

Ep 173: The Wines of Sicily with Beatrice Bessi, Head Sommelier of Chiltern Firehouse (Part 1)



Janina Doyle 00:00:07 Welcome to Eat Sleep Wine Repeat, a podcast for all you wine lovers, who, if you're like me, just cannot get enough of the good stuff. I'm Janina Doyle, your host, Brand Ambassador, Wine Educator, and Sommelier. So, stick with me as we dive deeper into this ever evolving, wonderful world of wine. And wherever you are listening to this, cheers to you!

Hello wine friends and welcome back to another episode. So today I'm talking with a CMS advanced sommelier, Beatrice Bessi, who is head somm at the five-star luxury boutique hotel Chiltern Firehouse in London.

Now she's currently working towards her master sommelier qualification, but holds the WSET diploma, is a WSET educator and judges for the Decanter World Wine Awards. This year, she was the winner of the International Wine and Spirits Competition's Emerging Talent in Wine Hospitality Award.

So, with her 20 years of experience in the hospitality industry, I'm finding out more about the Grands Jours de Bourgogne, a wine event that completely changed Beatrice's trajectory entirely to wine. Finding out what it's like to work at the unique and prestigious private members wine club 67 Pall Mall, and especially alongside the likes of Master Sommelier Ronan Sayburn.

We are talking about the challenges of being a sommelier to the joys of recommending hidden gems on wine lists and focusing on the wines of Sicily this episode. So, you'll find out why we think Cerasuolo di Vittoria should be this year's summer sipper. We'll be talking about Sicily's native grapes like Nerello Mascalese and Nero d'avola, the volcanic soils of Mount Etna, talking about the natural wine scene over there, and the incredible sweet wine called Passito di Pantelleria. And well, so much more, so just pour yourself a glass of wine, unwind and enjoy!

Janina Doyle 00:02:19 Okay. So, I really want to dive straight in. You mentioned to me about this incredible wine trip that you did from Italy, where you are from originally, all the way, I think in a car to Burgundy and with a five-year-old daughter, right? So, what was the motivation here?

Beatrice Bessi 00:02:39 Oh, God. So, I was still the restaurant manager of a one Michelin star restaurant in Italy, definitely not in my region. I was living in Padua at that moment and I had a five years old daughter at the moment. And I definitely started to feel suffocated by my role in a way that the wine was probably there when I started to realise I wanted to pursue just that part of the industry after 18 years doing other jobs and other roles in hospitality.

And so, it was the first time I could manage to be away for a few days. Obviously, thinking about spending that amount of money. And after I separated from her father, it was the first time where I have a position, I have a nice salary. It's hard, but I'm working it out. So, let's do this. So I always loved Burgundy. It was definitely probably the first region that I fell in love with after Barolo, Piedmont. So, they're probably the two regions that made me jump.

So, I was like, you come up on your phone and you see there is this amazing open kind of affair that is called the Grands Jours de Bourgogne and is happening every pair year? So not every year. And I was like, you know what, I don't know what it is, but I'm going to go.

Janina Doyle 00:04:07 Oh, really? So you had no idea. You just knew there were several days of this kind of wine event.

Beatrice Bessi 00:04:14 It was my first time driving by myself for a wine event outside the canonic one, let's say, I would just spend my day off a few times with the company I was working with, and do some short trips of one day to Amarone. And two years before I got hired in the company, I was working as a restaurant manager. I did a Master in Wine and Marketing Management in Italy, probably the highest in Italy at that stage.

And so, we did a lot of, of course, trips and deep studying about wine, but again, that was kind of a more university process. But that was the first time where I've done it by myself, you know? So, thinking about taking your car, I had a brand new car. It didn't last very long because after seven months I was in London. So, it was kind of very short, yeah.

So, I took my car. I didn't even know about Google maps. Thanks God it existed still there. And I drove through Mont Blanc. That was a nightmare. You can go only like, I think 25 or 30 kilometres per hour, only one by one queuing. And it's an excruciating queue. Like, I think, I queued going in there. So, crossing to France towards Burgundy, I think I queued eight hours doing this 25-30 kilometres per hour. Obviously I slept on the highway. That is definitely not the best thing to do.

And coming back after those five days of Grands Jours de Bourgogne, I probably drove even longer. I remember the queue was crazy in Mont Blanc. So, I think I drove back to my house, I think, in around 26 hours, something like that.

Janina Doyle 00:06:04 Okay, the big question is was it worth going to this Grands Jours?

Beatrice Bessi 00:06:05 I mean, I remember, yeah, totally by myself, not knowing French, knowing English, but you know, again, 10 years ago. Now I remember I started to Google where I could find the Romanee Conti vineyard, the classic thing probably that ever Burgundy lover would do in the first time. And I remember I started to cry when I finally found the spot.

Janina Doyle 00:06:31 When you go to the Romanee Conti vineyard, for anyone listening, we've done episodes talking about this is the iconic wine of Burgundy. Is it literally kind of a little walled vineyard that you can just stand in front of?

Beatrice Bessi 00:06:43 Yeah, you just cross like two, three streets. You have few houses there. Coming again from – I'm not travelling right now with the knowledge I have now. So, still, I can get surprised and that's the beauty of the wine world. But back in time, my knowledge and my self-

awareness of the wine industry and the wine world and the regions for sure was much, much, much rudimentary.

So, going in there and actually, I found it and analysed that actually, I am in the right place. And I did it by myself after whatever I've been through with a child and whatever, money wise, very tight and so on, I realised I was actually there and I started to cry. And probably that's one of the moments where I realised what I wanted to do in my life, the sense of achievement and also the sense of passion that I never had before. I mean, I did have. I'm working in hospitality since 25-26 years now. So quite a lot of time.

