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Etna Rhapsody

Giuseppe Russo's journey from classical music to melodic Sicilian reds

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At 32, Giuseppe Russo was a classical pianist and doctor of letters who knew nothing about making wine.

Now in his 10th vintage, the soft-spoken, unassuming Sicilian is one of the most acclaimed winemakers on Mount Etna—clearly the top local-born producer of Nerello Mascalese on the volcano's north face.

"For me, Giuseppe is the leader of the area," says Alessio Planeta of Planeta, the sprawling family-run wine company, which located its fifth Sicilian winery on Etna in 2012. "He has the right approach. He is like a poet."

Such high neighborly praise isn't common. But it's clear Russo's winemaking is deserving of the recognition that has spread across Italy to the rest of the world. Three red bottlings of his Girolamo Russo winery's current 2011 vintage, including his entry-level Etna'a Rina (named for his mother) and two single-vineyard *crus*—Feudo di Mezzo and Feudo—earned outstanding ratings in recent *Wine Spectator* blind tastings.

How did he do it?

"I am lucky," Russo says in a near-whisper as he bounces his Citroen compact car through his vineyards, which nestle between black, 30-year lava flows now covered by yellow broom, waist-high wildflowers and small oaks.

Actually, more than luck is involved here.

Eleven years ago, Russo was finishing writing a heady book on Wagner's music in Luchino Visconti's 1972 film *Ludwig*. Then his father, Girolamo, died of a sudden heart attack while working in the family vineyards.

"After my father died, I had to choose to sell or not to sell," Russo says, shrugging. "I decided not to sell."

Russo's dad was a charcoal seller who cultivated grapes to sell in bulk from the family home in Passopisciaro. But as Russo took over, an Etna renaissance was blooming with the first wave of foreigners who began bottling wines that were nothing like the acidic, rustic, local Nerello. Passopisciaro was becoming the center of the scene, and Russo decided to join in.

Russo credits three key Etna transplants with teaching him valuable lessons. From extreme natural winemaker Frank



Robert Camuto

Giuseppe Russo gave up a classical music career to kick the dirt on Mt. Etna.

Letter from Europe

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Cornelissen he learned patience in waiting to pick mature fruit. From Italian-American Marco de Grazia of Tenuta delle Terre Nere he got the idea for single-vineyard *crus*. And from the Roman-by-way-of-Tuscany Andrea Franchetti of Passopisciaro winery, he learned that Nerello could make concentrated wines with evolved tannins.

"They taught me what a great wine is," says Russo. "At first I had no idea, but I slowly learned."

Working out of the cellar in his familial house—an old wine merchant's home and cellar from the 1930s—Russo took on Tuscan enologist Emiliano Falsini, who works for more than 30 independent producers across Italy.

Rather than imposing a wine style, Russo keeps his ego out of the way, working more like a pianist interpreting a score. It is the vineyards that seem to express themselves through wines that are elegant, supple and complex.

Russo, who still lives and works out of the family house and uses the dining room for tastings, now makes more than 4,100 cases per year, including three barrel-aged red *crus* selected from his vineyards of lava sand and fist-sized stones. He works organically, and some of his vineyards are planted on their own roots, without grafting onto the rootstocks that are commonly used to deter vine pests.

Fellow winemakers and those who know him say Russo's success has to do with his meticulous way of working and selecting grapes for his *crus*.

"Whatever Giuseppe does," says his mother, Nerina Russo, a small sunny redhead, "he does to the maximum."

Russo no longer plays the piano, nor does he think much about the world of the arts he left behind.

"I am not an intellectual anymore," he says, a grin creasing his round face and soft features. "I am a farmer."

"My best work," he adds, "is wine."

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Great story, Robert - thanks to you and the Wine Spectator for sharing...

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