

TOWN & COUNTRY

MARCH 2020

DEATH in
PARADISE
The Anguilla Tragedy

Britain's Original
REBEL
PRINCESS

LET'S ALL
JUST MOVE TO
SICILY

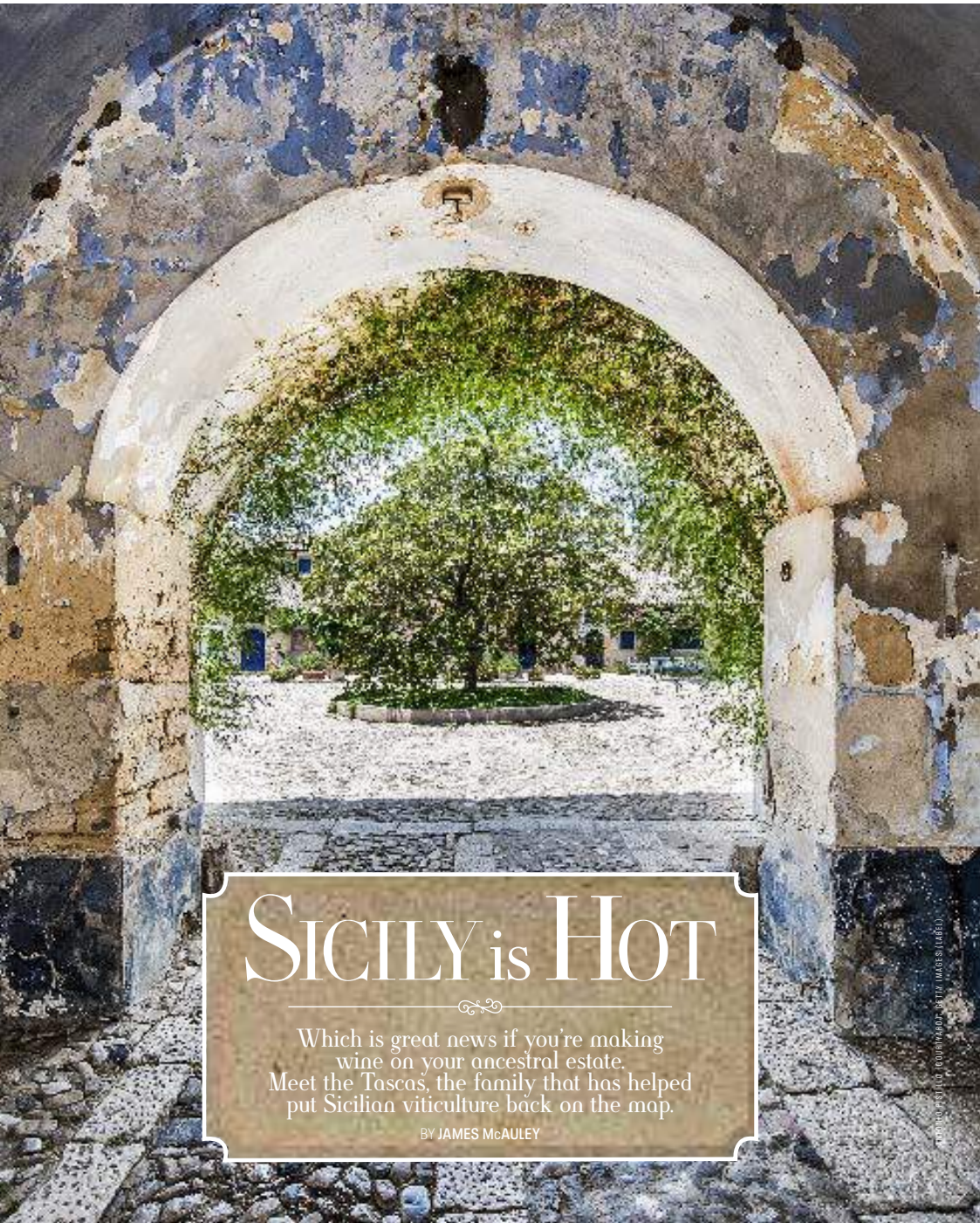
Fashion DNA Test
Is There a Birkin in Your Family?

