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From Etna and the Salty Sea, a White of Great Potential

By Eric Asimov
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The Aeris vineyard in the foothills of Mount Etna, a joint venture between Salvo Foti and the California winemaker Kevin Harvey of Rhys Vineyards. The young carricante grapevines are trained to grow vertically on chestnut posts.

MILO, Sicily — The first thing you notice about Salvo Foti's new Aeris vineyard in the foothills of Mount Etna is the sponginess of the soil. In parts of the closely planted 15-acre vineyard, where the young carricante grapevines are trained to grow vertically on chestnut posts in the ancient alberello fashion, powdery soil can seem to engulf a shoe pressed too heavily into the earth.

The second thing you notice are the meticulously constructed stone terraces carved from a hillside and the stone-lined drainage ditches, all intended to slow the flow of water and prevent erosion.

It rains often around Milo, a town on the east face of Mount Etna, the hyperactive volcano that has gained a reputation as a source of excellent reds, made primarily of the nerello mascalese grape.

But Milo is different from the rest of Etna's grape-growing regions. The prodigious rainfall makes Milo white wine territory, and a welcoming home for the carricante grape in particular.

"Carricante was born in Milo," Mr. Foti said. Even the rule-enforcing bureaucrats have recognized Milo's affinity for carricante, the best white wine grape on Sicily: Etna Bianco, made with a minimum of 60 percent carricante, can be produced throughout the Etna grape-growing

regions. But Etna Bianco Superiore, a higher level of quality with a minimum of 80 percent carricante, can come from only Milo.

If you've never heard of carricante, and if you thought Etna only produced reds, you are no doubt in good company. Eastern Sicily, including Etna, is dominated by red wines. Yet the whites, made primarily if not entirely of carricante, may be even more distinctive. The best carricantes, like Benanti's Pietra Marina, are profoundly savory, with a striking saline flavor. In a word, salty.

Salty wine? It may strike some people as bizarre. But the carricante wines can be unmistakably saline, particularly those from the Milo region, and that is only part of their appeal.

Depending on the vintage, Pietra Marina, which I believe is one of Italy's best whites, can be rich and concentrated with great minerality and herbal and citrus flavors. It can age well, too. Over time, it can take on a kerosene quality reminiscent of aged riesling, but it never loses its lip-smacking succulence. It's balanced, refreshing, distinctive, complex and delicious. The wines are high in acid and low in alcohol.



Mr. Foti, who is spreading the gospel of carricante, the best white wine grape on Sicily.

The biggest problem with carricante is that very few good ones are made, a problem rooted in culture and history.

“Sicily is a land for red, not for white,” Mr. Foti said as we walked the vineyard in June. Up until the 1980s, most of the wine made in the Etna region was cheap, red and sold in bulk. Much was shipped overseas.

“The idea was to make cheap, strong wine to sell elsewhere, and nerello mascalese served perfectly,” said Salvino Benanti, who, with his twin brother, Antonio, runs Benanti. “Carricante was ignored, and still is by many.”

Benanti, founded by Salvino's father, Giuseppe Benanti, in 1988, was among the first Etna producers to look to carricante. In those early days, Giuseppe Benanti hired Mr. Foti, then a young oenologist, as a consulting winemaker, and together they came to the decision to make the white.

In a beautifully manicured carricante vineyard about 2,100 feet high, one of Benanti's sources for Pietra Marina, a visitor can see the ocean to the east and Etna to the west. The Grecale, a Mediterranean wind from the northeast, blows more or less continually.

"It gives you a better understanding of how it gets so salty," Salvino Benanti said. "Sea breeze and elevation gives saltiness and acidity."

Not far away, Benanti is preparing a hillside to be planted with seven and a half acres of carricante this fall.

"It will be our project for the next 50 years," Mr. Benanti said.

In western Sicily, where a lot more white wine is made than in the east, catarratto bianco, not carricante, dominates. It makes a bland, low-acid wine. Grillo and inzolia can make very good white wines, but, as Mr. Foti points out, their primary purpose has been to make Marsala, a sweet wine. Similarly for moscato, which is mostly used for sweet passito wines.

Pietra Marina may be the leading expression of Etna Bianco Superiore, but other carricante wines in different styles are worth seeking out, beginning with Benanti's entry-level Biancodicaselle Etna Bianco, which uses carricante grapes from the Contrada Caselle in Milo and from southeast Etna. It's not as rich, deep or complex as Pietra Marina, but it's delicious in its own right, and cheaper, around \$20 against Pietra Marina's \$50.



Salvino Benanti, who, with his twin, Antonio, produces Benanti wines.

Tenuta delle Terre Nere near Randazzo in the north of Etna, one of the larger producers of Etna Bianco, makes two Etna Biancos. Its large-production Bianco is a blend with about 65 percent carricante and four other grapes. It tastes primarily of herbs and citrus, and it is fresh and refreshing. But the other Bianco, the Cuvée delle Vigne Niche, is all carricante and is far more savory and saline.

Alberto Aiello Graci, also on north Etna, makes two Biancos. The entry-level wine, 70 percent carricante, is pleasant and refreshing, but the 100 percent carricante Arcurìa is excellent, herbal, mineral and saline.

Ciro Biondi, whose vineyards are on the warmer southeast of Etna, also makes two Biancos, but neither is 100 percent. The entry-level Outis is fresh and energetic, lightly savory with lemon and herbal flavors. The 2014 single-vineyard Chianta Bianco is deliciously floral, like inhaling the scent of a big basket of flowers. Barone di Villagrande, like Benanti another carricante pioneer, makes a very good Etna Bianco Superiore, though without the dimensionality of Pietra Marina.

That leaves the wines of Mr. Foti, who has had the most to do with the success of carricante. Aside from working with Benanti through 2011, he has consulted with Biondi and has made one of the few carricante wines outside the Etna region, with Gulfi, which is based near Vittoria in southeastern Sicily. (It's richer and less distinctive than the Etna versions.) His own Etna Bianco Superiore, called Vigna di Milo and issued under the I Vignieri label, is superb. The 2014 was fresh, floral and almost oceanic, with great salinity and minerality.

Through his work with Benanti and others, Mr. Foti is spreading the gospel of carricante. One convert is Kevin Harvey of Rhys Vineyards in the Santa Cruz Mountains of California. Around 10 years ago, while traveling in Italy, he tasted the 2001 Pietra Marina.

"The lights went on for me," he said. "It had all the aspects of a truly great white wine: ageworthiness, complexity, completeness. I think carricante is one of the world's great white wine grapes."

Never one not to act on his wine intuitions, Mr. Harvey tracked down Mr. Foti and eventually became a partner in buying and planting the Aeris vineyard. Early bottlings of Aeris show great promise. Full production under the Aeris label should begin next year, Mr. Harvey said.

More exciting for Mr. Harvey than owning a vineyard in Milo is his plan to plant both carricante and nerello mascalese in the mountains of the northwest Sonoma coast. The soils are not volcanic like Etna's, but Mr. Harvey believes the elevation, the proximity to the ocean and the site's diverse rocky soils will be just right for carricante.

"We have so many great soils in California in climates that are too warm for chardonnay or riesling," he said. "Carricante could be a way to make a profound wine in those places."