Janina Doyle 00:07:51 A while!

Beatrice Bessi 00:07:52 Yeah, I don't know. Definitely started illegally. Yeah, I mean that's how you do in Italy. You start, you have a bit of a pocket money situation, but I never left. And definitely, I had passion, but now that I'm, again, seeing backwards all the things that I've done, definitely not the same level of passion I have for wine.

Janina Doyle 00:08:15 I love that it was such an inspiring moment. And obviously it was so inspiring. It's called the Grands Jours de Bourgogne. Is it five day event?

Beatrice Bessi 00:08:24 I think yeah, if I remember right. So, basically you go around by yourself. Obviously, you probably have quite a lot of sommeliers going there. But it's more about, I think more about a wine buyer situation where you come in, you take your wines, you can buy them, you bring them home or in your restaurant or whatever.

It was basically every day focused mainly in one or two villages. For example, one day you could have Gevrey-Chambertin. So, you would go there and you would have all the people, all the producers showing. And at the same day you might have had like Nuit-Saint-Georges. Moving on, the day after you have Vosne-Romanee with, I don't know, and you have certain events organised from the association of the Burgundy wines.

And so, the first day was always Chablis, I remember again, I was planning my life. Yeah, I'm coming here. Don't worry. Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Again, with the queuing, I didn't consider it because I never did by myself. I arrived at 2 PM instead of 8 AM and I was more than halfway down the Chablis tasting, but I remember like, I'm here. I can do it here.

Janina Doyle 00:09:31 And Chablis just that little bit further than the rest of Burgundy.

Beatrice Bessi 00:09:36 Yeah, the first day I know that I'm thinking through it. Yeah. The first day was Chablis and after. Yeah, it was a five day process where every day you have two or one, two villages and all the tastings around those villages. So, the expressions of those communes.

Janina Doyle 00:09:54 That's beautiful. Okay. So, you cried, you felt the passion, you knew wine is now going to be your life. And so obviously you sold your brand new car, got your daughter and you came along to London and started working at 67 Pall Mall, which is a very, very good start into the wine world in England, right?

Beatrice Bessi 00:10:15 Yeah.

Janina Doyle 00:10:15 Well done.

Beatrice Bessi 00:10:16 I mean, I did it again in a bit of a weird way. I mean, the connection came from actually where I used to work. So, in Padua, where I was working in a one Michelin star restaurant, I had a guy that used to work for Ronan. So, he was definitely younger than me, but he came back from London and being from that area, he came back and he wanted to work in the company that he knew very well because they own a three Michelin star. They are part of the 50 best restaurants and so on. So, I was working in one of those restaurants.

So, we started to talk and this guy started to mention Ronan Sayburn in Italy, no clue whatsoever, especially a mess on my stage back in time, on my level, no clue whatsoever and Court of Master Sommelier comes up in the discussion. "Yeah, I've done this exam. I did the certification," blah, blah, blah, blah. It's very hard.

So, basically this guy gave me the proof I needed. That Italy was not enough. The Italian reality was not enough for me and I want to know more. And so, basically, I kept listening to this conversation that sometimes would happen with me. Sometimes this guy would talk with other colleagues of ours and I tried to remember Ronan Sayburn's name and I Google it and I found it. And I found it one morning on Facebook and I started to follow him. And that would probably be like, yeah, like in February or January or March, something around that time in 2016, probably a bit earlier. Like, yeah, January or something, and I saw that he was opening at that moment just...

No, I think it was actually before because if they open in December 2015, probably I was following him just a bit earlier than that. I remember the first stages, the first masterclass they did as a soft opening moment.

Janina Doyle 00:12:15 Okay. So, I didn't realise, so you came very soon after 67 Pall Mall opened?

Beatrice Bessi 00:12:21 Yes, I joined them in May 16th. So, I was the first one to be hired after the first group of sommeliers. So, there were seven sommeliers and me and another girl, we got hired in the same month.

And yes, it was May. So, I started to talk with Ronan in March, probably through Facebook. That led me to speak with Terry Kandylis, the head sommelier of 67 at the time. And I was like, I'm going and that's what I did. So they offered me the position and that was probably the end of March. And I moved there half of May.

So, in one month and a half, I have to close everything. Obviously, I didn't bring my daughter with me on that stage. So, I moved by myself. So, my daughter moved back with my mom to my town. And yeah, and I'm here after eight years.

Janina Doyle 00:13:14 Wow. So now you've mentioned two names, Ronan's and Terry's, and both of them are incredible masters sommeliers. So, is there something specific that sticks in your mind that you learned from them? Something they ever told you, something they showed you?

Beatrice Bessi 00:13:26 I mean, definitely. I remember the first month and probably a bit more than the first month coming to a place like this where you have this river of knowledge, if it makes sense, like, constant conversation, very in-depth about producers, about vintages, about every single

region that I never experienced in Italy. And probably you might have some, but it's not really easy to have perspective.

It doesn't make any sense to taste one bottle of Chateau Margaux if that's the only one that you have. It doesn't give you any idea of the quality of the vintage. And that's what I was lacking and I was dreaming to receive in Italy and it was not possible.

So, yeah, I mean, at that stage I also had Garrett Ferreira, that was our assistant, Head Sommelier. He's the beverage director now at Core. He is there since he left 67. So, I had amazing sommeliers doing this all day constantly. And it was such a natural thing for them to do, talking non stop about everything, about vintages, about producers. And I was like, Oh, my God, I don't understand anything, but I'm going to absorb everything I can. I'm going to take notes.

I was taking notes every day. I remember obviously my English was not at the level it is now. So, I was also taking notes. Every single word I wouldn't understand, I was writing it down and doing research at home. It was a very intense time. I must admit that probably I wouldn't be able to do it if my daughter was with me, obviously. It took me probably one year to eventually get ready to the stage to move her with me.

