

# PLANETA

PRESS NEWS

(October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2003)

## Wine Spectator

### ITALY'S NEW GENERATION A bright future in an ancient land

By James Suckling

#### Francesca Planeta

Bringing Sicily to the world

For Francesca Planeta, Sicily often felt like the end of the Earth. Until recently, most people knew very little about her homeland, and even less about the wines sold under her family name from Italy's largest island.

"I traveled around the world years ago and spoke a lot about Sicily, but it was really difficult," says the charming blond, who is half English, half Sicilian. "In the beginning, the doors were closed. Either they said that they already had a Sicilian wine, or they didn't like the wines from the island."



Today, when the 32-year-old arrives at a wine shop or restaurant they almost always know who she is. Planeta has become a superstar in Italian wine, producing blockbuster Chardonnays, Cabernets, Merlots and Syrahs as well as sublime wines from indigenous Italian grapes such as Nero d'Avola and Fiano.

"When we started in the mid-1980s, my father wanted to make an image for Sicily, and people could better understand Chardonnay or Cabernet than (Sicilian white varieties) Cataratto or Grillo or whatever else was at hand in Sicily. Indigenous varieties were still relatively unknown."

However, Francesca, called Chicca by her friends, is now working with her father and cousins to fine-tune wines from local grape types, particularly Nero d'Avola. She and many others believe that the reds from this grape can be world-class, with a distinctive, inimitable style. The Planetas have three vineyards stretching along the south coast of the island, each producing unique reds. Their Santa Cecilia Nero d'Avola cuvee blends grapes from all three sites, in hopes of achieving greater complexity and subtlety.



"Maybe in the past we were more viewed as a white wine producer, or *bianchisti*, but we are now working more and more on our reds," says Planeta during a tasting of Nero d'Avola. "We want to relaunch the indigenous varieties of Sicily on the world market, these weird and wonderful grape types."

The family divides the responsibilities at the winery. Alessio Planeta, Francesca's cousin, is the principal winemaker.

Francesca is active in determining the final blends, but her main role is in sales and marketing. Largely thanks to her, the winery's bottlings boast some of Italy's most beautiful packaging.

From labels graced with a distinctive sun design to stylish brochures and sales materials, Planeta could easily be selling designer clothes or contemporary art in Milan—instead of wines from the outback of Sicily.

Planeta splits her time between the family's offices in Palermo, the winery in Menfi and an apartment/office in Milan, where she lives with her husband, Giampaolo, who works for MTV, and their 8-month-old son, Pietro.

"It gets tiring traveling between Milan and Palermo," she admits. And it leaves her little time to enjoy equestrian or aquatic pastimes, such as skin diving.

"But it is something I have to do."

The Planeta family owns a total of 865 acres of vineyards on the island, divided among four main sites: Sambuca di Sicilia, Menfi, Noto and Vittoria. Most are planted at relatively high altitudes, from 450 to 1,200 feet, to take advantage of the cooler temperatures there.

Annual production is about 100,000 cases; quality is consistently high, and the wines offer excellent value, with the top bottlings selling for about \$40.

"It's incredible to think that we can go to Los Angeles, Chicago and other major cities in the world and they new know us," Planeta says.

"[j]ust 10 years ago that world have been untEinkable. My father always said that you have to never stop and just watch the world go by from your house. You always have to try to do more. So we have looked at France, California, Australia and other pares of the world for inspiration. Thanks what you have to do!"—J.S.