

# in the shadow of VULCAN

VOLCANO WINES ARE – AHM – REALLY HOT STUFF AT THE MOMENT. YET THERE IS A GOOD DEAL OF CONTROVERSY OVER HOW TO DEFINE THEM AND WHY THEY TASTE LIKE THEY DO. **DARREN SMITH** SIFTS THE PUMICE FROM THE POMACE

Frank Cornelissen would seem to have a lot to answer for. When the Etna winemaker released his top cuvée, 'Magma', for the first time in 2001 – a wine so earthily, spicily eccentric that not even counting its volcanic origin it would have turned heads – the mystique of the volcano was thrust to the fore of the wine enthusiast's mind.

There's an irony here, because Cornelissen himself has very little time for 'volcanic wine' as a discrete category. Just as it's not possible to have a definitive limestone wine or clay (the soil, not the pot) wine, he says, neither is it possible to have a wine that is definitively volcanic.

## Forged in fire

'Imagine if you asked a Burgundy winemaker the same question. It depends so much on the specific variables,' he rightly points out. 'Concentration of grapes, vinification – as well as the mysteries of every individual site, [whether it's] La Tâche, Romanée-Conti, Richebourg, or here in the northern valley of Etna – Barbaresco [the contrada from which grapes for Magma are sourced], Guardiola, Marchesa...'

'I have chosen for the northern valley of Etna as it is potentially a winemaking area for great wines – wines with elegance, density, profoundness and personality. It is not [any] singular soil characteristic which makes this valley special.'

This is undeniably true – of Etna or any other wine region for that matter – but that hasn't stopped a huge, yes, I'll say it, eruption of interest in wines of volcanic origin, interest which in the past year or two seems to have cooled and solidified into a positive trend. Any restaurant with pretensions to having its finger on the pulse will have an Etna Nerello Mascalese or a Santorini Assyrtiko listed these days.

But on top of that, we're now seeing more obscure volcanic regions popping up – regions like Pantelleria in Sicily, the Azores in Portugal, Tenerife and La Palma in the Canaries, Somló and Badacsony in Hungary – bringing new stories, distinctive native grape varieties... and some beautiful wines.

Further confirming the trend, this year also marked the publication of the first real reference book on volcanic wine – Canadian Master Sommelier John Szabo's *Volcanic Wines: Salt, Grit and Power*. This book has garnered plenty of attention and praise in wine circles, even winning the 2016 André Simon drinks book prize.

Let's hold our geological horses though. We all know the wine world loves a trend, but given what the likes of Cornelissen say, how exactly do we define a volcanic wine? When you think about it, it raises

**'IT IS NOT ANY SINGULAR SOIL CHARACTERISTIC WHICH MAKES THIS NORTHERN VALLEY OF ETNA SPECIAL'**  
**FRANK CORNELISSEN**

PHOTO: PHILIP WILKES

many questions. Is it in the taste? The texture? What impact does the soil actually have? Does it necessarily have to contain lava rock, or pumice, or can it be totally degraded material? Does it matter if the volcano has been extinct for a gazillion years?

Perhaps the best place to start to answer such questions is with those well-grounded individuals, the geologists.

Charles Frankel is one such with a special interest in wine. He was one of the speakers at last year's first ever 'Volcanic Wines' seminar at the Institute of Masters of Wine. Like Cornelissen, he's dismissive of the idea that wines can be definitively volcanic.

### Finesse and tension

'Actually, one cannot distinguish characteristic, global features for "volcanic wines"', he says. 'The notion of terroir brings together the texture and chemical nature of the ground and soil, relief and its influence on a larger scale (elevation, slope, orientation, rain shadowing, wind amplification), regional climate and local microclimate, the grape cultivars developed and selected on that specific site, and winemaking habits.'

'With so many variables, each volcanic region and its wines are thus unique. Each volcano has its own wine suite, hinging on its particular chemistry (basic or acidic/alkaline), its own soil texture (loose pumice or scoria, sandy, clay-rich, or bedrock lava), its own microclimate and its own cultivars.'

Is that game over then? As you were? Just another emperor's new clothes story no sooner told than forgotten?

Well, no. There certainly appear to be more or less consistent, positive characteristics coming from volcanic soil that are not easily attributable to other factors.

