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Outside Etna – the next generation

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*A whole new aspect of Etna wine, from two pioneering free spirits.
Above, Stef Yim in Contrada Nave.*

Attracted by elevation, old vines and land prices lower than those of Etna's glamorous north side, a new generation of wine producers is discovering the possibilities on the north-east side of this volcano. Working outside of the official denomination, they are producing highly original wines that are attracting the attention not just of sommeliers but also of established Etna producers, who are considering the area a form of potential insurance against global warming.

Yearning for heights – Stef Yim, Sciara

Stef Yim made it his mission to get his hands on the highest vineyards in Europe. No surprise then that he ended up on Etna. ‘I came here for the heights and I found a plot at 1,520 m (4,987 ft) in elevation and now I make a wine called 1520 metri’, Yim told me last September when I visited him at his winery in the Contrada Taccione.



Stef Yim in Contrada Nave – at 1,200 m (3,947 ft) it's by no means the highest-elevation vineyard he produces wine from.

Yim is one-third Japanese, one-third Chinese and one-third American. He moved with his mother from Hong Kong to California when he was just nine. Now at 53, but looking much younger, he has several plots on Etna's north

side, notably in the Contrada Barbabecchi right underneath Frank Cornelissen's winery, and in the Contrada Feudo di Mezzo. But his real passion are several incredibly high plots in the area between Randazzo and Brontè outside of the Etna DOC.

The particular plot at 1,520 m is in Contrada Cielo and is planted with Pinot Noir, Grenache and Pineau d'Aunis. 'I took cutting from old Pineau d'Aunis vines in the Loire which were propagated in the Loire and I shipped them over', Yim told me.

Arguably only an outsider would feel sufficiently unrestrained to come up with the idea of planting Pineau d'Aunis on Etna, but most of Yim's ideas stem from experiences he had in France. After having dropped out of school in 2002 he became a bartender in LA where, he says, a wealthy customer, Mr Roseman, would order the most expensive wine every time he came in. While tipping him handsomely, Roseman told Yim that if he wanted to earn more money, he should become a sommelier. What followed was a WSET Diploma and studies at the Court of Master Sommeliers, when in 2004 he decided to stop at level 4.

Without any training, in 2008 Yim bought 2,000 kg of grapes, mostly Syrah and 750 kg of Cabernet Sauvignon, from a vineyard in Copper Mountain, Lake County, in northern California. It was here that his idea of the importance of elevation for wine began to crystallise.

He moved to France in 2010 but found the language barrier an unsurmountable obstacle when he tried to find work in Burgundy or the Rhône Valley. By luck he found a job as a cellarhand in Madiran at Domaine Laffont. Over the next three-and-a-half years, Yim drove up and down France, visited Barolo and Barbaresco and made a pilgrimage to [Joško Gravner](#) to learn about his pruning techniques.

During this time Yim picked up knowledge about single-plot vinifications and spontaneous fermentation but still found the viticulture and winemaking rather conventional. 'I wanted to make wine my way and I started to look for a place to buy. I like acidity and after four years of France, I noticed that global warming is ruining a lot of its wines with ever higher levels of alcohol and lower levels of acidity.'

In 2014 the estate in Madiran was sold and Yim's search for high elevations began, with the first stop Tenerife. Here he was tempted by an offer of two

hectares for sale, but he felt they were too much for him to handle alone. Still, he decided to stay for a month but left after three weeks. ‘I couldn’t stand the food’, he said, but the more pressing reason was that the highest vineyards were only at 600 m (c 1,970 ft) in elevation. ‘When I walked the west, south and north slopes I didn’t see any potential expansion. I wouldn’t be able to get higher, because the soils are too rocky and there is no real winter and hence no dormancy for the vines. Local grape producers also seemed to work with a lot of chemicals. And no one was going to visit me, because ten years ago there were very few direct flights.’

From 2010 onwards Yim visited Etna frequently and got acquainted with Frank Cornelissen and Salvo Foti, both staunch defenders of Etna’s viticulture and artisanal wine. In 2014 he looked at several vineyards but none of them passed the Yim elevation test. ‘If I start I might as well start as high as possible’, he thought. In the Contrada Carrana at 980 m (3,215 ft) in elevation he found a roughly 1.2-ha (3-acre) plot at €60,000 – a bargain in hindsight – planted with Nerello Mascalese, Carricante, Minella and very old vines called Francese, indicating they might be Grenache and Cabernet Franc. The wine is called, no surprise, 980 metri.

In 2017 he moved into a garage where he made his first two vintages; in 2021 he bought 1.4 ha (3.5 acres) of vines and a proper cellar in Contrada Taccione in Randazzo. He baptised his estate ‘Sciara’, or lava stream.

As well as 1520 metri and 980 metri, Yim also produces a wine from a vineyard at 1,200 m (3,947 ft) in the Contrada Nave from Grenache vines over 70 years old, called, *nomen est omen*, 1200 metri. The least vertigo-inducing wine is 760 metri, a 100% Nerello Mascalese from vineyards in *contrade* Sciaranuova and Taccione. All wines are fermented spontaneously and without temperature control. ‘You don’t want to take control; you have to let the wine go its course. And the nights are very cool here; there is a great difference between day and night temperature.’

Yim ages most of his wines in a combination of Clayver ceramic vessels, terracotta amphorae and concrete eggs, while the 760 metri sees only used tonneaux. The 1520 metri is partially fermented in the vineyard in amphorae buried in the ground.



