

Untold Italy Episode 246: Exploring Sicily's Volcanic Vineyards - Mount Etna Wines

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 246.

Ciao a tutti and Benvenuti to Untold Italy, the travel podcast, where you go to the towns and villages, mountains and lakes, hills and coastlines of Bella Italia. Each week your host Katy Clarke takes you on a journey in search of magical landscapes of history, culture, wine, gelato, and, of course, a whole lot of pasta. If you're dreaming of Italy and planning future adventures there, you've come to the right place.

Katy Clarke:

Ciao a tutti! Welcome to another Italian wine episode with our good friends Olivia and Andrea from Italian Wine Tales. Today we are heading over to the island of Sicily where winemaking has been a tradition for millennia - in fact well before the Greeks and Ancient Romans arrived.

Wine making here is part of the fabric of life and especially so on the slopes of Mount Etna, Sicily's smoldering volcano. This fertile volcanic soil is the perfect place to grow and cultivate vines that go on to produce the most flavorful grapes for the local wine. Just like in many areas of southern Italy, younger generations are taking hold of traditions and adding their own spin to the wine-making process. Apart from the volcano, it's definitely a fun time to try Sicilian wine so let's find out more.

Katy Clarke:

Bentornati. Welcome back to the Untold Italy podcast, Olivia and Andrea.

Olivia Windsor:

Hey Katy. Hi everyone.

Andrea Mitti Rua:

Ciao Katy.

Katy Clarke:

Hello, hello. Always great to have you on the show and we love chatting about Italian wine. Don't we? And I'm super, super excited about this episode because it's not often that you get to talk about wine made from grapes grown on the slopes of an active and smoldering volcano.

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Olivia Windsor:

Indeed. Seriously, one of my absolute favorite wine regions. I can't wait to talk about Mount Etna.

Katy Clarke:

Oh, exciting. But, you know, I think everyone needs to know exactly who you are before we get chatting about these wines. So give us a quick introduction and remind everyone who are our guests that talk about Italian wine.

Olivia Windsor:

So I'm Olivia, and my husband is Andrea, and together we run Italian Wine Tales, which is an online resource all about the wonderful world of Italian wine, where you can find info on wine tours, wine varieties, and just general suggestions of what to drink while you're in Italy. So who doesn't love that?

Katy Clarke:

I'm happy with that. Excellent. So today we're heading over to Sicily, and Sicily is like a really exciting wine region. There's a lot of things going on there. We've already talked about Marsala wine and the wines from the west coast of the region and the island. But today we're going to the most exciting part - to the mother as they call her Mount Etna, and let's have a chat and find out about what this region is like and why it's such a popular and up and coming wine region.

Andrea Mitti Rua:

So as you said, we're talking about Mount Etna, and it's the eastern coast of Sicily. So even if you don't have the geographical map in front of you right now, you know this place. Why? Because it's the part of Italy that was featured in the 2nd season of White Lotus. So we're talking about that area there. As you said, there is the mother of Mount Etna, which is an active volcano, which gives incredible fertile land, incredible fertile sulfur, all kind of agriculture, especially when it comes for, wines and winemaking.

Olivia Windsor:

The thing that I love as well, sorry, to interrupt. When you land in Catania, you immediately see Mount Etna. And, like, you travel up and down the East Coast, and she's always there watching. We went on a holiday last year to the Aeolian Islands, and you could even see Mount Etna from there. It's crazy. Like, it's just it really is the mother. She's always watching.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah. But it's also like, it's really important to know that it is an active volcano. So there is literally smoke coming out the top. And even this summer, you know, a few weeks ago, they had like some little eruptions, which is not uncommon. It's a, like a normal occurrence and it's okay, everyone, like they know if it's going to blow. but, they get a lot of, obviously... They're monitoring the seismic activity constantly, but it's just such a cool thing to see with all of, you know, like you have these baroque towns and in the distance you have the volcano. It's

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amazing.

