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Vintner Diego Planeta, Who Helped Put Sicilian Wine on the Map, Dies at 80

As head of a vintners' cooperative and later as founder of his family winery, Planeta brought new ideas and boundless energy to Sicilian wine

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Diego Planeta, the tireless force behind both his family winery's success and Sicilian wine's campaign to gain international respect, died Sept. 19. He was 80 years old.

"He has certainly been one of the most influential people in the Sicilian wine renaissance, and I will greatly miss our discussions about the future of Sicily," said Alberto Tasca d'Almerita, who heads his family's winery with his brother Giuseppe. "One of Diego Planeta's greatest contributions was in the way he always thought about Sicily as a collective island and never just as an individual."

Planeta's most tangible legacy is the wine company that bears his family's name, now run by the next generation and encompassing five wineries spread across Sicily. But Planeta started as a grapegrower and spent decades pushing Sicily toward the production of quality wines and promoting them around the world.

In 1973, Planeta began what would be an almost 20-year term as president of Sicily's most successful wine cooperative, Cantine Settesoli. Planeta's father was a founding member of Settesoli

in 1958. It was established to protect grapegrowers at a time when prices were at an alarming low, driven by Sicily's reputation as a source for poor-quality bulk wine.

Today Settesoli includes 2,300 members farming nearly 5 percent of Sicily's total vineyard acreage. As president, Planeta improved the quality of the cooperative's value-oriented **MandraRossa** label. He solicited the expertise of famed consulting enologist Giacomo Tacchis. In 1989, Planeta hired Piedmont-born enologist Carlo Corino to integrate modern winemaking technologies Corino learned during time working in Australia.

"His work at Settesoli was unbelievable, not only because he created a successful brand but because he proved the ability to join together hundreds of grape producers," said Tasca d'Almerita.

During Planeta's tenure he also established a progressive partnership with the Istituto Regionale della Vite e del Vino (IRVV). As part of this partnership the IRVV helped fund experimental vineyards of international varieties. Planeta hypothesized that in order to produce quality wine from Sicilian varieties, the island's producers needed to first understand how to do so with benchmark grapes like Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay.

"At the time, he seemed mad to everyone else in Sicily," said Francesca Planeta, Diego's daughter, in a 2014 interview with Wine Spectator. "But he had the vision that we had to do it to save Sicilian viticulture. He didn't do it just for Settesoli, he did it for the whole of Sicily."

Settesoli began to pay skeptical growers to plant international varieties, based on the promising results of the IRVV work. Co-op members ultimately applied the farming and winemaking techniques they learned to local varieties.

Planeta began commercial production from his family's historic vineyard holdings located in southwestern Menfi, bottling his first wines in 1995. The wines were an overnight success. In 2000, the Planeta Chardonnay Sicilia 1998 rated 91 points on Wine Spectator's 100-point scale and the Merlot Sicilia 1997 rated 90 points. The Chardonnay earned a spot among Wine Spectator's Top 100 Wines of 2000, the first wine from Sicily to be included in the annual list.

Planeta continued to champion all Sicilian wine. In 1998 he collaborated with Lucio Tasca d'Almerita and Giacomo Rallo of Donnafugata to establish Assovini Sicilia, a private organization promoting the island's wines.

Though Planeta is known for championing international varieties, he saw that work as ultimately in pursuit of quality production from the island's local grapes. While the wine world was raving about



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his Chardonnay, Cabernet and Merlot, Planeta was purchasing land in other parts of Sicily to explore the diversity of the island's terroir and its ability to produce distinctive wines from native varieties.

Working with his daughter Francesca and nephews Santi and Alessio, who heads the winery today, Planeta added four new boutique wineries between 1997 and 2013. Each is dedicated to the production of different native varieties, from Frappato at the Dorilli estate in southeastern Sicily's Vittoria to a Nero d'Avola-Nocera blend at Capo Milazzo's La Baronia property in the island's northeast corner.

With his warm and congenial personality, often speaking of his beloved Sicily, Planeta was a venerated ambassador for his region's wines. "Diego was an inexhaustible source of wisdom, ideas and vision," said Antonio Rallo of Donnafugata.