

Sicily: The Ultimate East Coast Itinerary for Wine Lovers

Whether you're looking to island-hop or stay on the mainland, we'll show you where to get the best wine and food along Sicily's eastern coast.

BY LAUREN MOWERY



All photos by Lauren Mowery

Sicily is hot. And not just in the summertime. The delights of this Italian island long occluded by affiliation with the Mafia, have attracted renewed attention with its ancient sights, diverse landscapes and gorgeous hotels. But this land mass at the crossroads of ancient seafaring civilizations like the Greeks, Phoenicians, Romans and Arabs, best expresses the indelible marks of peoples and time through food and wine. From the volcanic vineyards of Mount Etna and the market stalls of Ortigia to the homegrown wines and caper farms on Salina, this ultimate itinerary skirts the east coast along paths both well-trodden and seldom seen.



View of Mount Etna

Mount Etna and Taormina

Visitors flock to Sicily's central eastern coast for wine, sea-inflected cuisine and volcano tourism. Fascination with Mount Etna, one of the world's most active volcanoes, is far from a modern phenomenon. In the 3rd century BC, Greeks erected a grand theater that framed the perpetually erupting cone.

Today, this ancient triumph remains largely intact, and it sits next to Taormina's finest hotel, the [Belmond Grand Hotel Timeo](#). In the evening, a stream of sunset-seekers and guests fill the hotel's terrace—the city's swankiest spot—for an *aperitivo* with a volcanic view. But don't fill up on free snacks if you're staying for dinner. A romantic multicourse affair with regional wine pairings may be the city's best.

Unfortunately, this famous town, once a posh haven for the rich and famous, has fallen victim to its own success. Lovely ornate buildings now harbor trinket shops, gelato vendors and global commercial brands, driven largely by mass tourism. Yet, there are still pockets of delight.

For Old World elegance with a sea view, head down to the [Belmond Villa Sant'Andrea](#), Timeo's beachfront property. Local seafood specialties like spiny lobster and spottail mantis shrimp come with a deep wine list curated by a Sicilian sommelier. Centrally located in Taormina, [Osteria Rosso Divino](#) also supplies a hefty Sicilian bottle list. The menu changes based on the day's catch.



Village of Savoca

Just north of Taormina, in the sweet little hilltop town of Savoca, sits Ristorante Gelso Nero. It makes pastas by hand and sell wine for a song. Savoca also has an unusual draw for tourists: It served as backdrop for several *Godfather* scenes.

To visit wineries, the fun begins outside of town. Book a few days amidst the vines at [Monaci delle Terre Nere](#), a wine estate and boutique hotel with its own label, [Guido Coffa](#). The hotel's sommelier has strong opinions about the direction of Mount Etna viticulture and will gladly share them during dinner at its organic restaurant, [Locanda Nerello](#).

The region is surprisingly vast and no simple road allows for expeditious driving. But patience yields one of the many pleasures of Sicily: to smell citrus groves and wildflowers through the car window.



Mount Etna has several unique qualities that lend delicious complexity to the wines. Its slopes are stacked with stone-terraced vineyards that follow old lava flows, delineations known as *contrade*, or crus. Like in Burgundy, where granularity of site provides key differences to wines, the volcanic soil within these terraces differs, due to Etna's constant activity. Wines made yards apart may taste wildly different.

Elevation further exaggerates these differences. Despite its Mediterranean location, Mount Etna has an alpine climate. Finally, the region's calling card grape, Nerello Mascalese, shares traits with Pinot Noir and Nebbiolo. It combines the elegance of the former with the structure and tannins of the latter.

Always call ahead for tasting appointments. A good place to start is in Passopisciaro, at Vini Franchetti winery. One of the original drivers of the *contrade*, its lineup provides a fascinating exercise in understanding Nerello's capacity for transparency.