Olivia Windsor:

I love it. Yeah. It's really amazing. And the soil there as well. I mean, everything I think tastes better in Sicily, but especially the wine.

Andrea Mitti Rua:

Between the sea, the the sunlight, and the soil of the volcano, everything, as she said, is super rich in flavor and in nutrients. And the winemaking there, it's famous and rich, and luscious because of the volcano, but also it's super historical. So more than 2000 years ago, they were already harvesting and growing wine thanks to the ancient Greeks, which colonized the area and installed tiny little towns. And, of course, it was a big culture for winemaking, And so they imported the culture for winemaking. And nowadays, they're still retaining a bit of the culture and continue to produce and grow different varieties of grapes, and it's a very historical tradition in the region.

Olivia Windsor:

I think the thing as well that I love the most about wine coming from Sicily in general, I'm quite into, drinking organic wines, which is a big trend in the wine world. And I'm not talking about gross things that taste funky, but, you know, things that are made with less chemicals and really, you know, aiming to support the environment and give back into the land so that you drink, you know, even better wines. But the thing that I really love is that there's this interesting blend of old world practices with new world ambition, and there's a lot of young entrepreneurial Sicilians who are working really hard to, you know, create a new kind of oenological revolution in Mount Etna, especially. So young wine makers experimenting, you know, biodynamics, organic viticulture, bringing in modern techniques, and marrying it with the really ancient 2000-year-old winemaking history on Mount Etna. So I find that really exciting.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah. I think if you grow up in the shadow of a volcano, you probably have a lot more respect for the land of earth. Yeah.

Olivia Windsor:

Exactly.

Andrea Mitti Rua:

Probably so. Yeah.

Katy Clarke:

I'm not gonna offend that thing overly in case it decides it's very angry and wants to punish us. But yeah, I think it's an amazing and you like you say, it's very vibrant and Sicily is a really exciting place for that because the people really respect their home and they love their home. So they would identify as Sicilian rather than Italian. So, you know, there's a lot of sort

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of civic, local pride that comes out, not just in the wine, but in in really everything that they do. Okay. So Liv and Andrea, what sort of wine do they make there?

Olivia Windsor:

So they make white and red. So whatever you drink, there's something for you. But perhaps we'll start with the white. So it's simply called Etna Bianco. So it's very easy to know what you're ordering. And it's made with a blend of Carricante and Catarratto bianco grapes, so these are indigenous to Sicily. Carricante is an ancient Sicilian white grape, and they think it's been growing for, as Andrea was saying, you know, even 2000 years ago when the Greeks came, so it's got a very long history. What can you expect from this wine? So think about delicious aromas of apple, pear, citrus, lemon, even floral notes like jasmine, orange blossom.

Olivia Windsor:

Orange blossom to me is Sicily in a nutshell. So if you think of this grape as well, it's just so Sicilian. It's a really light and mild wine, but you can get more medium to full-bodied versions if you go for an Etna Bianco Superiore, which means it's been aged longer, so that's 30 months. So you can have your kind of aperitivo version, just the Etna Bianco. The DOC we always recommend going for, or you can go for a Superiore order if you want something that's going to be a little bit more weighty to have with your pasta or your fish courses.

Katy Clarke:

So Liv, what, I mean, it's a very unfamiliar one. Most people will not have tried it. And so when you say something that's a little bit similar.

Olivia Windsor:

I feel bad to compare it to anything else only because, you know, obviously, it's a volcanic wine, so it's so different. But the fruity notes could even be a little bit similar to, like, a Pinot Grigio. I would say. That familiar fruitiness. However, it's also got floral notes in it too. And, yeah, I much prefer an Etna Bianco to a Pinot Grigio if I have to choose. But if we're gonna say something similar, think of it kind of like that, but a 100 times better.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah. So the opinions are coming out today, look at, love it. More opinions, please. We love them. So, that's the white wine. And so in Sicily, obviously the food, the food is amazing. It's like, you know, we cannot have bad food in Sicily, but, what are we eating with this wine?