Even Cornelissen grudgingly acknowledges that, depending on all the other influences, 'finesse and tension' are common ingredients to wines of volcanic origin, along with a 'light smokiness'. Frankel, too, has noted some striking observations – the peppery nature of Gamay being enhanced by the basalt of the Auvergne and the earthy character of Etna red, for example.

Few would deny, either, that there is

## ME AND MY MAGMA

Some top somms tell us what they think about volcanic wines, who their faves are and how they go about selling them

### Heidi Nam Knudsen, wine director, Nopi and Ottolenghi (opened in 2011 with a volcanic wines section)

'We are lucky enough to have guests with open minds and a curiosity to taste things that they may not be familiar with already. Having them on the list as a separate section has given us an opportunity to talk more about them. I love Les Pierre Noires from Jean Maupertuis in Auvergne. This is made from a local grape variety called Gamay d'Auvergne. I'm also a big fan of the wines from Lamoresca, San Michele di Ganzaria in Sicily.'



### Jonathan Kleeman, head sommelier, Social Eating House

'Volcanos are just never boring to talk about and evoke such great imagery when you talk to customers about the terroir of wines, which come from so many different regions from Alsace to Washington State. There has been a great response to volcanic wines from customers regularly looking for wines from Etna and Santorini, as well as the more unusual wines like Zidarich Vitovska from Friuli in Italy.'



### Giovanni Ferlito, head sommelier, The Ritz London (who also co-owns a wine brand, Monterosso, making wines on Etna)

'On Mount Etna the volcanic character is even more pronounced thanks to the high altitude which gives wines incredible freshness, especially the white wines coming from the south east slopes of the volcano facing the Ionian Sea. People are interested by volcanic wines probably because they are fascinated by the idea of wine coming from a place where extreme viticulture takes place. Also there is more interest in diversity and re-discovering indigenous grapes.'



### Matteo Montone, head sommelier, London Edition

'I find volcanic wines very interesting: although coming from different regions or grape varieties they share similar characteristics – high, refreshing acidity, steely minerality and savouriness. Etna and Santorini wines are certainly the proof of it. Guests start to be engaged with this category of wines once we tell them the peculiarity of the story of the region, what the features of the terroir are and why the perception on the palate is as it is – so volcanic.'



also a distinct 'minerality', if you'll allow this dubious descriptor (Szabo prefers 'umami' – a savoury more than a fruit component). Admittedly, most of these observations are anecdotal, however Olivier Humbrecht MW of Domaine Zind-Humbrecht in Alsace is one of the few winemakers to have done rigorous scientific analysis to determine the effects of volcanic soil on his wines.

'Volcanic wine in Alsace? Really?' you may be thinking. *Bah ouais* – the small

grand cru of Rangen in Thann from which Humbrecht produces his Clos St Urbain Riesling and Pinot Gris is a rocky vineyard area of decomposed tuff and andesite (volcanic) material.

Humbrecht's laboratory analysis over two vintages found that ash (sugar-free dry extract, used as a measure of mineral content) was consistently more than 20% higher in his Rangen wines than in any others. He points out that there is a huge variety of volcanic soil types. Some have

a ready capacity to decompose – tuffs and andesite like in the Rangen, for example – others may take much longer.

'Depending on the material they contain,' Humbrecht says, they all can produce a small quantity of interesting clay, which is necessary to stabilise the minerals. Usually they have a high content of certain elements like magnesium and potassium [although the opposite is the case on Santorini, for example], and very little calcium.

'Depending on their age, origin and erosion factors, they can be extremely poor soils or quite fertile ones. They all usually have very high mineral content. This shapes up wines that have usually slightly higher pH, which increases the "saltiness" effect on the palate. They also usually have higher ash content.'

'My only proof is that the same grape grown on different soil types – volcanic, limestone, granite – and grown the same way will consistently develop the same flavour profile on each soil type year after

him latitude to write about regions as seemingly diverse as Napa, Oregon, Maule, Itata, Alsace and Veneto.

It's interesting to remind ourselves here, though, of the geologist's definition of volcanic soil. To a geologist, volcanic materials are those that have emerged out of the earth: if the material wasn't erupted it's not volcanic, it's 'intrusive'. But if one is going to include 'intrusive' materials as part of volcanic terroir, that moves us into the realms of rocks like granite, which means regions like Beaujolais, Dão, Amador and many more sit under the volcanic umbrella.

