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Marsala Wine Tasting in Sicily

Sicily is the largest of the Mediterranean islands and has more vineyards than any other region in Italy. It has 19 DOC regions, with the most prominent producer being the **Marsala** region.

Although Marsala wine has had a rather dubious reputation in the past, there are very good wines being produced other than the inexpensive sweet wine most often associated with cooking.



During a trip to the western part of Sicily in November 2005, we explored the Marsala region to learn more about this interesting fortified wine. Marsala is located in the Trapani province and is 31.5 km from the city of Trapani. Like much of Sicily with its diverse cultural history, it was an enterprising Englishman by the name of John Woodhouse who first started producing wine in Marsala in 1773, as a substitute for port. By 1812, English businessman Benjamin Ingham created Ingham Whitaker & Co. and in 1833, a Sicilian by the name of Vincenzo Florio established Cantine Florio. In 1924, Cinzano bought Florio, and in 1928 they also purchased the Woodhouse and Ingham-Whitaker wineries and combined the three companies into one.

Although there is a Wine Museum, as well as many Cantinas or wine cellars along the Marsala wine trail, we decided to visit one of the most famous, the [Cantine Florio](#). Each year, they receive over 30,000 visitors for their 1-hour tour to learn the history of Marsala wines and then finish the tour with a wine tasting, which demonstrates that Marsala wines are a high-end product suitable as an aperitif. Their guestbook is signed with many famous signatures including that of Benito Mussolini.



We toured the Cantine Florio with the enthusiastic and knowledgeable Mr. Bruno Parisi who entertained us with the long history of Marsala wine, provided us with recipes along the way, and showed us what we believe to be every barrel in the cantine during the course of our very interesting and enjoyable 3-hour tour.

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Two of the more interesting points to note, is that Marsala wines have a very long shelf life of over 100 years, and are one of the few wines that require oxidation. The wine is stored in porous oak barrels that have a wooden cork, but are not sealed, with a small air chamber at the top, as the barrels are not filled to capacity. Marsala wines are DOC wines, can only be produced in Marsala, and are made using three types of grapes: White Grillo, Inzolia and Cataratto, and must be drunk cold.

There are four types of Marsala wines: Fine, Superiore, Riserva and Vergine. Marsala Fine Dry-Sweet is matured for over 1 year in Slavonian Red-Oak casks and has 18% alcohol, the Marsala Superiore is matured for over 2 years in Slavonian Red-Oak casks and has 18% alcohol, the Marsala Superiore Riserva is matured for over 4 years in Slavonian Red-Oak casks and has 19% alcohol and the Marsala Vergine is matured for over 5 years in Slavonian Red-Oak casks and has 19% alcohol.

Fine and Superiore are mainly used in cooking, and are used for cooking white meat: chicken, rabbit and turkey. Riservas are semi-dry, are perfect to accompany sweet desserts like cannoli as well as dried fruit, and should be served between 15 – 16 °C (59 – 60.8°F) in short stemmed tulip-shaped glasses. Vergines are very dry, make very good aperitifs, and should be served at a temperature between 10 – 12 °C (50 – 53.6 °F) in long tulip-shaped glasses. Vergine Marsala wine has an old gold color and is made only with Grillo grapes, which has the highest sugar content of any of the other grapes. Bruno suggested pairing Vergines with Sicilian cheese and olives. He likes to take a creamy Gorgonzola cheese, add a bit of their Vergine Terre Arse, mix well and spread the mixture on bruschetta.

It should be noted though, that Vergines and Riservas are not exported worldwide, although some are exported to England and Denmark to very high-end restaurants. With that in mind, when in Sicily, if you find some exceptional Vergines and Riservas, make sure that you purchase them when you see them, so as not to be disappointed later on.

In 1941, the city of Marsala and Florio were bombed, and as a result, few bottles of the Florio product were saved. Their 1939 Riserva is their oldest vintage, and last May 2005 it received an award. They also have other historical vintages: 1944, 1948, 1963 (Vergine), 1964 (semi-dry) and 1975 (semi-dry). They do not sell historical vintages, but in the future, they may sell a limited amount of bottles, as they now set aside 10-50 bottles whenever they start a new vintage for their museum. Cantine Florio has more than 42,000 bottles in their collection.



After touring the wine cellar and inspecting the barrels, as well as having the rare opportunity to “nose” their 1944 historical vintage barrel, it was time for a wine tasting with Bruno and Vincenzo Massimo, who said that Cantine Florio has “antique traditions with modern passions.”

We tasted their 1992 Baglio Florio, a Vergine made with White Grillo grapes, and matured for over 10 years

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and has 19% alcohol, that was amber in color, with an aromatic, sweet nose and had a hint of vanilla at the back of the palate. We also tasted their 1998 Terre Arse, also a Vergine, aged for 9 years in oak casks, whose name means burnt soil by the sunshine, that was also made from White Grillo grapes. It had a completely different nose than the Baglio Florio, with a very long dry finish. It was complex on the palate, and was lighter and less aromatic. Tasting continued with a 1997 Targa Riserva 1840, made from White Grillo and Inzolia grapes, which was amber colored, with raisins and vanilla on the nose, and was creamy and sweet with essence of honey on the palate. For our last tasting, we tried a 2003 Morsi di Luce, a Vino Liquoroso, made from white Muscat grapes known as Zibibbo, matured in stainless steel for 3 months, and then 10 months in oak casks, and has 15.5% alcohol. This nectar-like wine had honey, vanilla and apricot on the nose, and was creamy with apricot on the palate.

When visiting the western part of Sicily, take time to visit the Cantinas, you won't be disappointed.

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