Olivia Windsor:

So a really typical dish is pasta con sarde, so sardines. But don't think of, like, those gross little things that I know a lot of my American clients are really hesitant to try. They're completely different. They're delicious. And they have a lot of fennel in Sicily too. So finocchietto, and this dish is typically with pine nuts and even raisins. So that's a really delicious pasta dish to try with this wine.

Katy Clarke:

Yum. That sounds amazing. Yeah. I love all of that. And they're just, they're slightly got that North African hint as well with the raisins. And it's a really interesting complex cuisine and it's, you know, like it's completely different to what you're going to find in Rome or Emilia Romagna or anywhere else. So it's amazing. Okay.

Katy Clarke:

So if we prefer red, though, what are we drinking?

Andrea Mitti Rua:

So if you prefer red and you like something like a Pinot Noir, then you can try Etna Rosso. Etna Rosso is the red wine of the region, and it's born from Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Cappuccio. These two varieties of wine and gives a fresh and floral body with a lot of minerality because, of course, of the volcanic soil it's grown from. You can find notes of cherry, rose, and spice. It's very elegant white overall. I really like it. And it's interesting that this DNA grape, that we could say, is the child of the famous Tuscany grape, Sangiovese, which you heard before because of Chianti and all that, of course. So you can think about it as a distant cousin, distant relative of the Chianti, but born in Sicily under Mount Etna.

Andrea Mitti Rua:

I will also, sorry, recommend the Rosato version of it because we said that there is a bit for everyone. Right? And I know that you like, rose wines, Katy. So they also do Etna Rosato from the same grape, and it's it's very delicious, especially if you go there in summer, which, it's high season. It's a go-to wine.

Olivia Windsor:

Yeah. Sometimes it can be a little hard drinking the red wines in the summer season with the heat. So the rose, the Rosato is a great option.

Katy Clarke:

Oh, never say no to that. Thank you for looking after me there as you always do. You know what I'm like. So what do we eat with these delicious red and risotto?

Andrea Mitti Rua:

Well, something that you could try. Something a bit, let's say, controversial, but I would recommend to try something very typical. It's the street food, particularly the arancino or arancina because it depends on which part of Sicily you're from. There is this big feud on how it's pronounced, and it's, for people who don't know what it is, it's this rice fried with, inside different ingredients. It can be tomato sauce, it can be fish - it can be different things. And usually, of course, you don't drink it with a wine, but I would recommend trying it because in my opinion, the tannin, which are present in the Etna Rosso, can cut through the fattiness and the heaviness of the fried, arancino.

Andrea Mitti Rua:

So if you wanna do something different, you can try in 2 typical products of, this part of Sicily.

Olivia Windsor:

What about even pasta alla norma?

Andrea Mitti Rua:

Pasta alla norma is, of course, a bit classic as well, correct, which is made with aubergines. It's delicious. I personally prefer it over pasta con le sarde. It's made with tomato, aubergines, and usually short pasta. It marries very well with Etna Rosso.

Olivia Windsor:

Mhmm. Yum.

Katy Clarke:

And for those who don't speak French or British, aubergine obviously is an eggplant. So, no, it's really interesting because when I was living in the UK, they use a lot of French words instead of the Italian or the American. And so you're sort of going, what are you talking about? But, yeah, love that pasta alla norma - it is my favorite. I love it because - just putting it out there. My favorite vegetable is eggplant.

Olivia Windsor:

Yes, I remember that. Yeah, delicious.

Olivia Windsor:

And they do it so well in Sicily. The caponata.

Andrea Mitti Rua:

Oh delicious.

Olivia Windsor:

That would be great with the white wine too. I think.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah. Now this is a region that is got its, tourism smarts together. Isn't it? So, you know, if you want to actually go and visit wineries, this is a really good place to do it because they're quite well organized, unlike some of the other smaller regions. And, you can visit wineries from Catania or from Taormina, or a lot of people like to base themselves, or even if you're staying further afield in Syracuse or Ortigia, but I think the closest is Catania and Chalmina. So where are some of the wineries that you like to visit, Liv?

