

## **July 2023: Island Hopping – Sardinia vs Corsica**

When we chose the theme for July's Wine Club case, our rationale behind the choice was not only the exciting wines to be found there and to potentially give you all some summer holiday destination inspiration, but we also sought to compare and contrast the two islands, to explore the differences between them.

However, in the process of our research, we came to realise that the two are not as different as we initially thought. In fact, we found that if you hopped from one island to the other, you could be forgiven for thinking that you hadn't gone as far off the beaten track as you'd expected. The two islands have a shared cultural history, with links that date back to the Bronze Age, and much of Southern Corsica and Northern Sardinia share a similar dialect. The people of the two regions are able to understand one another (passably) much like the Danes and Swedes can, who are separated only by the Malmo Bridge.

Therefore, instead of focussing on their differences, it is perhaps far more intriguing to focus on how similar they are, not only in their culture, heritage and climate, but also in the style and character of the wines they produce. Read on and you'll soon realise why we came to think of Corsica and Sardinia as two sides of the same coin.

Corsica and Sardinia are located to the west of Italy in the Mediterranean Sea, so it will come as no surprise that the two islands have what we call in the business, a Mediterranean climate. This is characterised by long growing seasons with consistent warm temperatures, which means that the grapes reach full ripeness by harvest, leading to full-flavoured and expressive wines. The winter months can see a drop in temperature but this also brings much-needed rain to replenish the soils ready for the next growing season. Both islands also experience near constant sea breezes, which ensure good air circulation around the vineyards preventing rot and other viticultural diseases - so all in all, their climate is more than ideal for viticulture.

While the two islands' red grape varieties are quite diverse (more on that later), they do share a white variety in common - Vermentino. Northern Sardinia is home to Vermentino di Gallura, an iconic wine, and the namesake of the island's first (and only) official DOCG. And on Corsica, plantings of the variety make up 15% of the island's vineyards. The two islands do have a contrasting style of Vermentino, however, with Sardinia producing zesty and fresh expressions, while Corsica leans towards a more herbal style.

Now the red varieties are where some of the differences are to be found. Sardinia, despite being Italy's second largest island (after Sicily), has stronger historical links to Spain. For a long time, it was governed from Spain and as a result many of the distinctive local varieties actually have strong Spanish roots: varieties such as Bovale Sardo (Graciano), Bovale Grande (Mazuelo), and, famously, Cannonau (Garnacha) are all Spanish in origin. Corsica, on the other hand, despite being governed by France today, has much stronger viticultural links to Italy, with winemaking on the island dating all the way back to the Romans. The two grape varieties which form the backbone of Corsican reds are Nielluccio and Sciaccarello. The former is a very close cousin of Tuscany's iconic variety, Sangiovese, and produces robust, tannic wines which have been likened to those of the Rhone. The latter is fragrant, more elegant and delicate but brings with it huge ageing potential, in a style said to be reminiscent of Red Burgundy.

One last thing we discovered on the course of our research, was that not only did the two islands share a cultural history, climate and grape varieties, but that they are also geologically linked. The two islands, you'll notice, are incredibly close together – the southern tip of Corsica almost in contact with the northern edge of Sardinia, separated only by the Strait of Bonifacio. However, thousands of years ago the two islands were physically connected by a narrow sandbar, also known as an 'Isthmus'. Inhabitants used this to cross from



one island to the other, bringing into reality the idea of 'island hopping' – no boats required! It is also thought that the islands were also linked in a similar way to the mainland of Italy at the Tuscan coast, which goes some way to explain Italy's influence not only upon Sardinia but also Corsica.

Both of the islands have a distinctive Mediterranean character, heavily influenced by France, Spain and Italy, which we truly believe is reflected in their wines: stubborn, wild and strongly bonded to their traditions and terroir. And both of the islands are criminally underexplored – which is a crying shame if you ask us, as there is such a wide variety of wines there waiting to be discovered. If you are looking for something traditional and familiar, it's probably best you look elsewhere. However, we trust you're an intrepid lot and would like to experience some more unusual wines – so this month's case is certainly the place to start!