So, I spent the first year just focusing, understanding, working and organising crazy events, leading crazy events, helping everyone. Coming from one of my colleagues from 67, from Roberto, "Just shut up and work." And that's what we did.

Janina Doyle 00:15:26 Kind of good advice sometimes. But you said like about the events and that's something that 67 Pall Mall is amazing at or they're putting on tastings. You mentioned, what's the point? Well, there's always a point in drinking a Chateau Margaux, but in terms of understanding it and learning, what is the point in having one tasting of a vintage Chateau Margaux without doing a vertical, without understanding it, was that something that you were able to do?

Beatrice Bessi 00:15:52 That's the power of 67. As I said, entering 67 on this stage with quite a nice crowd of seniors, sommeliers well known in the world and in London, I definitely started to work closely with the events.

And at some point after, I don't remember how much, but I think around one year, I took over the event – one year and a half, I think, I took over the event. So, I was the event sommelier for all the company. Back in time, we had obviously only London. So, I was focused on London. And it was quite a big machine, thinking about how much glassware we would use every day, receiving wines.

Janina Doyle 00:16:32 The glasses are always Zalto, right?

Beatrice Bessi 00:16:34 Yes.

Janina Doyle 00:16:35 Only Zalto.

Beatrice Bessi 00:16:35 Yeah, up to 1,600 glasses per one event. When we were doing the judgement of London, so we would have, for example, Jancis Robinson coming and doing blind tasting with the Champagne versus English sparkling. That was the amount of glasses we would have to set up and pour wine on. So, in one room, in one event, and after, sometimes we would have an

event prior to that event. So, we would have to clean, reset, and make sure that everything was okay.

And the decanting wine, double decanting, obviously with a lot of requests. And also thinking about how 67 Pall Mall was back in time, we had also two other PDR, private dining room events. So, I could have three rooms at the same time to deal with. So yeah, it was a...

Janina Doyle 00:17:25 That's a challenge. Learning curve.

Beatrice Bessi 00:17:28 Yeah.

Janina Doyle 00:17:28 Okay, how is it now though, you are head sommelier at Chiltern Firehouse. What's it like working there? What do you get from working in this restaurant?

Beatrice Bessi 00:17:38 I mean, after 67, considering back in time in 19, I just achieved the Advanced Court of Master sommelier. So, that was my stage at the moment. I started to feel I wanted to look for the next step. I wanted to focus on understanding how to buy wines, how to learn this kind of situation, the wine buying side of things.

And Chiltern Firehouse definitely gave me all the opportunity to understand how to buy wines, how to deal with the suppliers, to be the front woman on doing this kind of thing. So, it was definitely an important step. It is definitely an important step.

And also, the scary thing of dealing with a wine list by yourself – I didn't have anyone to back me up. I had to think about my own things. How do I want to do it? What's my idea? What do I think about wine? And am I doing the right way, the wrong way?

So, definitely, I had to think. It's a constant decision that you take every day. I mean, in my case, I'm changing the wine list every 15 days. So you think about, am I doing the right things? Am I doing what our guest wants? What do we need? Is there anything that needs to be replaced? Yeah, that was definitely the process I wanted to learn moving in a place like Chiltern Firehouse.

Janina Doyle 00:19:07 So, now you're changing the wine list every 15 days. Just keep yourself busy. And with all of the events and all of the tastings at 67 Pall Mall, one of the wonderful joys of being a sommelier is you get to taste a lot of fabulous wines. So, for everybody listening, tell us, is there one wine that has just blown you away or just something with its story and its flavour that you just you always think of?

Beatrice Bessi 00:19:37 Oh, no, no. Very hard. Very lucky to have a lot of them, but probably the less known appellations at this moment are the ones that are exciting to me. Think about, for example, I don't know, everybody wants Barolo and Barbaresco, right? We all know that. It's a big passion of mine, but coming from less known appellations, such as a Langhe Nebbiolo, a Carema, a Gattinara, a Ghemme or a Boca. Those are the ones.

Now you have a different price point, you have amazing quality. I mean, it's basically all the regions of Italy, you know. You know where to go, but at the same time, you always have these minor appellations or this less known, and I wouldn't call them minor, but less known for sure, where you can see, oh, wow, I have the same quality.

Janina Doyle 00:20:29 Well, you find the value though.

Beatrice Bessi 00:20:30 Exactly. You have the same quality. And at the same time you have incredible surprises there. Carema is one of my favourites.

Janina Doyle 00:20:40 Yeah. Okay. So, you said about finding the value. I guess that's what surprises you rather than one of the top wines, which you expect to be amazing. Has there been, and it could be a wine or it could be an area where you just love bringing to your guests when they give you full flexibility and they just say, we just want something really affordable, but you want to knock their socks off?

Beatrice Bessi 00:21:00 Not really. I really don't like that approach. I'm a bit of a weird one. I mean, for example, I don't like to be put in a box. I never liked it really. So, let's say, in a way, for example, I'm just gonna give you an example to make you understand what I meant. I'm Italian and the first question is, oh, why you don't suggest me Italian wine? I'm like, no, I don't want to. I mean, I do. I can, but it's not the only thing I know of.

So, it's definitely a one-to-one conversation, a one-to-one feeling first. And I like to experiment and to travel around my wine list. Otherwise it wouldn't make any sense. I could have just Barolo and Barbaresco or Pinot Noir, but I'm not making the wine list for myself. So, I like first to understand the feeling of the guests and of the table. Everybody wants to have an oaky Chard. Good. Good for you. Fair enough. You want to have a Burgundy? We have three pages of Burgundy without any problem, every price point, every appellation. Good.