Olivia Windsor:

So my favorite would be Benanti because it's a nice mix between it's not super big, but it's not

super small. Yeah. They've just got really organic approach and really, I like their philosophy as well about, you know, giving back to the mother, giving back to the soil. So I just think that reflects really deliciously in their wines. And they've got really nice, you know, as you were saying, their hospitality in Sicily. They're no stranger to tourists. So you can also have lunch when you do a wine tasting, and that might seem like a really obvious thing if Australians and Americans are listening because that's how it is in our countries. But that is definitely not the norm in Italy that, they offer, you know, a full lunch with a wine tasting.

Olivia Windsor:

But a lot of the wineries in Sicily, they do. So it's a really nice experience. So I'd say Benanti. Otherwise, Donnafugata is always a great option. Obviously, it's a lot bigger winery. And I see about Donnafugata, though, is that if you love their wines, you likely find them in the States, and Australia because they do export around the world. So you can keep enjoying that Etna wine back home. And, yeah, Donnafugata is nice because there's lots of different Donnafugata wineries around Sicily and they've got an outpost on Mount Etna where they make their Etna wine.

Olivia Windsor:

So that's a really reliable one too. They're obviously used to having a lot of guests come in and out and they offer a lunch experience too, or just a wine tasting, but it's a very polished experience that you'll have there.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah. So I think it's really interesting because, you know, we obviously go around to different wine regions and some of them are, you know, a lot more developed from a tourism perspective than others. And in fact, I think in some ways, in a lot of ways, from a, maybe even a group tour perspective, it's easier to go visit wineries, these wineries that sometimes even in Tuscany, it can be quite difficult. Anyone out there, you know, he's some really great Tuscany wine tours - let us know because, you know, we have a few that we love, but I feel like it's a bit of an untapped market, but in Sicily, they've really got their act together and they know what people want. They know that they want to be transported from Catania or to Taormina and they're onto it. And you can have this beautiful lunch and experience on the volcano.

Katy Clarke:

I mean, it's a wow. This is like a once-in-a-lifetime experience because a lot of the other volcanoes in the world are really in tropical areas aren't they the ones that are alive? And so you're not really getting wine there.

Olivia Windsor:

No, exactly. And it's so amazing just to be on these wineries too. They're so lush and green and everything smells better. Everything tastes better. I mean, it is really, if you're going to East Sicily and you even just have a passing interest in wine, I would highly recommend doing a wine tour because you'll never go anywhere else like it. You really won't.

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Katy Clarke:

No. I mean, it's it's completely unique. And, you know, because they've had such this, you know, really interesting relationship with that volcano because it obviously did destroy half of that part of the island. Now I've forgotten the date, but it's, you know, back in the 17th century or 18th. Yeah. I mean, like it's a really interesting relationship with that. They have with nature. I think. It's a combination of fear, respect and love and, but it's a relationship that maybe some of us that grew up in cities just don't have.

Olivia Windsor:

Yeah. I agree. And I think as well, like Sicily as a whole, like, just to give you some kind of numerical figure, like, when you talk about winemaking, 38% of all viticulture is organic. So that is huge. And that just also feeds into this respect that they have for the land in Sicily. It's a complete different relationship, I think, than a lot of other countries or regions have for the land.

Katy Clarke:

This is a theme that comes back again and again, like it's just taking the time understanding what's going on. Slow, slow, you can't do this fast, it's going to roll with the seasons, there's going to be some good seasons, some not-so-good seasons and you have to learn and be patient.

Olivia Windsor:

Yeah, exactly. Exactly.

Katy Clarke:

And you know, I'm just reflecting on my day-to-day that I like, I'm not initially, and I use my horn like about 10 times. I like recognized in myself, this rush, rush, rush. And it's like, you've got a piano, piano, slow down. And that's true. You need to keep reminding yourself. So maybe it's time for me to go and get a glass of Etna wine. What do you reckon?

