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New Winery in Sicily Teams Italian Aristocrat With Top Veneto Winemaker

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By [Per-Henrik Mansson](#)

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Eager to make world-class whites and reds in Sicily, Italian businessman and multimillionaire Paolo Marzotto has invested \$12 million in a gravity-flow winery and cool-climate vineyards on the island, and hired well-known Veneto winemaker Fausto Maculan as his consulting enologist.



Baglio di Pianetto, owned by multimillionaire Paolo Marzotto, is producing six Sicilian wines—four reds and two whites.

Marzotto's estate, named Baglio di Pianetto, is located in Santa Cristina Gela province, about 20 kilometers south of Palermo. The winery is producing five wines -- three reds and two whites -- from international and native grape varieties.

"I am sure I can make elegant wines in Sicily," said Marzotto, 73, an aristocrat whose family owns or controls the Santa Margherita brand, wineries in Tuscany and fashion brands such as Hugo Boss, Valentino and Marlboro Classics.

To achieve this, Marzotto hired Maculan, 53, in 2002 and gave him a 2 percent stake in the business. Both men live in northeastern Italy, and Marzotto had long admired the [Maculan](#) wines, which include an outstanding blend of Cabernet and Merlot and renowned dessert wines. Maculan, who spends a few days a month in Sicily, said that in the Veneto, he always has "to fight for ripeness, but in Sicily I don't have to fight for that. There I have to fight for finesse and elegance."

A test of their success will come this week as Marzotto introduces his white blend from the 2003 vintage -- the first made at the new gravity-



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flow, temperature-controlled winery completed last year. The 2003 Ficiligno is a 50-50 blend of Viognier and Insolia, a native grape variety, of which 3,300 cases were made. The estate is also releasing 8,300 cases of a red blend, the 2002 Ramione, which is 50 percent Merlot and 50 percent Nero d'Avola, a native grape. The wines -- which are priced at around \$18 and \$23, respectively -- will be released in the United States this spring.

Sicily's warm climate had been known for producing high-alcohol wines, and since World War II, the island's wines were often used by other regions to boost the alcoholic content of their weaker wines. But in recent years, a few Sicilian wineries, such as Planeta, have been making outstanding wines.

Marzotto got involved with Sicily in 1997, when he was still chairman of Santa Margherita. At the time, he had never tasted a Sicilian wine that he found entirely satisfying. "No wine of Sicily reached the same level as the best of France, Tuscany or international emerging regions," he said.

But that didn't lessen the businessman's determination. "I had no doubts. I was not afraid. I thought Sicily was a good place to invest," he said.

Marzotto bought land situated in cool microclimates -- either at fairly high altitudes or close enough to the sea to catch the ocean breeze -- expecting that they would produce more refined wines. He planted high-density vineyards. Currently, the winery has 182 acres under production, from two areas. One is in an area called Baroni, in Syracuse province, in the Eoro DOC. The second vineyard, growing at altitudes of up to 2,100 feet, is in Pianetto a Santa Cristina Gela, in the Monreale DOC.

The first wines came from the 2000 vintage; until Marzotto's winery was completed, the wines were made at a custom-crush facility. The four-level Baglio di Pianetto winery is dug into a gently sloping vineyard; half of the building is buried into the ground to facilitate the handling of grapes, must and wine by gravity only. Winemakers believe that this gentler handling produces smoother, more balanced wines. The red wines are aged in French oak *barrisques*.

Baglio di Pianetto also makes three other wines: Piana del Ginolfo, made from Viognier; Piana dei Cembali, made from Nero d'Avola; and Piana dei Salici, a blend of 65 percent Merlot, 31 percent Nero d'Avola and 4 percent Petit Verdot. These are not currently distributed in the United States. Within a decade, Marzotto plans to produce a total of 100,000 cases from an estimated 390 acres of vineyards.

Marzotto expects Baglio di Pianetto to be in the vanguard of change in Sicily. "I am producing the new Sicilian wine, not the old Sicilian wine," he said. "I think this is the sort of wine Sicily ought to be making."