I mean, as I said, Burgundy is a big passion of mine, but you have alternative varieties and alternative styles that then make exciting full body white other classic things. But if you're willing to do something else, why don't we have an amazing Pinot bianco, Sauvignon blend, made in oak? Would you like to do that? Why not? Yeah. Are we having a rich style? Yes, it is a rich style, blah, blah, blah, blah. And I'm always saying, "If you don't like it, I'm going to drink it. Don't worry about it!"

Janina Doyle 00:22:39 That's exactly my technique when I was a sommelier, because if I was taking them, for instance, I used to work for a Chilean winery. And that happened because I used to, as a sommelier, pull out a lot of Chilean wines instead of, for instance, the person wanting a Shiraz or a Bordeaux, something from France.

And they used to always be like, "Oh, I don't know if I want to go Chile." And I'd be like, it's fine, because if it's opened, I'll take it back and it will go, I will consume it. I will get you something else. Do you have a tip for a consumer to help them navigate a wine list?

Beatrice Bessi 00:23:11 It's very scary, to be honest, to choose wine. And I can see sometimes the fear in their eyes. It's like, oh my God, I need to choose a wine. I don't have any clue whatsoever. It can be very scary. That's the first thing I said to them. "Don't worry, I'm here to help you out."

Definitely, I would say look to a person that wants to make you feel comfortable and to make you feel that you can trust them. So, try to find that relationship of trust. Coming from my experience, I would say, look to do, again, producers that are well-known and maybe look for less pricey appellations.

It's very hard, but try to find at least a bit of an idea of, are you looking for a light wine or for a full body wine? Which price point are you willing to spend? And that's probably the first approach. And if you have a wine that you like, try to remember which wine it was.

Usually when they don't know what to say, I'm asking, "So, usually what one do you drink?" And that helps a lot because coming from my knowledge, the idea would be that I would be able to help you out with whichever wine you're telling me. "Oh, I had this producer." "I had this grape variety."

Okay, so I don't have that. Maybe I do, but if I don't have that, I would say those are similar ones. So, those are the similar ones in the same country, or those are the similar ones in other countries, or maybe let's say, "I don't mind. I want to stay in Italy, but I want to spend that amount of money." Okay, I can give you that, that, that.

So, kind of my brain always goes in boxes. I'm opening these kinds of boxes. So, that's what my brain does when I have a conversation with guests. So, I would say from their perspective, think about if you could remember some wines that you like.

You're gonna help the sommelier to establish a conversation with you and ask a few questions and don't feel scared because the sommelier, people that are doing this as a passion – as a job, but a passion, they're there to help you out. They wanna be there for you. They wanna be there for you to have an amazing experience. So, there is no judgement at all. There is no thinking in my head, oh, my God, she doesn't know nothing about wine. That's not the point at all of the conversation.

Janina Doyle 00:25:45 No, that's what you are there for. That is what the sommelier is there for.

Beatrice Bessi 00:25:48 Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. We are there for that reason. We are there to make people happy. That's the first and the only goal for us.

Janina Doyle 00:25:56 So now I'm going to role play and pretend I'm the customer and I'm going to say, oh, I've been hearing all about Sicilian wines because, well, you're not just a sommelier, you have your WSET educator as well.

Well, I asked you what regions that you love talking about. You did mention Piemonte, but I just said, nah, already done that recently, so I won't let you. But the next region you mentioned to me was Sicily. So, I'm the customer and you've got a lovely selection of wines from all over the island. Where do I start? I want to taste a famous indigenous grape variety. What should I try? Over to you.

Beatrice Bessi 00:26:41 All right. So, if I have to choose a white, probably I would either do a Checco Grillo coming from the Marsala area.

Janina Doyle 00:26:52 Okay. Yeah. Grillo.

Beatrice Bessi 00:26:53 Discovering a grape that nobody really knew was actually the top grape for Marsala. And now they do amazing sparkling wines out of Grillo and amazing white wines out of Grillo. You can have an easier kind of approach, a simpler kind of style, but you have always this kind of a nutty walnut feeling to it.

Grillo is a grape variety that is kind of easily prone to oxidation and it's not a bad thing. It gives this kind of a richness and nuttiness to the wine, even in a kind of a lighter stage. And down to big and rich Grillo styles. And I think there are quite a few producers that are focusing on Grillo as a variety.

So, going probably down to other areas of Sicily, I would probably do Catarratto. Catarratto coming from Mount Etna.

Janina Doyle 00:27:52 Catarratto in comparison. So, Grillo is quite a hardy variety. And actually, I think, as I mentioned to you, I wonder like I've been reading about maybe it's the focus grape for climate change because it might actually be able to handle all these drought issues.

But Catarratto for you, I know this is a bit of a fresh wine with citrusy floral tones, but I don't know that grape variety very well. You said that there's a nuttiness with Grillo. Catarratto is fresher, right?

Beatrice Bessi 00:28:23 I would say, yeah, probably you have this kind of a brighter acidity and also think that every grape variety is just a person. Think about this grape variety like a person, it's wearing a dress because he's in an area. Think about coming from the area of the south of Italy or Etna, you have this bright acidity and also driven from the terroir, if you want to say it in French, but driven from the soil, driven from the environment.

And you have this always hint of salinity, this kind of almost iodine. I mean, I don't want to be super crazy on terms, but this kind of driven salinity to it. It's a combination for sure of the grape variety that has a nice floral, almost delicate – it's not a bad thing, being delicate. This kind of shy grape variety, but there was this amazing salinity as a backbone. And so, probably, that's how I would split them.

Janina Doyle 00:29:25 And that's interesting. I wonder what your opinion is because of all of the white grape varieties, no matter which one it is and where it's growing, if I had to categorise the whites, again, freshness, you said saline and kind of there is that mineral note across the board, whether it is a slightly more aromatic grape variety or maybe a greener citrusy style. Would you agree that's fair?

