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how to spend it

An adventure in Sicilian wine: Part One

The volcanic soils and ungrafted vines in Mount Etna's vineyards produce some intense and savoury wines



Forty five minutes north of Catania airport, with clear views of Sicily's Ionian coast to the east and of Mount Etna to the west, is Zash, a converted 1930s manor house surrounded by lemon groves, and a highly recommended starting point for any oenological exploration of the Mediterranean's largest island.

Wine connoisseurs are particularly drawn to this region of Sicily because the vines reach deep into volcanic soils and produce reds and whites that project the geological intensity of their origins immediately onto the palate.

Observing and understanding the concept of terroir is much easier when sampling wines such as these, and Etna's sloping, high-altitude vineyards, ungrafted vines, extended ripening season and small, artisanal production are rapidly gathering a cult following as a result.

Zash, which won the Ischia International Architecture Award, is chic but not pretentious, uncluttered but not stark. Restored by owner Carla Maugeri and architect Antonio Iraci, it has as its director Federica Eccel, who is also consigliera of Strada del Vino dell'Etna (The Etna Wine Route), making her a very useful person to talk to when planning a vineyard tour of the region, and its atmospheric restaurant is situated in a former palmento (wine press room) where many of the original features have been left intact.

Chef Giuseppe Raciti – who worked under Massimo Mantarro at double-Michelin-starred Principe Cerami in Taormina and is one of the final four chefs in the Italian section of the Bocuse d'Or competition – puts together an inventive seasonal menu (starters from €16, pasta and rice dishes from €18, mains from €22, chef's tasting menu from €55 per person), which I at first try alongside Benanti's Pietramarina 2013 Etna Bianco Superiore (£44 for 750ml), still a benchmark for the region's lean, high-acid and penetrating Carricante variety – the Grand Cru Chablis of Etna.

This is followed by a red from one of the early leaders of the modern Etna wine movement, Frank Cornelissen, an uncompromising pioneer of minimal interventionist wine making on the mountain. His MunJebel (£51.30 for 750ml) from Nerello Mascalese, harvested in 2012 and aged in amphorae, has a tangy, sappy, crunchy character that balances red fruits and brick dust, purity and funk, Sturm und Drang, that nearly pulls off its 15 per cent alcohol content.