

THE WARM SOUTH

TO SICILY'S MANY ATTRACTIONS YOU MAY ADD ITS VINEYARDS, WITH PRODUCTION STRETCHING BACK MILLENNIA. ONE ARISTOCRATIC FAMILY HAS HARNESSSED HISTORY, FOOD AND CULTURE FOR A VERY 21ST-CENTURY HOSPITALITY EXPERIENCE.

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If there is any wine region in Europe that can claim the title of Most Buzz-Generating these days, it is probably Etna, in Sicily. Its roughly 1200 hectares of vineyards cover the middle slopes of the volcano of the same name, overlooking carefully cultivated plains of citrus fruits that are a mainstay crop in these parts. Its appellation status – Etna DOC, made official in 1968 – is not especially old; but winemaking here stretches back some 25 centuries, to the heyday of Magna Graecia, and the terroir profile is many millions of years older. Etna's volcanic soil is rich in iron, phosphorus, magnesium and other vine-friendly minerals. Its climate is breezy, with wide-ranging temperatures; its light is diffuse; riots of bold-hued wildflowers grow in swaths between vines. It is, quite apart from the viticulture, a ravishingly pretty place.

But Etna's allure is in its multifariousness. There are more than 70 quality estates tending discrete *contrade* (the Sicilian correlate of a *cru* vineyard), most planted with the local red nerello mascalese grapes or one of the white local varieties, *catarratto* and *carricante*. Producers range from serious marquis names – including, as of this year, Angelo Gaja – to emerging players like Anna Martens, an Australian expat exploring clay-amphora

aging techniques to intriguing effect. In between are the likes of Tenuta di Fessina, Girolamo Russo, Giuseppe Benanti, and other excellent boutique wineries with increasingly international reputations.

But one name still stands out among them: Tasca d'Almerita. Not just for its winemaking prowess – though Tasca d'Almerita is in the country's highest echelon of producers (it was named Italian Winery of the Year by the esteemed Gambero Rosso guide in 2011) – but also for the eminent history of the Sicilian family behind it. The Tasca family tree reads like something straight out of Lampedusa (indeed, various Tasca ancestors are said to have inspired *The Leopard's* author in his descriptions of noble 19th-century Sicilian life): eight generations of winemaking by aristocratic landowners, parliamentarians and benefactors (in 1882, Wagner completed his opera *Parsifal* while a guest at Villa Tasca in Palermo; framed pages of the original libretto sit upon the grand piano there). The first Tasca vineyards, planted in the early 1800s at Regaleali – the family country seat, located deep in the hilly, severely beautiful interior – have since proliferated into five separate estates across Sicily, from the Aeolian island archipelago to Mozia, the ancient Phoenician trading outpost at its westernmost tip, to Etna, where Tasca first invested in 2006.



Left, Villa Tasca in Palermo, and the vineyards of Tenuta Tascanta on Etna



Given their gilded dynastic CV, it wouldn't be surprising to find the current generation of Tascas resting comfortably on their laurels. On the contrary: they are anything but dilettantes. Their investment in Sicily is dynamic and inspiring, and extends across all strata of life, from winemaking to gastronomy all the way to sustainability – in which field Alberto Tasca, the company's 43-year-old CEO, has developed a series of agriculture protocols that are being adopted as a new benchmark across the entire Italian wine industry. For this family, reinterpreting Sicily's vast patrimony through a contemporary lens, so as to protect and preserve it, is a matter of *noblesse oblige*.

And this is where one of the Tascas' less known ventures comes in: hospitality. Quietly, but with a great deal of attention to detail, atmosphere, and authenticity, Tasca d'Almerita now welcomes guests at almost all of its estates in various ways, with experiences that offer a window on to a way of life inextricably linked to the story of the family, and of the island.

I meet Alberto Tasca on Etna to explore the vines of Tascante, their holding here, set about 700m above sea level (a prime growing altitude, in Etna's very narrow band of viability). Over a rustic but impeccable lunch of sardines, tangy-sweet caponata and glasses of Buonora,

Tascante's *carricante*-based white, we discuss his sustainability initiatives, which he first piloted eight years ago at Regaleali and which have evolved into a widely-recognised best-practice certification. This is based on an assessment that is horizontal instead of vertical, examining the start-to-finish production of wine and all the products, services, and players involved – including glass suppliers, marketers, winery architects, and a few unexpected others in between. "The fundamental interventions we've made are about agriculture. But as that exists in a bigger society, the protocols necessarily extend to include many others, too," he notes. Clearly, it's working: at last year's Vinitaly conference in Verona, Tasca had requests from 30 wineries to apply for certification.

The primary precept of Tasca's sustainability vision could also be his vision for living: "first, and always, to simplify; to try to pursue that idea of less is more". This ethos is manifesting here in Etna, where Tasca has recently purchased four *palmenti* – the local manor houses, often constructed with grape presses built into their ground floors – on and around their vineyards. We pick our way through one that, when restored, will hold a vast kitchen and dining room with an outdoor garden – an exposition and teaching space, as well a restaurant.