Beatrice Bessi 00:29:49 You mean in general as a grape variety?

Janina Doyle 00:29:52 In general. If you just said, yeah, like the whites of Sicily.

Beatrice Bessi 00:29:58 Absolutely. I mean, probably it is a bit the power of Italy in general, where the acidity and the minerality are the driven power force of Italian wines. That's one of our most important characteristics. The wines that we do, we sit on mountainous soils and volcanic soils and chalky white soils. So, this of course, it's driving our personality, if you think about the overall picture of Italian wines.

So, it's definitely a focus point for all the wines. But Sicily for sure, you have this driven minerality thinking about we are in an island, thinking about all the currents that are landing on the island, coming from the seaside, thinking about the soils, thinking about the monstrous activity of Volcano.

You have Etna, the highest Volcano of Europe, but it's not the only one that you have in all the area. It has always been kind of active, at the moment dormant.

Janina Doyle 00:31:05 Well, when I was there, I've been to Mount Etna and it was puffing away. It was smoking and it was doing its thing. Thankfully, nothing more than that. But yeah, it's incredible.

Beatrice Bessi 00:31:14 So, all the area, think about another important fact of studying and being passionate about wine, it's also the cross knowledge. You study more about biology and geology than you ever been. You know all about the plugs, that all that area of course has been quite active in the past about volcanic activity because of all the situation of the plugs down to the ocean and the seashores and the Mediterranean Sea.

So, obviously those impacted our geography down to Italy and impacted all the planet. So, knowing those kinds of factors, also you get information about the soil, you get information about the natural features, and you get information about how the wine might taste. It's all a combination of different things that it's so fascinating because you need to consider all these aspects.

Janina Doyle 00:32:12 It's so true. I hated geography in school and then I got into wine and now regions, places, and like the climate, I can come up with random stuff and people are like, how do you know about that?

Beatrice Bessi 00:32:25 I hated it. And now I'm like, I cannot stay without it. I mean, I always liked to travel. Since I was a child, I was always like, I'm going to leave this town. I'm going to go somewhere else. I'm going to live in America. I'm going to do that.

Since I was probably seven years old, I had a very clear idea of what I wanted to be. I was supposed to be a computer science engineer, travelling for that. Yeah, I'm graduated and everything.

Janina Doyle 00:32:54 Well, I'm glad you came into the world of wine. Thank you.

Beatrice Bessi 00:32:57 But definitely travelling, it's a big important thing. And connected with all these factors, it's all related, history, geology, everything is related.

Janina Doyle 00:33:07 Yeah, it's beautiful. Now I have to ask you about Carricante. So, Carricante for me, we were talking about minerality. In my head, I've always felt that that is the grape variety of Sicily to show the crushed rocks, the real salinity and this kind of slight herbiness with that zippy acidity.

I don't know. That's the one. It was interesting that you've gone with Grillo, which I think might be the future. I don't know. Whereas, I don't know, Carricante for me has always been the one in my head. What are your thoughts on that grape variety?

Beatrice Bessi 00:33:39 I think Carricante has been the grape variety that broke the international perspective about white from Sicily. Probably was much easier to start with the Etna Rosso, with the red wines from Etna. And obviously, we did have a lot of history about Nero d'Avola exported everywhere and so on.

So, probably the door was already open for the red side of it, but for the whites were definitely less known. And again, back in time, a lot of bulk wines and production and so on. And the quality definitely has been increased massively and Carricante led the way because of these characteristics.

Again, think about alternatives. We all like to, I mean, now, especially in the last years, we all try to tune down the alcohol, the trends are definitely looking to have less alcoholic wine and it's getting harder and harder by the minute because of climate change and because of also all the wine making that we always pursued, thinking about the 90s, then 80s, and probably after all the judging and wine critics era as well.

So, thinking about the Carricante was probably the answer to having an opportunity to show a wine with bright acidity, with minerality. There wasn't an iconic international grape variety. So yeah, that was the answer.

And after that, all the other varieties followed suit in a way because Sicily got acclaimed as a quality region and the other ones were given also the opportunity to be shown.

Janina Doyle 00:35:20 Carricante, just for anybody who isn't aware, I think the majority does grow on Mount Etna. So, just like you were saying, it was the Etna Reds that started it. So, it made sense to follow what's the white that grows there. Do you still feel very much the heart of the winemaking on Sicily is around Etna and Etna DOC?

Beatrice Bessi 00:35:42 I mean, there is definitely a lot of focus on Etna. It's probably the most upcoming area after Piedmont and Tuscany. I mean, there is a bit of gossip around that Etna will be the next area for MGA as they did in Barolo and Barbaresco.

Janina Doyle 00:36:01 MGA?

Beatrice Bessi 00:36:01 Yes. So, in Barolo and Barbaresco, they've been in Piedmont mainly, but we started to recognise singularities. In Italy, unfortunately, it's not always down to single vineyards. It's like the same concept as Burgundy, that you have a single vineyard and after you have climate. So, this kind of a 'parcelle' as they say in French.

In Italy, we do have the same fragmentation. Recognising historical sites has always been confusing for Italian wine history, where the books would say something, but the grandfather of the grandfather would say something else, and the plot wouldn't match with the actual map of the area.

Of course, that's the history of Italy. You have a lot of history, but sometimes it hasn't been passed through the generations properly. Probably we didn't think of it in that way. It is our power. The story and the history is one of our powers.

And so, in Etna, there is a lot of talk about, you know, singular expressions, and they're not really single vineyards as we think about in the rest of the world. They are called contradas in the Etna areas. So, it's kind of a hybrid between hamlet and village. So, there is a lot of talk about potentially pushing forward Etna for having a kind of an MGA.