### Balance of terroir

Former Soave consorzio oenologist Giovanni Ponchia has to bear some responsibility for the birth of the volcanic wines category – he and consorzio director Aldo Lorenzoni launched the first major forum of volcanic wines in 2009. Yet even he remains somewhat on the fence about definitions.

'It's a difficult challenge, this one,' he says. 'Talking about intrusive and extrusive, this could be a first division. Then, I imagine that the definition will include a minimum of volcanic material,

## 'YEAR AFTER YEAR, THE GRAPES GROWN ON VOLCANIC SOIL HAVE THIS DISTINCTIVE FLINTY, SMOKY, SALTY CHARACTER' OLIVIER HUMBRECHT MW

year, and yes, [wines from] volcanic soil do have this distinctive flinty, smoky, salty character,' he confirms.

### The volcanic umbrella

Saltiness is also a common thread for Szabo. In his book he refers to a 'weightless gravity', a subtle power, concentration and longevity, and very much more of a savoury aspect to the wines than a fruity one. Indeed, he tells me his current research in focusing in this direction – that is, into the 'salty' aspect of volcanic wines.

Where does that leave us? Neither fully here nor fully there, sadly. There is huge variation: not one volcanic wine, but many. Indeed, Szabo, who for now is the only textbook authority on the subject, freely admits in his preface to his work that there is 'no such thing as volcanic wine', only 'volcanic wines' – this giving

ie 60-70%, inside the soil.

'The most revealing research would be that which is able to put in relation the various compounds in the different volcanic soils and the relative presence inside the wines produced. Volcanic rocks are rich in silicon, iron and magnesium, [which are] not so plentiful in other kinds of soils.'

So there, for the time being, we are. The lack of satisfactory definition may leave those of a reductive mind-set disappointed, but if the 'volcanic wines' category continues to engage trade and consumers with the idea of terroir – which is, after all, the *ne plus ultra* of most self-respecting winemakers – and if it continues to draw attention to the viticultural importance of these extraordinary regions and the amazing wines they produce, it's surely worth continuing to stoke the volcanic fire. 🍷

## LAVA ACTUALLY

Top five wines from lesser-known volcanic regions.

### 1 Marco de Bartoli Pietranera 2015, Pantelleria

A lean, limpid Zibibbo (muscat) with spring time notes of lychee, candied lime, white peach and bergamot. The palate is far more mineral than fruity – with a fine, cleansing, mineral freshness. Apéro-style at only 12% abv. £18.72, *Les Caves de Pyrene*, 01483 538820



### 2 Azores Wine Co Tinto Volcanico 2015, Azores

Made from a blend of Aragonês, Agronómica, Castelão, Malvarisco, Merlot, Touriga Nacional, Saborinho, Syrah and others on very rocky, infertile volcanic soil in the middle of the Atlantic. Pale in colour with red cherry, iodine and spicy clove notes on the nose. The palate is fresh with some savouriness and fine-grained tannins. £12.75, *Red Squirrel*, 020 3490 1210



### 3 Tornai Grofi Juhfark 2015, Somló

This Juhfark (native Somló grape) is from the best plots of Tornai's Grófi vineyard. Late-harvested fruit aromas. Honey, ripe melon, ginger and walnut. An oak-rich and creamy palate is cut through with fine acidity and an 'iron fist in a velvet glove' mineral streak. £19.99, *Witness Mountain*, trade@witnessmountain.com



### 4 Envinat Benje Blanco 2016, Tenerife

The first ever vintage of Benje Blanco, which has become a cult wine as a red, always sold on allocation since it was first released. Made with old-vine Listan Blanco at 1,000m altitude in Santiago del Teide. A bit of skin contact but this remains a pure, linear, saline, citrus-pithy, mineral wine. £13.90, *Indigo Wines*, 020 7733 8391

### 5 Le Coste 2014

Earthy, cinnamon spiced, savoury, strawberry, watermelon, red cherry, stunning texture, fine line of acidity. A volcanic red to be reckoned with. £27.08, *Tutto Wines*, info@tuttowines.com