

Harvest starts very early in Sicily's drought-hit vineyards

August 8 2024, by Gaël BRANCHEREAU



At Contessa Entellina, the company's main estate in the province of Agrigento, there has been almost no rain since May.

On the hills of the Contessa Entellina vineyard in western Sicily, the harvest is already well underway, the grapes ripening earlier than usual

because of drought and high temperatures.

The prestigious Donnafugata vineyards, which span the Italian island from the slopes of Marsala to the mantle of Mount Etna, began their [harvest](#) on July 22, an unprecedented two weeks early.

At Contessa Entellina, the company's main estate in the province of Agrigento, there has been almost no rain since May.

"Between October and the end of July, there has been 35 percent less rain," said Antonino Santoro, the estate's technical director and oenologist.

In 2022, the harvest had already begun on July 29.

The Sicily of myth is a fertile orchard blessed with rivers of pure water, but the modern day Mediterranean island suffers more and more from global warming.

Since the end of spring, water has stopped flowing, the soil and the springs parched.

Farmers here are used to the naturally arid territory, but they are being tested.

Even [citrus fruits](#) and [olive trees](#) are suffering from the drought and scorching temperatures which in 2021 set the European record of 48.8 degrees Centigrade (119.8 Fahrenheit).

Drop by drop



"Before, irrigation was useful, today it is essential," Antonino Santoro said.

With 460 hectares of vines and 3.6 million bottles per year across all its territories, the Donnafugata company has the financial resources to adapt.

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Around Contessa Entellina the estate has installed several retention basins which meet around 75 percent of its irrigation needs, the rest covered by public reserves.

During June and July, it irrigates the vines using a micro-sprinkler

system, which provides water at a rate of four liters per hour per vine.

"The aim is to optimize water use," said Giuseppe Milano, the estate's head of cultivation.

Irrigation is not cheap, costing between 4,000 and 6,000 euros per hectare per year. The average size of an Italian vineyard is 11 hectares.

At the end of July, the Italian government recognized Sicily was facing "force majeure conditions and exceptional circumstances" due to the drought, according to Sicilian authorities.

This eases some EU rules on agriculture and allows farmers to defer payments and charges, the region said, in response to a year-long drought it said was "one of the most serious in the last 50 years".



For the first time, regional authorities have banned working in the fields during the hottest hours of the day, between 12:30 pm and 4:00 pm.

Quantity and quality

Donnafugata takes its name from the fictional town in "The Leopard", the novel by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa set in the area during the unification of Italy in the late 19th century.

Back then, the grape harvest did not begin before September.

As well as irrigation, Contessa Entellina adapts by growing its vines taller, up to 1.5 meters, so the upper foliage serves as a canopy to screen the grapes from the sun.

There is no such shade for the grape pickers, who use pruning shears to harvest the grapes under a blazing sun.

They started at dawn, and by 10:00am it is already 29 degrees Celsius.

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They are now picking the Merlot grapes for red wine. The white Chardonnay ones were picked in July.



Antonino Santoro, oenologist and technical director of Donna Fugata winery smells a glass of red wine during the harvest of merlot grapes in Contessa Entellina.

Depending on the varieties and the terroir, the [grape](#) harvest in Sicily this year will be spread out over three or four months—"a unique situation in Europe", according to national agricultural association Coldiretti.

Contessa Entellina's harvest will be smaller than last year, with smaller grapes.

But Milano insisted that what it lacks in quantity is made up in quality.

Today, Donnafugata is involved in research projects to help prepare the

vines for the evolving conditions.

"I am optimistic," said Santoro. "The vine adapts better than other crops."

It is not just heat that is affecting the harvest.

Last year, a combination of frost and floods in the north and mildew in the south cost the Italian wine industry a quarter of its production—allowing France to take the title of the world's leading wine producer.

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Citation: Harvest starts very early in Sicily's drought-hit vineyards (2024, August 8) retrieved 8 August 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-08-harvest-early-sicily-drought-vineyards.html>

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