Benanti, oft-considered a founding father of the Etna industry, has changed its style to focus on the elegant side of Nerello. For a sense of local history, walk through Pietradolce's century-old organic vineyard.

Mount Etna viticulture doesn't just encompass red wine. The region of Milo has far more rainfall than elsewhere on the volcano, a climate in which the indigenous white grape Carricante thrives. Barone di Villagrande has proven a master with it.

If you prefer not to navigate, drive or make appointments, hire Etna Wine Lab. It organizes custom tours and ensures samples of Etna's neon-green pistachios and local cherries.



Additional Mt. Etna Wineries

Cottanera: Book ahead for a tour of the vineyard and winery, followed by a tasting. Nerello Mascalese provides the backbone for tannic, burly reds intended for aging.

Tenuta di Fessina: Modern Italian design inhabits this restored lava stone winery. Book one of several experiences, from a picnic in the vineyard to a blind tasting with other local wines. There's a lovely guesthouse on-site, too.

Tornatore: A label you'll frequently find on lists around Sicily, the brand was founded by a well-funded, ambitious family. Taste by appointment in the rustic stone tavern or pop into the cellar.

Palmento Costanzo: A husband-and-wife team own this newly renovated estate that boasts beautiful views of the vineyards. They offer different tasting experiences though don't miss the rosé.



Salina

Salina, Aeolian Islands

Not many Americans go here, which is why you should.

A speck in the Tyrrhenian Sea, Salina is part of the Aeolian Islands, located north of Sicily that's accessible via ferry from Milazzo. The archipelago's name derives from Aeolus, the keeper of the winds in Greek mythology, an homage thrown into sharp relief during the rough sail to port.

Ferries dock in Santa Marina, a white-washed town evocative of Greece. While it's an island, Salina is not for beach lovers. Rather, steep terrain invites outdoor enthusiasts who pour off boats clad in hiking gear. It also attracts wine lovers in search of a far-flung opportunity to taste the rare and unusual.

Salina is lush, wild, and raw. Vineyards and caper farms descend from the island's two extinct volcanoes in a quilt-like patchwork. Despite its small footprint, Salina yields a surprising density of wine, food, and views. And if you relish solitude by the sea, well, there's plenty of that.



Capofaro Locanda & Malvasia

Base yourself at [Capofaro Locanda & Malvasia](#). Simple rooms with expansive balconies encourage guests to linger with a glass of wine, as they spy for volcanic fireworks from distant Stromboli. At night, specialty cocktails by the pool precede a wine-paired dinner by experienced chef Ludovico De Vivo.

For an authentic winery experience, head to [Hauner](#). Many believe that the family restored the legacy of the island's wine production, starting in the late 1960s. Their core lineup tastes of the landscape. Organically farmed wines brim with crisp saline, mineral tang. They're full-flavored but not full-bodied. In addition to Malvasia, Hauner works with local grapes Inzolia and Catarratto.

However, the island's most recognizable label, Didyme, is produced by [Capofaro Locanda & Malvasia](#) itself, which also maintains a vibrant vineyard. It's owned by the [Tasca d'Almerita family](#), known for their estates across Sicily. Capofaro is the family's tribute to the heritage of Malvasia delle Lipari, or the historical white wine of the islands.

Traditionally, producers turned Malvasia into a sweet delicacy, as they often dried grapes outdoors to concentrate their sugar. With today's popularity for dry wines, producers now offer both styles. But despite its long history, production is tiny, and wine tasting is just a sliver of the Salina experience.

To visit the island's towns, rent a car or moped. In Lingua, have lunch and people watch on the terrace at Da Alfredo's. The owner's almond and pistachio granita and *pane cunzato*, a focaccia-like bread topped with fresh, seasonal ingredients from tuna, almond-caper pesto, to smoked ricotta, are legendary.

Have dinner at [Porto Bello](#) near the ferry dock. Eat red prawn crudo and drink from the reasonably priced wine list.