Rupert Murdoch's
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CLAIRE
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talks *Homeland* with
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SICILY is HOT

Which is great news if you're making wine on your ancestral estate. Meet the Tascas, the family that has helped put Sicilian viticulture back on the map.

BY JAMES MCAULEY

PHOTOGRAPHY: ROBERTO TASSI / ARTS & IMAGES (STAFF)

BERNARDO TASSI / ARTS & IMAGES (STAFF)



Alberto and Francesca Tascas d'Almerita with their sons at Alberto's family's 190-year-old Sicilian estate, which has several rooms to rent for short stays.

The open-top jeep is hurtling down country roads, plowing through mud and navigating hairpin turns. It is sunset on a summer evening in central Sicily, and of course there is not a cloud to be found. Most people know Sicily, if they know it at all, in terms of its coastal cities: the swelter of Palermo, the glamour of Catania, the ruins in Syracuse. But there is another world inland that feels as though it's on a different planet, a mesmerizing and improbable blend of limestone and verdant splendor. On both sides of the stretch of road we're on, vineyards extend down steep hillsides and up gentle inclines, all the way to the mountains in the distance. It is like driving into a scene by Cézanne, embroidered with Pantones of olive green, lemon, and chestnut.

Behind the wheel is Alberto Tasca d'Almerita, a slender man in his late forties who wears a white linen shirt, ironed pants, and a pair of boots that have seen their share of muddy hikes. When grapevines give way to groves of trees, he slams on the brakes, hops out of the jeep, and grabs raw almonds straight off a branch. "Try one," he says, thrusting a hairy green globule at me. I hesitate. This is not how almonds—or anything else, for that matter—look at my grocery store. But Alberto insists, so I crack the shell and bite into the fleshy white splinters inside.

We're on the road to Regaleali, one of five estates run by the Tascas, a celebrated Sicilian winemaking clan that traces its agricultural accomplishments on this particular plot of land back nearly two centuries. It was here that, seven generations ago, two brothers bought a 2,900-acre parcel and began implementing modern farming techniques. Their progeny continued to innovate, and today, along with grapes and almonds, the Tascas grow wheat and olives, raise sheep, and keep bees. They produce wonderful olive oil, bread, cheese, and honey, but it is their wines (and, more recently, their small resorts, tasting rooms, and restaurants) for which they are celebrated around the world.

Even though I live in France, I've always avoided visiting the great estates in Médoc and the Loire. It's not that I don't love the wine, it's just that there's something a bit, well, *précieux* about lining up to view the manicured vineyards and historic estates of Europe's famous winemakers. Rest assured there is nothing *précieux* about Regaleali. It is located a twisty two-hour drive southeast of Palermo. There are no tour buses or welcome centers. Cell phones don't really work, and no one expects you to spit out the wine you taste. That's not to say people don't visit; they come in small groups by appointment to hike around the vineyards, stay in the handful of rooms at the estate the family has recently begun to rent out, or take classes at the Anna Tasca Lanza cooking school (she was Alberto's aunt). But mostly visitors come here, and to the Tascas' other estates, to experience Sicily through the works of one of its most innovative families, one that has embraced the modern while preserving the island's unique traditions.

I had met Alberto and his wife Francesca for dinner a few nights before, in Palermo, where they live most of the time and where

their youngest children attend school. The three of us sat outside at Le Cative, a restaurant the family recently opened in Palazzo Butera on the waterfront, nursing a Tasca white and munching on hunks of parmesan cheese. He wore a button-down shirt with rolled-up sleeves; she, a light summer dress adorned with strands of beads. Alberto is the son of a count and a member of one of Sicily's oldest noble families. Francesca's maiden name is Borghese; she was born into one of the most famed dynasties in European history, one whose ranks have included a Renaissance pope and one that has a name-sake museum in Rome that showcases astounding Bernini sculptures. Neither Alberto nor Francesca has any interest in speaking about their heritages.