Chef Ludovico de Vivo at Tenuta Capofaro, Tasca's malvasia vineyards and resort

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that would reflect what they stand for. So I looked at the way they've made wine for the last eight generations, and mined their history.” De Vivo perused archives and interviewed family members, including Alberto's father, Count Lucio Tasca d'Almerita. The resulting menu takes thematic inspiration from family dishes and lore, and from the historical bounty of their various estates. Vegetables feature prominently, brought to vivid life with a minimum of artifice or embellishment. “The cornerstones here are simplicity of flavour, simplicity of expression, and the very highest quality of source materials, because that's what Tasca has always stood for. Ultimately, they're very modest people,” he says. “There is maximum humility with regard to the land.”

Nowhere is this deep rapport with the land more evident than at Regaleali, where the Tasca d'Almerita wine story began. Straddling the border of Caltanissetta and Palermo provinces, the vast estate entered the family via marriage in the early 1800s. Long before it was a commercial winery producing around three million bottles annually, Regaleali was largely a cultivator of grain and livestock. By the late 1800s, the estate was garnering kudos for its model farming practices; by 1901, it was winning awards for its wines.

Today, its 500-odd hectares are given over to nero d'Avola, catarratto, nerello mascalese, and grillo and inzolia, two local white grapes; but also sauvignon blanc and cabernet sauvignon (which the Count planted in the late 70s, in contravention of his own father's wishes and, at the time, the law; the resulting monovarietal wine was so good it helped convince the Regione Sicilia governing body to lift its restrictions on cultivating international grapes). On the estate are two walled villa compounds known as *bagli*, Case Vecchie and Case Grandi, where the Tascas stay when they are in residence.

Alberto's aunt, Anna Tasca Lanza, founded her now famous cooking school at Case Vecchie in 1989. When she passed away in 2010, her daughter Fabrizia Lanza assumed oversight. Lanza is a presence at Regaleali: she has piercing ice-blue eyes, a daunting intellect, a disarmingly straightforward demeanour and a brilliantly unladylike laugh. Until she was 45 she was an art historian, employed by prominent museums, and her erudition permeates every conversation. But she dispenses entirely with the formalities of her stature when on teaching duty here, wearing old blue coveralls and clogs and perching on stone steps in the sun so that her students can enjoy the shade at the communal table, sipping the estate rosé and nibbling the pillow *pannelle* she's prepared with them for their aperitivo.

Like her cousin Alberto, Lanza takes her role as custodian of the land deeply seriously. In 2016 she launched a pioneering program at Regaleali called Cook The Farm – a 10-week intensive immersion into the how, when, and why of sustainable food cultivation and preparation. The program has multiple facets, including guest lecturers, site visits (an organic olive mill; a granary; a butcher), tastings at Regaleali's cantinas, and an entire day spent shadowing a shepherd in the hills – “That's life-changing for most of the students,” Lanza says; “no one knows how hard the life of a shepherd is.” There is also hands-on experience, in



The soaring barn adjacent to the building will be converted into an enoteca; other *palmenti*, meanwhile, are being remade as exclusive rental accommodation. Like the food we enjoyed at lunch, they will be rustic but impeccable, and eminently comfortable – a true reflection of life on the volcano.

From Etna, it's a fast and sexy half-hour helicopter transfer to the Aeolian island of Salina – larger, more diverse, and less insistently glamorous than Panarea, its shoutier neighbour to the east. Tenuta Capofaro is situated on a breezy bluff, comprising eight malvasia vineyards which Tasca acquired in 2001. (Didyme – Capofaro's dry, balanced white that belies every stereotype about malvasia's ostensible one-trick sweetness – was served at the G8 summit in Taormina the week I was on island.) The resort was conceived over a decade ago, created from former labourers' cottages scattered amid the lush acid green of the vines, which the Tascas have simply but gorgeously upcycled. They have whitewashed walls, floors of polished concrete, and elegant earth-toned linens on the beds; festoons of

hot-pink bougainvillea wind around columns and spill extravagantly over tiled roofs. With just 20 suites, a tiny jewel-box spa, a teak-decked pool and an excellent restaurant manned by Ludovico De Vivo, a young chef who has trained across Europe, Capofaro is more about chic understatement than full-on luxury; but it exists in profoundly satisfying balance with its surroundings. Everything seems calibrated to showcase nature, especially the unfettered views across the blue sea to Stromboli, a still-active volcano that, like Etna, glows picturesquely on the occasional evening.

De Vivo, intense and articulate, has recently cultivated a terraced garden that makes its way up the slope behind the pool and restaurant, in plots of beautifully contained colour: some 30 varieties of salad, 40 herbs, a dozen edible flowers, and a profusion of vegetables – gleaming eggplant, courgette, tomatoes of all hues on the red-to-yellow spectrum. “When I joined two years ago, I was tasked with helping the family create an identity – actually, the words used were ‘a soul’ – for Capofaro,” says De Vivo. “A food experience



The Anna Tasca Lanza Cooking School and its director Fabrizia Lanza



the form of actual farming: each student is allocated a garden plot to sow, tend and harvest over the 10 weeks.