So, MGA stands for additional geographical mentions and they kind of align them with single vineyards that were historically acclaimed in Barolo and Barbaresco, for example. Tuscany is following suit. Again, single areas and hamlets. And Etna might be the next one. I think it's the area where you have the most recognition at this stage to do that.

Janina Doyle 00:38:03 And I mean, I love the wines. This is on volcanic soil. The smokiness, that minerality – we keep saying the word. Actually, okay, red, Nerello Mascalese, this incredibly elegant

grape. So, how would you describe this grape? I mean, it's very often blended with Nerello Cappuccio as well. So, you don't always get...

Beatrice Bessi 00:38:29 Yeah. I mean, it's not really easy to find a blend, I think. You have this kind of a 5% sometimes. I mean, originally when we started to study about Italian wine, so I'm talking about for myself probably 20 years ago, 15 plus, you would always read the book, let's say Nerello Mascalese is the elegant one, is the worthy to be planted only for quality wine and Nerello Cappuccino. I probably won't go back.

Janina Doyle 00:38:58 Cappuccino? Are you thirsty?

Beatrice Bessi 00:39:00 Yeah. Nerello Cappuccio, it's the more rustic one. It's more like a simple one. I agree and not agree completely. I think, again, it's down to really what has been not done properly in every country in the world. I mean, every wine that has a business plan and all of them, they want to try to make money and survive and have a successful business plan, so it's always to be considered.

But at the same time, popping up on trends and what the market needed and wanted for some time has been not really great for the grape variety themselves. So, you know, as there are a million cases where we lost grape varieties because they were not up to the standard of the market at that time, or the mass production, or the higher quality or lower yields, whatever was the trend at that stage.

Janina Doyle 00:39:57 At that time.

Beatrice Bessi 00:39:57 Yeah. So, Nerello Cappuccio definitely has suffered a bit of it because of it. And also again, I think we do make wine for a lot of centuries in Italy, but really focusing on the quality and understanding our culture and understanding our country, it's not a lot of time, unfortunately. If you compare it to other countries of the...

Janina Doyle 00:40:23 No, for sure.

Beatrice Bessi 00:40:24 Exactly.

Janina Doyle 00:40:26 Italy was so fragmented.

Beatrice Bessi 00:40:27 Yes, absolutely. We are. We are as a culture. And so, it's very hard to wrap up all the information because you don't have really sources that have been left behind. And so, yeah, probably there is a mixture of, yeah, it might be true. It might be that it's an easier grape variety, that is a more fruit-driven style of grape variety. But it's rustic, why? Because I've not been taken care of properly. Yeah, definitely Nerello Mascalese is the king. I would say queen. Is the queen.

Janina Doyle 00:41:00 Yeah, because of the.... yes.

Beatrice Bessi 00:41:02 Is the queen of the area. But I wouldn't discard it automatically, Nerello Cappuccio as not able to show personality. I think always, when you have partners in a blend, you have always this kind of a three dimensionality that you can gain from having another grape variety. So, I would say that there is still a lot to be done for me for Nerello Cappuccio, but yeah, I would say Nerello Mascalese is, at the moment, the leading partner.

Janina Doyle 00:41:34 I kind of, I forgot that I was role playing. So I'm going back to my, I'm a customer and oh, they're lovely white grape varieties that you've mentioned, but actually, I've decided I want red and Nerello Mascalese seems maybe a little bit too elegant and fresh. I think I want something a little bit rounder and juicier and a bit bolder. What red grape variety from Sicily would you recommend to me?

Beatrice Bessi 00:41:58 Oh, la la la. I mean, it's a big of a leap, but probably I would do some beautiful expressions of Nero d'Avola, you know?

Janina Doyle 00:42:10 There we go. That's what I was leading you in for. And I wasn't sure if you were going to take it.

Beatrice Bessi 00:42:17 It's one of the other varieties that has been massively destroyed with bulk production and low quality level. But it's not true. The beauty of this grape variety, the expression that you can get from this grape variety – again, you need to think about the environment, you need to think about how you planted it, how you're taking care of it.

You want to only think about high quality vines and so on, and an environment and wine making and viticulture. But sometimes Nero d'avola is beautiful. So, you just go a bit down in the south of Sicily, around Vittoria and Ragusa, north to these kinds of areas. And you have a beautiful expression of Nero d'avola that can have this granitic minerality to it, that can have this beautiful juiciness.

At the same time, they're not simple wine. You can chill them a bit. You can decant them also. And there are certain producers that have millions of expressions on this grape variety in the same winery. There is a lot to be chosen there, to be honest.

Janina Doyle 00:43:26 Totally. I mean, it's really difficult to say what does it tastes like. But I've always said to people, again, tell me if you have a different interpretation. But I'm like, if you like a nice Northern Rhône, the cooler climate Syrah, because it has the body, it has that kind of spiciness to it. It could be quite juicy. Maybe like if a Northern Rhône Syrah had a baby with Merlot. I don't know!

Beatrice Bessi 00:43:51 It's a mixture of – I mean, I'm trying to think about it now, but it has the same juiciness of Valpolicella. So, this kind of a cherry-like, this kind of amarena cherry-like. So, this kind of very cherry focus. And also, as you said, the spiciness of Rhône, of a Syrah grape variety, but coming from a cool climate.

Janina Doyle 00:44:19 Yeah, rather than hot. Yeah.

Beatrice Bessi 00:44:21 Yes, I agree with you. And you have also this granitic dust sometimes, but in a very pleasant way finished that it's balancing everything out.

Janina Doyle 00:44:30 Do you know, honestly, I love when I talk about grape varieties that's not my everyday drink in wine. I'm like, oh, I do. I love this. But talking about love this, what about Cerasuolo di Vittoria?

