

Palmento: cherished cultural heritage on the Etna



Wine is made by pressing grapes. The juice is released, the fermentation begins and wine is in the making. Through the centuries, ingenious devices and buildings to realise this process have been designed, which in the 20th century however were rapidly replaced by more modern facilities.

Except in one wine region In Sicily we still find buildings called *palmento*: stone buildings where wine was made, with a permanent system of stone containers using the force of gravity to channel wine into the barrels. Unfortunately the use of palmento's is forbidden under modern European wine law. The strict hygiene rules surrounding the making of wine cannot be realized in the palmento, is the reason given for the prohibition.

On the slopes of Mount Etna however almost every winery I visited still had a palmento. These facilities were in use up to the 70s-80s of last century and are now cherished as a precious witness of a rich cultural heritage. And rightly so!

Here and there, wine is still made in the palmento, and they taste very good! We tasted one, normally made for the workers in the vineyard, as part of their wages. That wine, made by I Vigneri, was one of the tastiest I had during my recent visit to the vineyards of Mount Etna.

During our trip we visited over 15 producers and about seven palmento's, from small ([Feudo Cavaliere](#)) to large ([Graci](#)). A small impression of the palmento's is given below, with an explanation of course how they worked.

At [Tenuta del Gelso](#) we were received in a completely renovated palmento. The building was still clearly recognizable as a place where grapes were pressed and wines were stored. Today, however, the large stone rooms accommodate groups who enjoy wine tastings, for example.



Lunch at Tenuta del Gelso, in the old palmento

The word *palmento* is probably a form of the Latin word *pavimentum*: pavementum - pav'mento - paumento - palmento. It is related to the verb 'to beat': Pavia (infinitive pavire) = punch. A palmento is therefore the stone building where a grindstone is present, to 'beat' or 'to crush'. Later it came to mean a building where grapes were crushed, and where everything was arranged to make wine. Palmento's appear all over Sicily and southern Italy, but on the slopes of Etna you will find the highest concentration. In the picture below the palmento of [Biondi](#), who still needs to be refurbished. Note the large round wicker mat in front of the building!



Palmento Ciro Biondi, with 'donkey'

In a palmento you find several floors: on the top level grapes are entered. They are brought inside through large windows and end up in shallow stone basins. There they are crushed by feet, usually a job for women and elderly. The juice can drain through gutters, past retractable wooden partitions, to a lower level. When as much as possible of the grape juice has been extracted, the pips and skins are lumped together and pressed again, now using a large round, straw mat, the 'donkey'. During our visit to [Vinicola Benanti](#) Giuseppe Benanti even performed a dance the workers performed on this mat.



The dance on the 'donkey'. Photo Wink Lorch

The juice landed on the middle level, in another set of stone basins, and began its fermentation. When that was finished, the wine was channelled to the lowest level, where the fluid again landed in large stone containers. Then the wine was transferred to large wooden barrels. In those barrels the wine rested until it was ready for sale or own consumption. The levels are seen well on the pictures below of the palmento of [Cantine Nicosia](#).



Cantine Nicosia



Cantine Nicosia

The great eye catcher in any palmento's was the wooden press, *u conzu* in Sicilian, which consists of a giant lever, usually made of one wooden beam, and a screw, also made of the

trunk of an oak! This screw operated the heavy block of stone that squeezed the pulp again, to so the very last drops were not lost.



Palmento of Cantine Nicosia



Screw press at Benanti, location Viagrande / Monte Serra

Obviously the work was heavy and monotonous. It was made bearable by dancing and singing. Giuseppe Benanti showed us how to include the last remnants of pips and skins in woven bands of reed (in the rear of the photo below); these cakes were then pressed a last time. Then he sang the song of the man who had the fill the barrels with a large "jug" (right on the picture below).



Giuseppe Benanti demonstrates the press

Several wineries of Mount Etna have plans to turn their palmento into a museum, or educational tasting room. And let's hope that in the future, wine can be made again in these beautiful historic areas, if only for "educational" purposes. That would really preserve the heritage!



Barrelroom at Feudo Cavaliere

More photos of the palmento's you will find [here at Facebook!](#) Finally: Author Robert Camuto wrote a book about the wine culture and the people of Sicily. He called it [Palmento: A Sicilian Wine Odyssey \(At Table\)](#) .