“People today no longer have any idea about their options, about the culture and history of what they’re eating,” Lanza says. “This is a planet with 220 varieties of almond; there are several festivals in Sicily alone celebrating them, there’s a museum to them in Agrigento. And that’s what Cook The Farm is about: the incredible biodiversity on offer, and how we as a civilisation are forgetting it. Much of the understanding of agricultural life is being lost. You buy food in a package, you have no idea which hands, attached to which brains, were responsible for how it arrived in your local market. I think it re-empowers people to tell them those stories.”

What’s needed in Sicily, she says, is more of this storytelling. “Because I’m in this family, because I speak English well and have travelled, I can create the context necessary for the narrative to resonate outside of Sicily. Not just for my farmers and producers, for whom I must translate, but also for that man from Massachusetts or that woman from Brisbane who effectively knows

nothing about how good olive oil or pasta is actually made. So hospitality is a great point of entry.”

Guests of both the week-long cooking school programs and Cook The Farm stay in the nine simply sweet rooms of Case Vecchie, with antique beds, lace curtains and vases of fresh wildflowers (but no televisions). They can swim in the sleek new infinity pool, and idle in Lanza’s large and exquisite garden, which hums gently with the busywork of honeybees.

Up on a hill a few kilometres away is Case Grandi. This is Regaleali’s noble redoubt, its doors and shutters painted a striking cobalt blue. In the courtyard, old halved oak casks overflow with geraniums, petunias and hydrangeas; wild roses climb the walls; at its centre stands a massive magnolia, its waxy, gleaming leaves forming a near-perfect half-sphere in the perfectly square space. From the windows in its outer walls, in every direction, are timeless scenes: olive, oak and cypress; vast blankets of yellow wheat; and, everywhere, rich green tended vines.

What few people know is that Case Grandi is open to paying guests who may not have the time or inclination to

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spend a full week in cooking courses, but who still wish to partake of the singular Tasca lifestyle. After dropping my bags in my terracotta-floored suite, I spent an hour barrelling across the estate in a Land Cruiser with a manager (others explore on mountain bikes and there’s the option to take horses out, too). My guide shares anecdotes stretching back a millennium. The name “Regaleali” probably derives from the Arabic *rahl Ali* – house of Ali – which would have been the farm’s name in the 10th century, when the North African caliphate that ruled Sicily reintroduced wheat cultivation to the interior. That evening, I watch the light fade from warm pink to deep blue against the courtyard walls, before heading in to a superb dinner in the antique-filled main house, its vaulted ceilings painted fresh white, its walls lined with industry awards for Regaleali’s signature wines, the Rosso del Conte and the Nozze d’Oro, a sauvignon-inzolia blend. My sleep, in a high antique four-posted bed, is the deep rest of a spirit scoured of its habitual worries by clean air, hot Mediterranean sun and wholesome food.

The next day I head west, to experience the latest of Tasca’s exclusive guest experiences. A Greek stronghold during the Punic wars, the tiny island of Mozia is an archaeological site in the middle of a lagoon, surrounded by ancient salt flats. Mozia has for decades been owned and managed by The Whitaker foundation, named after the Anglo-Italian, marsala-producing family that underwrote most of the excavations, and which planted the island’s first grapes. In 2007, Tasca d’Almerita entered into partnership with Whitaker, taking over Mozia’s 10 hectares of grillo vineyards. The grapes are still cultivated as they would have been 200, or 2000, years ago: harvested at dawn, transported to the mainland in small, flatbed boats for vinification. Since last year, Tasca has offered exclusive tasting lunches in a private grove of olives and gum trees at the island’s centre. These are elegant, country-chic afternoons that follow a vineyard tour – and, if guests want, an archaeological one – led by one of the winemakers, with prodigious platters of delicious homemade food: *melanzane al forno*, octopus and various fish, smoky *pasta alla norma* and more. The three estate grillo wines are poured and considered. There is talk, pending government approval, of guests eventually overnighing on the island – a once-in-a-lifetime experience indeed.

Before flying out of Palermo, I stop by Villa Tasca to have tea with Lucio Tasca. Turning into the gates from the blaring, claustrophobic chaos of the street, I’m immersed in instant tranquillity: stately palm arcades, lush gardens, and the wildly romantic baroque façade of the villa itself. Savoy, von Bismarck, Windsors and Kennedys have all passed through its grand halls; the family has discreetly let it out to celebrities, aristocrats and those with very deep pockets since about 2002.

Villa Tasca is a gilded page of Italian history, a distillation of a dream of what once was. To sit in its shaded garden feels both a privilege and a wild indulgence. But weeks later, it is Regaleali to which my mind insistently returns: the tall but far simpler house, bathed in ancient light, surrounded by land that tells a different, far more elemental story – one as old, beautiful and compelling as Sicily itself. **W**