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Interview with Francesca Planeta, Winemaker at Planeta Wines, Sicily, Italy

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Francesca Planeta, of Planeta Wines, was recently in New York at the VinItaly 2011 U.S. Tour, a wine tasting for the American Cancer Society Fundraiser: Leading Women of Italian Wine Unite for a Worthy Cause. Planeta took a break to speak with us about women's changing role in winemaking, climate change, and the diversity of viticulture in Sicily.

Jeff Harding: Since you are here in the midst of other female winemakers, I'd like to ask you about the evolving role of women in the wine world. Historically, women have encountered resistance and prejudice when they enter the wine industry in Europe. Is that something you experienced when you decided to go into the family business?

Francesca Planeta: Well, the fact is that when I started there were not many women in the wine business. It was really a man's world traditionally, especially in Sicily, and I think everywhere in Italy. Women had worked in the country, but never actually worked in the front "cover," let's say. After 17 generations, I was probably the first of my family to actually go out and say, "Hi, here I am! We're the women, and we're working here."

JH: I see you are doing a lot of environmentally sustainable and biodynamic work. Can you tell me about your work in that area? I always hear about biodynamic wine in France, but not so much in Italy. Am I missing it or are things done differently in Italy?

FP: We don't do biodynamic wine, but we do a lot to be sustainable, so there is a bit of a difference. We have a project called Planeta Terra, which is everything that we do to be sustainable. And we are working on a big project of which we are big promoters, which is called SOStain.* We actually try to be as sustainable as possible in every phase of production—not only in the vineyard, but in the winery, in our procedures, and especially in analyzing the environment. You can be sustainable, but in a polluted environment you will never actually, really, be sustainable. So it's a complete cycle we are working on. At the moment we are at the point where we have analyzed all our procedures, and we're working to be 100 percent sustainable.

*editor's note: the SOStain Project is the first Italian environmental certificate program in which wine makers continually improve their production methods towards increasing levels of sustainability. It is modeled after similar programs such as the California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance (CSWA), WineWise in Washington State and Low Impact Viticulture, and Enology (LIVE) in Oregon.

JH: Are you finding any challenges related to climate change and global warming?

FP: [The climate] in Sicily has been more favorable than other parts of Italy or Europe. In fact, we've had a lot of rain in the last five or six years, and then really good winters and summers. Actually, we've had better vintages than maybe 10 years ago, so it's quite incredible. It's raining at the moment in Sicily, and in the north of Italy it's hot and sunny. Climate change certainly is a problem, but it hasn't touched Sicily at the moment.

JH: Tell me about your project to reclaim and re-launch the **Mamertino** wine, the favorite wine of Julius Caesar.

FP: A couple of years ago, we were in touch with a children's foundation that has a beautiful property near Capo Milazzo. They have set aside part of the land for recreation for children, and another big part of the property was practically abandoned, but had olive trees, where originally there were grapes and viticulture. This area is famous for having grown grapes that were made into Mamertino, one of the wines that Julius Caesar used to drink. It's very hard to go back to that time and find out which grapes he drank, but our intention is to bring back the tradition, which is wines produced with Nero d'Avola and Nocera, typical varieties from that region. It's probably not the same as in Roman times, but there is a link to the history of the Mamertino of Julius Caesar.

JH: I find it so interesting that the more advanced we get in winemaking techniques and production, the more people are inspired to go back to the roots of winemaking.

FP: In Sicily in the last 15 years, there's been a lot of research in viticulture. There are 19 different Sicilian varieties that are used to make wine. It is the biggest wine growing region with the most variety in Italy, and there are another eight or 10 ancient varieties being researched to see if they can be made into wine.

JH: How does such a small area like Sicily have such a wide diversity of grapes?

FP: Well, first of all it's not a small area, it's a very big area, but people think it's small. It's

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incredible—the diversity of microclimates that exist in Sicily. You go from Mt. Etna (where you plant at 1,000 meters above sea level, on volcanic soil where it rains all the time) down to Noto (where the best Nero d'Avola is grown on calcareous soils, where it never rains and it's the hottest place in all of Europe). What we've done in the past 20 years is to understand which varieties adapt best to which terroirs. And of course there are some indigenous varieties like Frappato, which, thanks to the research and technology in viticulture, we are able to make into great wine.

JH: You also make olive oil. Is it easier for a winemaker to start a business in pressing oil since it's similar to pressing grapes?

FP: Olive oil production has been in our family forever, at first for family consumption, but since 1999 we actually started bottling it for sale. We have our own factories and mill, and we have 85 hectares of olive trees. I mean it's not as big as the wine business, but in Sicily if you want to be in agriculture, you can only grow three things: tomatoes, olive oil, and wine.

JH: Do you find the strict rules of appellation, the DOC system, to be helpful or a hindrance?

FP: The rules don't help. I think you just confuse the consumer. They do help in terms of quality in viticulture because it guarantees the different terroirs and grapes grown there, but it's very complicated for the consumer to understand. So you need some laws, but they have to be more easily understood by the consumer.

JH: Are you selling to Brazil, China and India?

FP: We are selling and growing in those countries. We are investing in those countries, but of course in some countries like China it's a little harder because there's a different mentality and different culture. But those markets are very important. We go there nearly twice a year because we feel that's where our future is. We work with 75 different countries; we are in 75 countries. But for the future, where we want to grow our business, we are focusing on the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) countries.

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