## **Sardinia**

### **2021 Cannonau Naracu, Vigne Surrau - 13.5%, £23.99**

Vigne Surrau was founded in 2001, just a few kilometres from the iconic Costa Smeralda at the northern end of the island.



The vineyards are bathed in sunshine and cooled by coastal breezes. Their reds have a distinctively Mediterranean feel; they are savoury with classic notes of garrigue herbs and spices.

We couldn't have a Sardinian case without including a Cannonau – this is the main red grape of the island and is otherwise known as Garnacha. So those of you who like your Spanish reds are bound to enjoy this one. This wine is named 'Naracu' after the fortresses built by the ancient civilisations of the Mediterranean and some can still be found on the island to this day.

The grapes for this wine are sourced from 20-to-30-year-old vines and are vinified in stainless steel to retain all the red fruit flavours classic to the variety. This is a fresh and juicy red packed with flavours of blackberries and strawberries, accompanied by those classic savoury notes of dried herbs, rosemary and thyme. This is a great red to pair with grilled red meats, barbecued vegetables such as aubergine and peppers. We'd also recommend trying it slightly chilled, especially on the hotter days this summer – it is so refreshing!

## 2021 Vermentino di Sardegna Tarra Noa, Saraja - 14%, £20.99

The Saraja winery overlooks the sea, and houses the latest technology and winemaking facilities. The estate is a relatively new project, with construction of the seaside winery only having been completed this year. The winemaking team, headed up

by Mark Hartmann and renowned Italian consultant winemaker Federico Curtaz, has their roots in northern Italy, in Valle d'Aosta, but they have a shared belief in the potential for wine greatness that Sardinia has to offer. The estate consists of 49 hectares of vineyards in nearby Gallura DOCG, which is the heartland of Vermentino, the mainstay of Saraja's production.

The Vermentino grapes for this wine are sourced entirely from the Gallura region – where the vines are grown on southern facing slopes of Guyot trellises at around 350 metres above sea

level. After harvest, the grapes are gently pressed and the pure juice is fermented at low temperatures in stainless steel in order to retain the pure fruit flavours and freshness of the grapes. After fermentation, the wine spends up to 6 months on lees, which adds depth and complexity to the final wine.

This is a Sardinian classic – bright citrus aromas on the nose with delicate floral hints and lightly savoury characteristics. The palate fresh with a zip of acidity combined with notes of lemon zest and a touch of stone fruit. Beautiful minerality with a ripe and rounded finish. Rather unsurprisingly, we'd recommend this with seafood, but also a simple dish of spaghetti dressed with good olive oil, garlic and lemon zest would be utter perfection.

## 2021 Saragat Monica, Cantina Atzei - 14%, £21.99

Cantina Atzei is one of the newer winery projects in Sardinia, with the winemaking team led by Dennis Verdicchia and Sardinian winemaker Daniele Manca. They produce high quality wines from a small selection of vineyards around the village of Mogoro in the south-western part of the island. Their aim is to produce wine using lesser-known varieties and to introduce them to as many people as possible to enjoy outside of Sardinia.

The 'Saragat' Monica is made from the indigenous grape variety of the same name, which are sourced from bush-trained vineyards located close to the village Mogoro, in the Alta Marmilla sub-region of southern Sardinia. In this region, the soils are deep and predominantly sand, which aids drainage and helps to retain heat, producing highly aromatic wines. Cantina Atzei follows an incredibly strict selection process in the vineyards at harvest, ensuring that only the very best fruit is picked, and the resulting wines display excellent flavour concentration. After harvest, the grapes undergo a 10-day maceration and soft pressing, followed by fermentation at temperatures between 26 and 28 degrees. The wine is then aged for 6 months in a combination of concrete and French oak barriques.