Beatrice Bessi 00:44:45 Oh, I love it! I love it. I love it. Just give me one and I would drink it.

Janina Doyle 00:44:51 So, my question to you, is this the 2024 Summer Sipper? Is this something that we want to try and push everyone listening to just have slightly chilled?

Beatrice Bessi 00:45:00 I agree with that. I mean, we all know rosé. It comes from a visual demand, you know, we're talking about the pale and all these kinds of things. We are talking about a successful marketing decision. But unfortunately nowadays, the perception is that darker colour leads to a sweeter profile. That's actually completely disconnected to it. So, it's actually not true.

So because of it, probably Italian and Spanish rosés suffered a bit because of this modern perception. But Cerasuolo di Vittoria, rosé, wow.

Janina Doyle 00:45:40 Okay. So no, I didn't know that they did rosé. I thought they only did, well, I suppose, unless we're having this conversation about where does a dark rosé and a pale red begin.

Beatrice Bessi 00:45:51 Yeah, it is. I mean, honestly, I would use it both ways. Chilling a bit.

Janina Doyle 00:45:55 Really?

Beatrice Bessi 00:45:55 Yeah, I mean, that's the beauty of it. Interpret it as a very pale red, but has this again, cherry juice or cranberry juice colour that for me, you chill it and you have a bit more personality. You can drink it as a red. You can drink it as a rosé. Why not?

Janina Doyle 00:46:15 And we should point out for anybody listening, what is this? Well, this is a blend of Nero d'avola, which we just talked about, but with Frappato, which is just yummy!

Beatrice Bessi 00:46:26 Yeah, another crazy variety. Frappato as a single variety usually has a tinge of orange to it. It gets quite pale as well in colour. It has this kind of a pomegranate colour to it. But yeah, it's definitely another variety that can lead to very juicy or very light colours with, again, a quite nice savoury feeling and also is very well suited for a lot of natural and for a ceramic winemaking where it likes to be in oxidative environments and it gets that proper orange tinge to it. So, it's a very versatile variety as well, yeah.

Janina Doyle 00:47:09 Because for me, I have had, when I've been on the island of Sicily, I drank quite a bit of Frappato on its own and I just loved the lovely light cherry red wine that it was but I haven't had it in this expression of either slightly more oxidative or I guess that whole, the natural wine element, which actually what are your feelings there? Because there are so many famous wines in Sicily that are natural wines like Frank Cornelissen. Oh, my God!

Beatrice Bessi 00:47:38 Yeah. I would say, you know, coming from Italy, it's a pretty easy conversation for us. Let's say before I moved to London in Italy, natural wine, it's a very big thing. In every top restaurant, you have a big part of the wine list represented with natural wines.

Janina Doyle 00:47:55 That's interesting. Okay.

Beatrice Bessi 00:47:58 And Sicily definitely has been one of the leaders for natural wines. Again, I think it's all down to the beginning of when the shift in reputation of Sicilian wine changed, where you had probably, through these wine makers that led the way with natural wines, they made the consumer discover the Sicilian quality, if it makes sense.

For the discovery of natural wines, 10-15 years ago, the first top producers coming out, you could have a Sicilian Frappata or a Sicilian White with nothing hard. You could have that even in the north of Italy, where I am from, that it was kind of a big thing. It kind of made the consumer discover the Sicilian quality.

There is definitely a lot of natural movement in Sicily. It's very easy to, I mean, I'm not saying it's very easy. It's easier in a climate where you have less humidity in a way. I mean, you have a warmer climate with a lot of wind that makes the land drier and you have less probably disease pressure. So, it's easier. I'm not saying it's easy, but it's easier to have a more natural movement where the land is helping you, the climate is helping you.

Of course, I mean, we have natural wine also in Friuli-Venezia Giulia, that you have completely different climate. So, I'm not saying it's not possible, but you have different challenges for sure.

Janina Doyle 00:49:36 It probably motivates them.

Beatrice Bessi 00:49:38 Yeah, and also back in time would make sense. I mean, Frappato back in time when I started to work in hospitality was only natural. I wouldn't taste it in a more classic way at all. That's the only way you would find Frappato in the north, especially from the two top producers leading the way in natural wines.

And after now you find, again, more easy style, more classical style. Again, natural, it's not a sign of quality but it's down to the consumer and the sommelier and the wine person to taste, understand that beyond natural wine, it is also a quality wine. So, it's very important to check for both.

Janina Doyle 00:50:21 And I think, to be honest anyway, if people want to try one Sicilian wine and also natural, it is very likely that they will find, as I mentioned, a Frank Cornelissen or COS or Occhipinti. So, they're great names to look out for.

Actually, one thing we have to say for everybody listening, both of us love Cerasuolo di Vittoria. It is the only DOCG. It is the only one on the Sicilian island.

Beatrice Bessi 00:50:49 Yeah. How crazy is that? That's what makes Italian wine sometimes, unfortunately, a bit confusing because, I mean, you can find Barolo DOCG for a completely different price point. You can find a Barolo DOCG, unfortunately, bought in the supermarket or on the highway. And after, you don't have any other DOCGs in Sicily and you're wondering why.

It's down to, unfortunately, when you want to claim for an appellation, it's a lot of paperwork. It's a lot of follow-up things. When you have so much paperwork, you need to have a consortium behind, an association of producers or an association, or a collective.

Probably I would say in Sicily, the collective has been missing. Back in time, we're talking about Marsala. It was one of the first DOCs, but that's it, really. Marsala is probably one of the oldest wines made in Italy that has been continuously made.

Janina Doyle 00:51:52 Is it coming back?