At sunset, hike down to a favored spot of locals on the rocks just below Pollara, where the breathtaking cliffs resemble the emerald-and-iron hues on the Nā Pali Coast of Kauai.



Dimora delle Balze

Noto, Marzamemi and Ortigia

Sicily's southeast presents a trove of food and wine against a backdrop of architecture, history and seascapes. To explore these distinctions, stay in different locations. In the countryside near Baroque-era Noto, spend a few nights at [Dimora delle Balze](#). This 19th-century farmhouse has been restored into an elegant resort. Its striking decor caters to lovers of high-end, contemporary Italian design.

Filled with limestone masterpieces, Noto's hilltop location is made for sunset strolls. As dusk approaches, buildings along the Corso Vittorio Emanuele, strategically aligned to catch the light, glow like embers burn within them.

In contrast to touristy Taormina, Noto, a [UNESCO](#)-protected town rebuilt after Sicily's devastating earthquake in 1693, transports visitors to an era before mass travel. The streets bustle with old men who smoke and gossip, while women dart into *macellerias* and *pasticcerias*. Shops brim with both visitors and locals, with ceramicists, cobblers and wine bars interspersed throughout town.

A fine dining offer can be found at [Ristorante Crocifisso](#). Book in advance for inventive Sicilian fare served in a slick, minimalist space. The wine list leans organic, offbeat and natural. Another open is to a stool at the bar in stylish [Manna](#), where Sicilian classics receive contemporary riffs and the fairly priced wine list is dense with Italian labels.



Nature Reserve of Vendicari

During aperitivo hour, skip the spritz on the Corso and head to [Anche gli Angeli](#). This cool concept store/bar/eatery is housed inside a series of vaulted brick rooms, and it transports diners to urban [Rome](#).

It's a rite of passage to snack on treats from Caffè Sicilia. An old-school dessert shop from 1892, the simple interior belies the dedication to fresh ingredients that drive its gelato and granita flavor. Otherwise, hit Pasticceria Mandolfiore. Two words: ricotta granita.

East of Noto lies the coast. Sicily's seldom revered for its beaches, but the [Nature Reserve of Vendicari](#) offers quiet, clean spots for swimming. It also sells its own craft beer, which can be purchased and enjoyed on the path to the beach. If you've got a few hours, follow the turquoise coastline to the abandoned tuna processing factory ("tonnara") and museum, or hike nature trails to spot a flamboyance of flamingoes.

After a dip, head 15 minutes south to seaside Marzamemi. Packed with locals and Italian vacationers, few Americans have discovered this sun-bleached gem. A fishing village and site of another defunct tonnara, Marzamemi houses atmospheric restaurants, bars and retail shops that peddle seafood delicacies. Grab a few jars of tuna and salted cured roe, known as *bottarga*, then settle in for lunch at [La Cialoma](#), set in an old stone house trimmed in powder blue. Sit at a table that faces the 18th century piazza or on the breezy terrace that overlooks the Mediterranean. There, order the grilled fish, red prawns and pasta *con le sarde* (sardines) with a bottle of Catarratto.



Noto

Not even Noto's beauty can prepare you for the splendor of Ortigia, an island connected by two bridges to Syracuse. Called the "White Pearl of Siracusa" for its luminescent buildings, this den of rustic beauty will trigger a photo spree around every medieval bend.

Ortigia deserves several days as the island overflows with drinking and eating opportunities. Book [Ortea Palace](#), a newly debuted luxury property, as your base. Peruse food stalls mounded high with eggplants and sea urchin on Via de Benedictis. Record video of the sandwich "genius" at [Caseificio Borderi](#) before you try into an overstuffed original. Wander past the Temple of Apollo, and land at [Monzù Sicily](#) for granita and espresso. Gawk at a Caravaggio inside [Chiesa di Santa Lucia alla Badia](#).