The 'Saragat' Monica is a brilliant ruby red with flecks of purple. It has intense notes of ripe red cherries and plum with a hint of baking spice on the palate, which shows great balance being underpinned by silky tannins and a great depth of dark fruit flavours. This makes a great match for pulled pork, or slightly spicy dishes such as Penne all'arrabbiata.

## Corsica

## 2021 Domaine Fiumicicoli Blanc, Corse Sartène - 13%, £22.99

Domaine Fiumicicoli is a family-run estate which was established back in 1964. Félix Andreani and his son Simon, tend the vineyards together, making use of time-honoured traditions and 'old-fashioned' cultivation methods, such as hand-harvesting, which are respectful of the surrounding environment. The vineyards are situated in the heart of the Corse Sartène appellation

in the south of Corsica, on slopes just inland from the coast which benefit from cooling sea breezes and a cooler mountain climate, which preserves the freshness of their Vermentino grapes.

This is a typically fresh and aromatic example of Corsican Vermentino, with scents of fennel and herbal notes of lemon balm. It is elegant and lush, with flavours of ripe apricot with wonderful balance and minerality with a zesty and pithy finish. Bright and flavoursome, this would be perfect paired with grilled fish or chicken, all manner of seafood or a spring vegetable risotto.

### **2021 Corse Sartène Rosé, Domaine Fiumicicoli - 13%, £21.99**

Sciaccarello is a red grape variety indigenous to Corsica, and mostly found on the areas of island underlain with granite. It is incredibly well-suited to making structured wines which are age-worthy and yet lends itself rather well to producing delicate rosés too. Notes of pepper, red fruit (raspberries, blackcurrants and redcurrants), almonds and charred peach, while right at home in the tasting notes of a red wine, are just as welcome in their rosé.

The pale pink hue of this wine belies the concentrated, rich textured flavours of peach and raspberry on the palate. The wine also has an intriguing savoury edge to it, with classic notes of garrigue herbs bursting on a palate complemented by summer berry flavours. This well-structured rosé pairs well with shellfish, pan-friend salmon and richly flavoured pasta dishes such as Spaghetti alla Puttanesca. Or simply enjoy by itself, chilled on a warm summer evening.

### **2021 Le Bois du Cerf Rouge, Domaine Vico - 13.5%, £28.99**

Domaine Vico was founded in 1901 by Jean Vico, after purchasing and planting 49 hectares in the north-east of Corsica. However, 80 years later, the winery was no longer in working order and had been left in a dilapidated state. However, two friends, Jean-Marc Venturi and Francois Acquaviva, saw its potential and purchased the ramshackle estate in 1986. They rebuilt the winery, and decided to focus entirely on indigenous grape varieties such as Sciaccarellu, Nielluccio (a.k.a. Sangiovese) and Biancu Gentile. The winemaking team at the domaine have worked hard for the past 37 years, earning Domaine Vico a place among the top producers in Corsica, and were certified biodynamic in 2020.



Domaine Vico's vineyards are situated in the foothills of a high mountain range, north-east of the village of Ponte Leccia, and are the only Corsican vineyards to lie inland from the coast. All the other vineyards on the island hug the shores. The mountainous location (some 300 metres above sea level) and the frequent north-easterly winds (the Mistral) have a cooling influence which helps to retain acidity in the grapes, in turn raising the aromatic intensity of the fruit.

Les Bois du Cerf Rouge is a 50:50 blend of Nielluccio and Sciaccarellu from 30-year-old vines rooted in schist and basalt soils. The grapes are vinified separately in concrete using indigenous yeasts and fermentation lasts 45 days. After this, the separate parcels are blended and aged for a further 12 to 18 months in concrete prior to bottling without fining and with minimal filtration. Bright ruby red in colour, with a herbal and aromatic nose of red cherries and a subtle touch of game. Dense and juicy on the palate, with notes of cherries, black pepper spice, liquorice, and rosemary.

Enjoy with plenty of fresh cheese and charcuterie, or a perfectly cooked Steak-Frites.

**£140.94**

**Case Price: £112.75**

**Wine Club Price: £105**