Instead they want to talk about their family. Alberto's parents and his brother Giuseppe, who will become count when their father dies, live nearby. "We see each other constantly," Alberto says. One of their sons is obsessed with video games. "Do you think it will hurt his chances of getting into a good business school?" Francesca asks. Alberto worries aloud if it is better to raise children in the city or the country. When he was 21 his parents sent him to live and work at Regaleali for a year. "I was young and had been going out every night," he says. Moving to the compound was a shock. "The wakeups are at 4:30 a.m., and the work is exhausting." And then there was the sense of responsibility. "The place owns itself. You're just a landkeeper for a short time." Eventually he got into the rhythm. "I knew I was hooked when I would sneak back to Palermo for a party only to find I was missing Regaleali."

The wine we drank that night is part of the story. It's called Nozze d'Oro, which means golden wedding anniversary in Italian. Alberto's grandfather Giuseppe Tasca d'Almerita created it in 1984 in honor of his and his wife Franca's 50th anniversary. It's a blend from the Regaleali estate that pairs the sharpness of the Tascas' sauvignon blanc, which they have grown there on sandstone soil since World War I, with the golden sweetness of inzolia, a variety they planted more recently that grows at a slightly lower altitude and in a different kind of soil—namely, clay. The taste is a bit sharp and a bit buttery.

Sicily is sometimes called an "oenological continent," a self-contained viticultural world that knows no rhythm but its own. People have grown grapes here for thousands of years; classical Roman poets lauded the island's wines. In modern times, however—after World War II in particular—the quality fell off. Most Sicilian wine in the middle of the 20th century was sold in bulk or sent to wineries in other parts of Europe for blending. The Tascas, starting with Alberto's grandfather, have played a major role in reestablishing the island as a producer of sought-after wine.

During my visit to Regaleali, Alberto takes me to see the two plots where grapes for Nozze d'Oro are grown. Walking between the rows of sauvignon blanc, in one, and inzolia, in the other, I'm amazed by the difference—the texture of the soil, the feel of the breeze and the sun—between two nearby stretches of vineyard. Like all winemakers, the Tascas must study soil and microclimates at Regaleali and their other four estates. But unlike in France, say, where plantings have ➔

There's nothing *précieux* about Regaleali. No tour buses, no welcome center, and nobody spits out wine.

GETTY IMAGES (LABEL); OPPOSITE: WEGROSTHEINE (TENNIS REGALEALI); BENEDETTO (FRANZINO); MASSIMO (COTO ALBERTO, LUCIO, AND GIUSEPPE); ANTONIO (PISILLO (LIVING ROOM))



Clockwise from center: Alberto (far left) with his father Lucio and older brother Giuseppe; the living room at Regaleali; Alberto and Francesca in the vineyard; the compound at Regaleali, which has been home to eight generations of Tascas.

SICILY TOUR: EARTH, WIND & FIRE

The Tasca d'Almerita wine empire stretches across Sicily and includes vineyards and resorts in some of the island's most remote and scenic landscapes.



SAIL Capofaro, the Tascas' 27-room resort on the Aeolian island of Salina, has a concierge to arrange yacht trips on the Tyrrhenian Sea. FROM \$290 A NIGHT, RELAISCHATEAUX.COM



TASTE The family recently built a tasting room at Tascante, its vineyard on the slopes of Mount Etna, Sicily's smoldering and ever active volcano. E-MAIL HOSPITALITY@TASCADALMERITA.IT



EXPLORE Mozia is a ruin-dotted island off the west coast of Sicily owned by the Joseph Whitaker Foundation. The Tascas took over the vineyards there in 2007. HOSPITALITY@TASCADALMERITA.IT



INDULGE A stay at the Tascas' Regaleali compound (pictured throughout this article) comes with meals, wine tastings, and vineyard tours. FROM \$558 A NIGHT, HOSPITALITY@TASCADALMERITA.IT

been fine-tuned to the square inch for centuries, the Tascas have also had to experiment constantly with new varieties while making the most of traditional Sicilian grapes.