The [Duomo di Siracusa](#), a palimpsest of architecture and history, will be the star of your Instagram feed. In the evening, grab a seasonal cocktail at BOATS. Or settle in for Sicilian wine, craft beer and excellent antipasti platters that heap with mortadella at Évoe Wine Bar. Sleep, eat, drink, repeat.

Logistics

[La Rosa Works Sicily Tours and Travel](#): Owner Karen La Rosa knows Sicily. She's visited every restaurant and hotel she recommends. Whether you seek wineries, or olive oil producers, the smallest of guest houses or grandest hotels Sicily can offer, LaRosa can point you in the right direction. She runs tours and designs custom programs.

Sicily Wine Reviews from Italian Editor, Kerin O'Keefe

[Franchetti 2015 Red Terre Siciliane; \\$145, 95 points](#). Aromas suggesting underbrush, toast, dark spice and camphor slowly take shape in the glass. The taut palate offers red cherry, pomegranate, clove and pipe tobacco framed in refined, rather austere tannins and vibrant acidity. Give this time to unwind and fully develop. Drink 2022–2035. T. Edwards Wines Ltd. *Cellar Selection*.

[Pietradolce 2014 Barbagalli Rosso \(Etna\); \\$94, 94 points](#). Made from pre-phylloxera Nerello Mascalese vines, this compelling wine boasts enticing scents of blue flower, exotic spice, menthol and wild berry. It's dense and concentrated but also elegant,

delivering mouthfuls of black cherry marinated in spirits, raspberry compote, licorice and well-integrated oak. Firm, close-grained tannins provide the tight framework. Drink 2019–2029. Empson USA Ltd.

Cottanera 2015 Rosso Diciassettesalme (Etna); \$20, 90 points. Aromas of forest floor, scorched earth, dark spice and a toasted note lift from the glass. The aromas follow through to the palate along with dried morello cherry, grilled sage and a hint of coconut while close-grained tannins provide support. Indigenous Selections.

Tenuta di Fessina 2015 Laeneo Nerello Cappuccio (Sicilia); \$20, 90 points. Made entirely with Nerello Cappuccio, this opens with aromas of wild red berry, Mediterranean scrub, grilled herb and a whiff of dark baking spice. It's elegant and savory, delivering flavors of raspberry compote, juicy Marasca cherry, white pepper and star anise alongside polished tannins. It closes on a smoky mineral note. Leonardo LoCascio Selections. The Winebow Group.

Tornatore 2015 Etna Rosso; \$20, 92 points. Intense, wild red-berry, Mediterranean scrub and dark spice aromas mingle together on the nose. The elegant palate mirrors the aromas, evoking juicy red cherry, crushed raspberry, camphor and star anise, while a mineral note wraps up the finish. It's well balanced, with fresh acidity and polished tannins. Drink through 2021. Lux Wines. *Editors' Choice.*

Tasca d'Almerita 2014 Il Tascante Nerello Mascalese (Sicilia); \$50, 93 points. Enticing scents of blue flower, rose, wild berry and Mediterranean herb aromas take shape in the glass. On the elegantly structured palate, bright acidity accompanies raspberry compote, juicy cherry and star anise alongside firm polished tannins. A flinty mineral note lingers on the close. Della Terra Winery Direct.



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Lauren Mowery is an award-winning writer, photographer, and blogger who has contributed wine- and spirits-related travel content to publications like Fodors.com, Lonely Planet, Voyeur (Virgin Australia's inflight publication), *Forbes*, *USA Today*, *Men's Journal* and *TimeOut*, among others. Pursuing her Master of Wine certification, she has also been a regular wine and spirits writer for *Tasting Panel*, *Somm Journal*, *Punch* and *SevenFifty Daily*. Mowery is a graduate of the University of Virginia and Fordham Law School, and transitioned from a Manhattan law career to wine via a role with the wine group at Gilt Taste. Today, she spends nearly six months of her year on the road. **Email: lmowery@wineenthusiast.net**