Olivia Windsor:

I think so. That bottle is calling Katy.

Katy Clarke:

I've just got to find it. But they do have Donnafugata in Australia. Definitely, for those of you who are in Australia, they have it at Dan Murphy.

Olivia Windsor:

So, well, you know, I can tell you as well. They have it definitely in the States because when I was last on tour for Untold Italy in west Sicily, we also came across Donna forgot to and even, one of our guests who lives in Hawaii, she can get Donnafugata. So you'll be in safe hands.

Katy Clarke:

Ciao to Kathleen, actually.

Olivia Windsor:

Ciao, Kathleen.

Katy Clarke:

Hope you're listening. Now Sicily is one of those places. It doesn't have to get too cold. Does it? But, is there a better time to go? Do you think?

Olivia Windsor:

Yeah. Again, I would just probably say when to avoid, and I think, like, the height of summer, unless you really love the heat and slash crowds, I just wouldn't go in July and August, personally. I just think that's so hot. Even June, we were there in June last year, and it's very hot.

Andrea Mitti Rua:

Good time to go in my opinion. Since, as you said, it's never really cold and it's in the south really, I would go even late September, beginning of October. You can still have very good weather. You can still swim in the sea in October if you're listening from the northern hemisphere. The world of October, you're associated, of course, with winter or autumn more than winter, sorry, so with cold weather. But in Sicily, it's still very warm. You can still have, like, a late summer. So Yeah.

Andrea Mitti Rua:

I would definitely recommend late September, beginning of October.

Olivia Windsor:

I mean, winter can be a nice time to visit too. However, a lot of activities close on winter, so you might be lucky to find a winery that will open up for you even if the weather's quite nice. So that's probably why it sticks to spring and fall.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah. And that's why our tours go at that time of year too because it's you know, you get the lovely weather and you have - everything's open and you can see maybe the Vendemmia. When is Vendemmia actually in Sicily? It must be October ish.

Olivia Windsor:

Can be later because of the altitude.

Andrea Mitti Rua:

Yeah. The altitude and, usually, you don't wanna do it too soon compared to the north. But, yeah

Olivia Windsor:
That's true yeah.

Andrea Mitti Rua:
The altitude is a factor as you said.

Olivia Windsor:
Also because on Mount Etna, you can get even, like, alpine temperatures, like freezing temperatures. So, yeah, that is true. Yeah, rarely, but it can happen that it can be really, really cold. So it's definitely a later harvest.

Katy Clarke:
Yep. I know Olivia was shocked when some guests wore some sandals.

Olivia Windsor:
Yes. On climbing Mount Etna. Time for sneakers.

Katy Clarke:
Yes. Yeah. So you can actually go right up to the crater, can't you? You can go right to the top.

Olivia Windsor:
You can. And there's different routes that you can do on our tours we visit - not a too intense hike. We visit, a crater that you can, you know, do a nice kind of walk around the crater with the guides and learn more about Mount Etna and the history, which I find really interesting, but it's, yeah, it's not too strenuous because some of the hikes can be quite - I mean, you're on a volcano. Let's keep in mind. Some of the hikes can be very challenging. So, yeah, you've gotta choose the right height for your level of fitness, of course.

Katy Clarke:
I was gonna say your problem of laziness. Everyone's different. You know, some people like to power off and sweat and all of that. And it, you know, for me, I'd rather like taking the atmosphere and enjoy and, you know, get my steps in and have a lovely glass of wine at the end of it. But it's, everyone's different. And I think you can adapt these activities for your travel style, and that's something really important to us, isn't it, Liv?