At dinner that night (an elaborate feast that includes pasta with fava beans) Alberto pours me a red made from grapes grown at Regaleali. I take a sip: sharp but not too acidic. "No," he says, "smell." When I do I'm instantly flooded with the aromas of rosemary, currants, and soil I took in during our walk earlier in the day.

Europe is chock-full of vintner families with illustrious histories and properties that have made wine for generations, even centuries. Like the Tascas, some have attempted to modernize at a rapid pace and have launched savvy public relations campaigns to sell their brands around the globe. Many have also converted their properties into hotels where guests can experience a little bit of a vanishing way of life. But in many of those cases what is being sold is essentially a heritage—nothing more.

The Tascas have come at it differently. Their first foray into hospitality was not at Regaleali but at a vineyard that Alberto bought in 2001 on Salina, one of the Aeolian Islands, which lie to the north of Sicily. The property came with a few rustic houses and gorgeous views of the Mediterranean and of the island of Stromboli and its active volcano, which belches smoke and occasional sprays of lava. The Tascas modernized the buildings and added others, creating a 27-room resort called Capofaro.

"The best Sicilian amenity is the countryside. Nothing more, nothing less. You can find yourself here."

Alberto was following the example set by his father Lucio Tasca d'Almerita, who for decades was a tireless force in introducing the Tasca wines to an international audience. (Lucio has turned over many responsibilities to Alberto, but he remains involved in the company.) Lucio traveled constantly, tasting wines and bringing back ideas, but like his ancestors he was interested in preserving and, hopefully, giving new life to Sicilian traditions. For Alberto, having a vineyard on Salina (planted with malvasia) was useful in expanding the company's offerings, but opening a hotel was a way to showcase the exquisite island, which has a rich culinary tradition (the interior is blanketed with wild capers, which are celebrated in an annual festival) and a long nautical history. (An avid sailor, Alberto has opened a small maritime museum on the grounds.)

In November of last year *Wine Enthusiast* named Tasca d'Almerita its European Winery of the Year, the first time the magazine has ever selected a Sicilian winemaker for the honor. Later that month the luxury hotel group Relais & Châteaux, of which Capofaro is a member, awarded the property its 2020 Sustainability Trophy in recognition of the Tascas' commitment to low-impact tourism.

Alberto and Francesca bring their boys to Regaleali on holidays. "You're just a landkeeper for a short time," Alberto says.



From the road, the compound at Regaleali is nondescript, mainly a simple country stone house, large but unremarkable. But when you pass through the portico and into a cobblestone courtyard lined with flowering vines and a giant magnolia tree, the magic of the place becomes clear. The entire estate seems to radiate outward from the tree, the gnarled roots of which punch deep into the dark earth. The guestrooms surround the courtyard, and when you look out from their windows you feel as though you're in a treehouse, suspended above the ground.

Before we head inside, Alberto says he wants to show me a few more things. We make our way to a small, old-fashioned dairy building, inside which we find rounds of curdled sheep's milk wrapped

in cloth and left to cure in the cool darkness and harden into hearty pecorino. "Cacio e pepe has always been my favorite," Alberto says. I smell one of the cooling cheeses, and Alberto cautions me. "It's not quite ready yet." Next we make our way to a stone chapel that has been there since the family arrived in the 1830s. There are family portraits on the walls, and the simple wood pews are covered in crude etchings that have accrued over the years: initials and jokes that made sense to the children who scratched them in but have been illegible for decades. "We come here for Christmas," he says, and then we walk outside for one last look at the views. "The best Sicilian amenity is the countryside. Nothing more, nothing less," he says. "You can find yourself here." **TAC**

BENEDETTO TARANTINO (CAPOFARO, TASCANTE, MOZIA); WEGROSSSTREICH (REGALEALI)

BENEDETTO TARANTINO (TASCA FAMILY)