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A glass of Sicilian wine

The feudal system is alive and well in this corner of Europe. Sally Ramsden hob-nobs with the local aristocracy and drinks their booze

Think of Sicily, and mobsters, volcanoes, ritzy seaside resorts and ancient ruins crowd the mind. But go there you'll find a rugged, mountainous interior covered in vineyards and virtually untouched by tourism. Aristocratic families still own vast country estates, and peasant farmers till the soil, an archaic state of affairs that survives thanks to the wine industry the biggest legal business on the Mediterranean's largest island. It's the perfect place for a wine tour, where sampling the noblest wines allows you to hob-nob with the nobles themselves.

Why are you standing in the loo, glass in hand, gawping at the fixtures?

I'm tasting an excellent Nero d'Avola, Sicily's great red grape, while admiring the cavernous bathroom of a 15th-century palazzo. Some of the best wines come from the old noble families who, like the Prince in The Leopard, Giuseppe di Lampedusa's Sicilian epic, own vast country estates and sumptuous townhouses. The Rapitala family wines can be tasted on a tour replete with medieval paintings, frescoed ceilings and skeletons in the closet one was found here sealed in a lost room.

What's so special about Sicilian wines?

This island is littered with the ruins of civilisations who knew how to drink the stuff by the amphora. The Phoenicians, Greeks and Romans made Sicilian wines famous more than 2,000 years ago, introducing wine to the rest of Italy. With its fertile volcanic soils, hot southern sun and cool nights up in the hills, Sicily is great wine country. Sadly, most makers have now opted for quantity over quality, which is all the more reason for seeking out the classy wineries.

Isn't wine-tasting just a jolly good excuse to get drunk?

Excuse me. Wine tasting is a very serious holiday pursuit. I paced myself and tasted only 55 different wines in six days, and we never started before the perfectly civilised hour of 11am. Okay, I did glug a few good-sized glasses of the internationally acclaimed chardonnay at the new Planeta estate and I didn't always spit the rest out. But mostly I managed to stay sober, usually until lunchtime.

Don't you have to line your stomach well?

Absolutely. In Sicily it would be a crime not to. One glorious lunchtime we were cooked for by the celebrity Sicilian cook, the Marchesa Anna Tasca Lanza, keeping it in the family with the superb Regaleali-Tasca d'Almerita wines produced by her brother. Sicilian pasta con sarda is one of the Marchesa's signature dishes: macaroni with sardines, fennel, pine nuts and raisins served up in the

country kitchen of the great family estate. Expect to expand, and dress accordingly, because at any good winery or restaurant you'll be tucking away a minimum of six courses.

And do they put Marsala in the trifle?

Marsala is a laid-back port full of baroque architecture, palm trees and tourist shops trying to flog you a horrible sickly sweet liqueur mixed with egg yolks. Your mother may still use it for cooking, but true Sicilians know better. This is not how Marsala should be enjoyed. The real thing used to be so good that Nelson's fleet swore by it, and a number of 18th-century English merchants made their fortunes from it. Hence its old nickname: the Englishman's wine. Fortunately, a few wise Marsala families are today working hard to revive the reputation of these fortified, sherry-like wines. Try Marco de Bartoli's Marsala Superiore Riserva it looks like port but tastes even better.

Is the soil on Etna so good it's worth the risk of being vaporised?

Europe's liveliest volcano has been fuming since early 2000, but so far the lava has left the vineyards alone. Don't wimp out and miss the chance to visit the small but superior Villegrande wine estate high above the chic resort of Taormina while you still can. Up here on Etna the mineral-rich soils help to produce some of Sicily's top wines, and the view of the mainland across the Straits of Messina is fabulous. Just do what the locals do and pray to the Virgin Mary for protection.

How about imbibing a bit of culture in between the booze and top nosh?

Wine is culture, darling. But, of course, there are other Sicilian pleasures to be savoured. Wander round Palermo and you'll find a cosmopolitan mix of Islamic architecture, Romanesque churches and medieval streets recalling its heydays as one of the leading cities in Europe. My personal highlight was the incredible 12th-century cathedral at Monreale in the hills above the capital, a fusion of Byzantine, Arab and Norman art boasting resplendent wall-to-wall, ceiling-to-floor mosaics and carved cloisters. Don't miss the solitude of the Greek Doric temple of Segesta in the north-west or the Valley of the Temples behind Agrigento, near the southern beaches.

If you want to know what a holiday home should really look like, visit the Piazza Armerina, a vast Roman villa catering for patrician vacations, set in the forested hills of Sicily's central region. Rainbow mosaics carpet the floors, showing scenes of war, love, hunting and even girls playing ball games in bikinis. Plus wine-making, naturally.

What about that other vital holiday ingredient, a classy hotel?

No would-be wine connoisseur should ever been seen dead in a budget hotel. It just don't go with the upmarket wine-quaffing image one should always aspire to. I slept in style at the Villa Ignia on a sheltered cove just outside Palermo, complete with Art Nouveau ballroom and its own mini-Greek temple overlooking the swimming pool. Guests have included Wagner, Humphrey Bogart, Elizabeth Taylor, Hillary Clinton and Kofi Annan. Half the royalty of Europe has enjoyed the sea views from the terrace and sampled the excellent wine list.

How do I book?

I travelled with in the company of Master of Wine Jane Hunt with Arblaster & Clarke Wine Tours (01730 893344; www.arblasterandclarke.com). A dynamic tour guide brought me up to speed on all things historical, geographical and cultural in Sicily. Both spoke fluent Italian, which made a world of difference in a place where most people don't speak English. Arblaster & Clarke offers a range of 70 wine tours covering 17 countries. The next Sicilian wine tour is from 3-10 November 2002 and costs from £1549.

Alitalia (0870 544 8259; www.alitalia.co.uk) flies via Milan and Rome to Palermo or Catania in Sicily from £178 return. For more information about Sicily visit www.enit.it.

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