Beatrice Bessi 00:51:53 I mean, I love Marsala. I always loved it and it's an amazing wine. Again, probably the way we rediscover Marsala, it's, as I said before, via the Grillo, so via tasting the dry

style of Grillo that you actually make the connection back to Marsala and, “Oh, I like Grillo, so let's have amazing Marsalas.” And honestly, some Marsalas are wonderful wines to be paired with food. With the savoury food, I absolutely agree with that. You can have a dry one and you can have a sweet one. So yes.

Janina Doyle 00:52:29 That is true. And actually talking of sweet, let's just maybe slowly sum up Sicily with Passito di Pantelleria. Delicious. And probably a sweet wine that most people don't know about or haven't tried.

Beatrice Bessi 00:52:56 It's very hard. It's such a small, small, small island. It's the farthest island of the Italian country. You are more close to the African continent and then to Italy itself. And it takes a bit of time to reach it and so on. The transportations, it's harder. Think about all these kinds of factors. It's a very small island and just few producers there.

And think about you are in the UK, okay? You are a sommelier in the UK. You can taste Sauternes every day, you can taste probably Vouvray Moelleux every day. You can taste Tokaji every day. You can taste Vin de Constance even more than every day. How hard it is to compete within this sweet wine category for such a small reality as Passito di Pantelleria? How many producers can you taste? How many bottles can you receive?

I remember we used to have one of the most important expressions of Passito di Pantelleria in 67 and I remember that we had some bottles of older vintages. I remember, it was in 2009. For me, coming from Italy was totally normal. That's what we would have in every single restaurant, a nice Passito di Pantelleria.

And I remember when one of my colleagues opened it and he was like, “Okay, let's see.” We have it by the glass. “Let's do it.” I never tried it, but the competition is strong, as I said. And after, I remember his face when he opened it, and he was like, “Wow! What a wine.”

What an incredible wine and the fragmentation of our culture of, you know, it makes everything harder, let's say to find representation, to find community – the community brings everything up front. But these wines are there. These wines are incredible wines and again down to small quantities, but they are available and they are beautiful wines.

Janina Doyle 00:54:50 I don't suppose the wine that you opened up was the Donnafugata wine.

Beatrice Bessi 00:54:55 Of course, it was.

Janina Doyle 00:54:56 Of course, it was! Okay! So, for anybody listening. Ben Rye.

Beatrice Bessi 00:54:58 Ben Rye. I mean, it has been awarded internationally. I'm not the only one saying that this is a good wine. But Ben Rye has been probably the most famous wine for many years about Donnafugata and probably the one that drove the reputation back up of all the winery and it's the one that people want to collect and then people want to fight for.

Janina Doyle 00:55:24 Well, so anybody who's after that wine, I mean, it is about £50 a bottle for a half bottle.

Beatrice Bessi 00:55:29 Yeah.

Janina Doyle 00:55:31 Do you have any go-to producers from Sicily? For me, just because I love them both, I've visited them. In general, I love Donnafugata. I also love her labels and just love all their wines. And also Planeta, I've been to see the Planeta Vineyard in Etna and I just like that they have wines from all over and they're both big producers but high quality. Do you have a producer or two that you'd love to recommend?

Beatrice Bessi 00:55:53 For me, the first one, it's now almost 20 years of relationship. It's Gulfi.

Janina Doyle 00:56:01 Gulfi. Okay. Yep. Good choice.

Beatrice Bessi 00:56:06 Okay. You start to say, oh, I don't like Nero d'Avola. And coming back to not having experience or having, you know, a certain preconcept about certain areas, certain regions, certain wines and so on. And after, let's taste one of the wines that they make.

Janina Doyle 00:56:23 And let's see.

Beatrice Bessi 00:56:23 Wow!

Janina Doyle 00:56:27 Now, if you are in the mood to try some Sicilian wines, I explored over at www.wickhamwine.co.uk. So, my amazing sponsors of the season. And I'm happy to say if you want to taste those volcanic soils, they have an Etna Rosso and a Bianco. They have a Frappatto, the gorgeous light bodied grape that gives strawberry and grapey aromas. There's a Nero d'Avola and a Cattaratto. So, the grape most famous for its role in Marsala production, but making those lovely full bodied lemony table wines.

Now don't forget to use my code "EATSLEEP10" for 10% off your first order. And whilst drinking a bottle, if you find you are starting to dream up a trip across to this incredible island, send me a message, either direct message me on Instagram, so @eatsleep_winarepeat or email janina@eatsleepwinerepeat.co.uk, as I visited the northern part and have a few tips, tricks and recommendations for you that just are not going to fit into this episode.

Now next week we continue with part two where we focus on another one of Beatrice's favourite wine regions, Alto Adige and Trentino in the north eastern part of Italy. So, get ready to become more familiar with the grapes of Schiava and Lagrein.

Now, to finish off, as always, a quick quote for you. And considering the beauty of this island, this is a quote itself about Sicily, said by Italian businessman Renzo Barbera. He said:

"On the sixth day, God accomplished his work, and pleased with all the beauty he had created, he took the earth in his hands and kissed it. There, where he put his lips, that's Sicily."

I've been to many regions in Italy and of course, each one genuinely is stunning, but I have to say Sicily is special. It has everything. So, beaches, mountains, insane wines and the very best food, genuinely, that I've eaten across the whole of Italy. So, you have to go if you haven't already.

But for now, as I let you daydream about this incredible trip, may I say thank you for listening. If you are enjoying the podcast, do show your support by just leaving a quick review or a rating on the podcast app you are listening to and screenshot the podcast and put it up on your socials to let people know about it. Wishing you all a really wonderful, successful week of wine pairings and

moments of peace and tranquillity. Love and light to you all. Until next week, wine friends. Cheers to you!