Stef Yim fermenting wines in amphorae buried in the vineyard where the grapes were grown

‘I love to experiment a lot, mostly in the vineyard’, he explains. In two vineyard plots right outside of his winery he’s planted the lower part with Nerello Mascalese clone NF5 on its own roots, and the higher part with clone NF8 on American rootstocks (Paulsen 0013 and Richer 110). ‘I want to find

out the difference in maturation of the grapes, their acidity levels and their fermentation time. Although there are too many factors that makes a real comparison between the ungrafted and grafted vines difficult, but there are bound to be some differences. Especially in pH. I need data, I need science.'

While all of Yim's wines are definitely left-field, and not exclusively made of Nerello Mascalese, to me they are some of the truest expressions of the Etna terroir available.

Sciara, Luna Dorata MMXXIII 2023 Vino d'Italia

17 ++/20

WHITE

60% Carricante, 25% Catarratto, with the rest Minella and Grecanico. First vintage 2018 – then called Lacrima di Luna. A blend of all his vineyards except from the one at 1,520 m of elevation. Part-fermented in Clayver, terracotta amphora and concrete. All grapes are fermented separately with a total skin maceration time of 35 days, after which the assemblage is made. Bottle 106 of 1,956.

Almost buttercup yellow. A stunning, almost heady nose of flint, honeyed apricot, rosemary, orange pith and chamomile and a hint of salted capers. Salt and stone on the attack, followed by aromatic apricot and orange fruit with a fine, satin-like vein of tannins. Light of touch and, at the same time, concentrated. (WS)

Alcohol: 12.5% Drink: 2025 – 2030

Sciara, Ubriaco sulla Luna 2021 Vino d'Italia

16.5/20

WHITE

70–80% whole bunches in the ferment. Bottle 720 of 1,730.

Golden-tinged deep straw yellow. Beguiling nose of ripe apricot peppered with mace and with notes of orange blossom, bruised apple and breadcrumbs. Lifted, aromatic and bone-dry apricot and quite a bit of tannins streamlining the fruit on the finish. Very long and dramatic. (WS)

Drink: 2024 – 2032

Sciara, 760 metri 2022 Etna

17 ++/20

RED

Nerello Mascalese with 5% Nerello Cappuccio fermented in food-grade plastic bins, some open tonneaux and some vetroresin-lined tanks. Total skin

maceration time of 7–10 days.

Youthful mid ruby. Beautiful lifted, perfumed nose with wild strawberry, cranberry and cherry and with touches of exotic spice. Really bursting with personality and with a clear saline undertow. Salty, savoury and yet perfumed fruit palate with finely ground, persistent tannins. Firm and yet finely structured and something that can age; and certainly I would wait for another year. (WS)

Alcohol: 13% Drink: 2026 – 2036

Sciara, 760 metri 2021 Etna

17/20

RED

70-year-old Nerello Mascalese vines from Contrada Sciarnuova and Taccione at between 730 and 770 m of elevation. Spontaneous fermentation and total skin contact of 18 days. Aged for 19 months in tonneaux followed by five months in bottle. Bottle 1,838 of 4,435.

Lustrous mid ruby with the beginning of orange tinges. Lifted cherry, damson and with notes of tamarind, but with real lift and vigour and with exotic spice touches. Impressive, pure, aromatic cranberry and sweet raspberry with bags of gravelly tannins that take the lead on the finish. Very long and seriously tannic but will age well. (WS)

Alcohol: 13% Drink: 2027 – 2036

Sciara, 980 metri 2021 IGT Terre Siciliane

17.5/20

RED

100% Nerello Mascalese. From contrade Barbabecchi, Monte Dolce and Carrana, all bush-vine-trained and close to 1,000 m of elevation. Aged in Clayver, concrete egg and terracotta amphora. Unfiltered.

Youthful mid ruby. Gorgeous, pure, cool and perfumed raspberry and with a touch of garden herbs. Transparent and minerally raspberry fruit. Bone dry and perfectly balanced. Long and perfumed and with a fine, long tannic texture that sticks to the palate. (WS)

Alcohol: 13% Drink: 2025 – 2034

Sciara, 1200 metri 2022 IGT Terre Siciliane

17 ++/20

RED

100% Grenache from a 0.3-ha plot of vines 70–80 years old. In the meantime, winemaker/owner Stef Yim has bought the rest of the steep slope and has planted two hectares with a mass selection from the old vines propagated by a local nursery. Grapes were fermented in terracotta amphora and a little Clayver.

Youthful mid ruby. Pure rose hip, stones and a hit of exotic spice. Pure and focused on the palate but still a tad too young and needs time to develop further. Finely balanced with tannins that are almost sucked into the fruit but present themselves as a finely textured, deep-pile carpet on the finish. Captivating, long, perfumed finish. (WS)

Alcohol: 12.5% Drink: 2026 – 2032

Sciara, Centenario 2022 Etna

17.5/20

RED

From 0.8 ha of centenarian (110–120 years old) Nerello Mascalese in Feudo di Mezzo. Fermented in amphora, then racked off and returned to amphora, where it stays for 19 months.

Youthful mid ruby. Powerful and lifted and yet, at the same time, composed. Very pure, focused raspberry with a hint of red bricks. Incredible depth yet elegant at the same time and with saline touches. Ripe acidity woven into the raspberry fruit that sits on a layer of satin-like tannins. Savoury and, at the same time, perfumed finish. Wait another year before opening this. It will be worth the wait. (WS)

Alcohol: 13% Drink: 2027 – 2037

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ITALY ETNA RED WINE



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