount Etna, Sicily's famous, majestic volcano, it is impossible to not mention the name Salvo Foti. A native of the city of Catania, Salvo studied enology and began his career in 1981 as a technical and agrarian advisor to some noted estates in eastern Sicily. He continues that work today for estates such as Gulfi, Benanti and ViniBiondi, all of whose wines are universally recognized as among the best in Sicily. But it is still working with and for someone else. Salvo wanted his own project to really make a wine that sings.

A number of years ago, Salvo's love of the grapes and soils of Etna, in particular, led him to initiate a project called I Vigneri. It takes its name from an association that existed in the Etna region in 1435, *Maestranzi dei Vigneri*, an association of vineyard workers that greatly influenced the wine culture of the Etna region. Today, I Vigneri is an association between Salvo Foti, other vine experts and local grape growers who bring their long experience among the particular vines of Etna to their work in the vineyard and cellar.

The vines for the red wine, Vinupetra, are concentrated at 700 meters altitude on the north side of the volcano near the town of Calderara. Here, the climate is more like the north of Italy than Sicily, winters are harsh and cold, the summers are hot and dry and there can be extreme fluctuations between night and day temperatures. The soils are broken or decomposed lava stone of varying depth mixed with sand. Many of the vines are rehabilitated old vines, some over 100 years-old, planted at 10,000 plants per hectare in *albarello* (goblet) system, the only system Salvo considers for producing great fruit under the climatic conditions of Etna. All of these factors allow for work only by hand or mule in the vineyards.

Because these vines are so old, there is great diversity within the vineyard and different strains of each of the varieties appear. The grapes are the autochthonous Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Cappuccio with Alicante (Grenache) and a smattering of vines referred to as *Francisi*, because their variety and provenance are unknown. There is a system of replanting using only *massale* selection with cuttings from the older vines while maintaining the diversity of plants. Replanting is done in the older vineyards because some of the old vines die, but there are also new, adjacent parcels being planted. Currently there are two new parcels planted and one is being readied for planting in 2009.

Two other sites in Bronte are at extreme altitude - A newly planted vineyard in 2005 of white varieties at about a 1200 meters from which comes the Vinujancu while the other is a vineyard of mainly hundred year old Alicante (Grenache) vines with some other red and white grape vines at 1300 meters surrounded by a holly oak forest, and from which a rosé wine called Vinudilice is made.

There is nothing used in the vineyards except copper/sulfur mix. No fertilizers, herbicides or pesticides are used. The grapes are harvested by hand at the end of September until mid-october. Fermentations are done in open oak vats, without enzymes or thermal control (the nights by this time of year are quite cold). There is very little sulfur used on the grapes or must, if at all. Racking and bottling are done under lunar cycle. The wines are bottled with little or no filtration.

Since its incarnation, each member of the I Vigneri association who works in the vineyards here and

at other nearby estates where Salvo is involved receive a quota of the grapes they pick at the other estates to make a wine in common for their own consumption. In 2005 and 2006 (hopefully 2007, too), with the workers permission, Salvo bottled some to sell. The wine is made from only the Nerellos - Mascalese and Cappuccio - and is vinified in concrete vats. It is unfiltered.

This is a breathtaking estate with a mission to make great wines. Furthermore, it is an association that is pulling from the experience and energy of local grape growing talent and giving them a vested interest to create great wines in an region that is economically challenging for many of its inhabitants, especially farmers.

Salvo says that a living wine has its own composition that arises from its own variables: the grape, the vine, the vineyard, the climatic conditions and the individual (vineyard worker and vinifier). It's important that there is harmony and respect for each variable to make a wine that truly sings.

You can see more at www.salvofoti.it. There is a great video of grafting onto a planted rootstock in the gallery. You can see the ash that makes up the soil in this region on the grafter's hands.