Olivia Windsor:
And I think the the thing that I love - our day when we go and visit Mount Etna on the Untold Italy tour is the best day because you see lots of different variety. In Mount Etna itself, you start, you know, we go all the way up the top to one of the craters and have this walk and the landscape there is very, you know, dark and the lava stone and kind of, well, the drive up there is not desolate at all. It's really fertile and lots of, trees and shrubbery and that kind of thing. But when you get to the crater, obviously, you're looking at a, you know, the crater of a volcano. And then you go back down the hill, and we stop in at one of the wineries, and it's so lush and almost tropical. It's completely different to, you know, the crater that you've just

seen. And then you keep going back, you know, towards Catania, and we stop in at a gorgeous little town that's famous for its honey production. Because keep in mind, you know, it's not just amazing wine that they produce.

Olivia Windsor:

They also have a lot of other products, and honey is famous in Mount Etna. So I love that day because you get all these different looks at Mount Etna from the sceneries, to the products that are being produced. So it's just incredible if you have the opportunity to visit.

Katy Clarke:

That's why we love Italy because even in one day you can have all of that diversity. We've got some guests actually coming, haven't we that are going to Sicily and Tuscany? And I can't wait to see their impressions because it's literally like going to another country, even another continent to actually experience those two regions. So, yeah. And Kathleen, who we mentioned before she went to Piedmont, which is...

Olivia Windsor:

Even more different

Katy Clarke:

Yeah. But this is the amazing thing about Italy and why people keep going back again and again is because you can have all these unique and different experiences in the one tiny little area. Well, it's tiny for those of us who live in Australia or North America.

Olivia Windsor:

That's true.

Katy Clarke:

Look, I can't wait to get back to Sicily. Everyone kind of knows. It's like it's got a real different pulse about it of different energy. It's always fun. But you know, if you want people want to keep learning about these Sicilian wines with Italian Wine Tales, how can they stay in touch with you and do that?

Olivia Windsor:

So you can head on to our website, italianwinetales.com or our Instagram, @talianwinetales. And we also have a Facebook group, Italian Wine Lovers. So if you want to ask questions and get immediate kind of responses from the community, connect with, you know, other Italian wine lovers, then that is the place to do it.

Katy Clarke:

Amazing. All right. Well, yeah, I can't wait to get back to Sicily and drink those Etna wines. So good. Grazie Liv and Andrea. Thank you for taking us on another wonderful wine journey.

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Olivia Windsor:
Grazie Mille, Katy. Thanks everyone.

Andrea Mitti Rua:
Thanks Katy. Bye.

Olivia Windsor:
Ciao.

Andrea Mitti Rua:
Ciao.

Katy Clarke:
As always I really appreciate Liv and Andrea for sharing their knowledge about wine and winemaking in an easy and accessible way. I think it's the perfect approach for those of us who enjoy wine but don't want to get too deep into the technicalities.

And what better place to explore winemaking and the amazing red wines of Sicily than close to Mount Etna? It's difficult to over-emphasize how important the volcano is to not only the winemaking process but the beating heart and culture of the island. So if you like wine do consider visiting a winery there and sipping your Nero d'Avola in the shadow of the mother - Mount Etna.

For those of you who like to relax and have everything taken care of for you our Untold Italy Eastern Sicily trip visits Mount Etna and a family-owned winery there so you can learn more about the traditions and tastes of Sicily. We also visit Catania, Taormina, the Val di Noto and one of my favorite places in the whole world - Ortigia - on this trip. Our sold-out 2024 trip filled quickly so book soon if you're keen to join us in October next year

As always we've provided a full list of the wines, grapes and places mentioned as well as a link to our Sicily tours in to our detailed show notes for this episode found at untolditaly.com/246 Make sure you have a look around our website while you're there. There are hundreds of articles designed to help you build your dream trip to Italy. We're very proud of the information we send out into the world. It's based on a love for Italy and checked regularly so you know it's up to date

Thanks to all our wonderful listeners for your ongoing support of Untold Italy. I hope you enjoyed today's show. If you did then it would be amazing if you gave us a rating or review in your favorite podcast app. That helps us reach more Italy-loving travelers just like you.

On next week's episode, we'll be sharing more ways to enhance your trips to Italy.

But until then it's "ciao for now".

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