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Santa Cristina Gela will host the first Festa del Catarratto on June 6 and 7

The new festival aims to recast Sicily’s most planted grape through tastings, local food and Arbëreshë cultural traditions

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Santa Cristina Gela, a small Arbëreshë town in the hills outside Palermo, will host the first Festa del Catarratto on June 6 and 7, a new public event devoted entirely to Sicily’s most widely planted grape and to the local culture that surrounds it.

The festival was created by ARCA, the Regional Association of Authentic Catarratto, together with its six founding wineries: Bagliesi, Caruso & Minini, Castellucci Miano, Di Bella, Feudo Disisa and Tenute Lombardo. Organizers say the aim is to restore attention to Catarratto as a historic Sicilian variety and to connect wine production more closely with local identity, food traditions and the Arbëreshë heritage of Santa Cristina Gela.

The two-day event will run from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. in Piazza Polizzi and Piazza Umberto I, with free admission. Visitors will be asked to leave a €5 deposit for a tasting glass. The opening ceremony is scheduled for 11 a.m. on June 6 on the steps of the Church of Santa Cristina. Speakers are expected to include Giuseppe Cangialosi, mayor of Santa Cristina Gela; Sebastiano Di Bella, president of ARCA; and Leonardo Spera, mayor of Contessa Entellina and president of BESA, the union of Sicily's Arbëreshë municipalities.

According to the organizers, 13 wineries will take part in the tasting program, with more than half from the Monreale DOC area. Nine producers of cheese, honey and other local foods are also expected. The program includes open tastings of Catarratto wines and regional products, a master class on the grape led by Othmar Kiem, director of Falstaff Italia, together with winemaker Tonino Guzzo, and cultural events tied to the town's Albanian-speaking heritage. Traditional Arbëreshë costume parades are planned at 11 a.m. and 6 p.m., and strangùli, a local dish, will be served at 6 p.m.

The festival comes at a time when producers are trying to reshape the image of Catarratto. The grape remains the most planted variety in Sicily, with about 28,000 hectares under vine, roughly one-third of the island's vineyard area. Yet that figure is far below the roughly 90,000 hectares recorded until the 1990s. For decades Catarratto was often associated with high yields and everyday wine. ARCA's members argue that newer vineyard practices and more focused winemaking are showing a different side of the grape.

In statements released ahead of the event, Di Bella said the festival was conceived as an effort in education, promotion and recovery for what he called Sicily's most representative native grape. He said the goal is not only to present Catarratto wines but also to place them within a broader cultural setting by involving the territory and

local community. He added that producers are working to highlight fresher and more contemporary styles that still preserve authenticity and can also show aging potential.

ARCA describes itself as more than a trade group. The association brings together six family-run Sicilian wineries that cultivate a combined 80 hectares of Catarratto and have an estimated production potential of about 7,000 hectoliters of wine. The estates come from different parts of Sicily, including the Madonie area, the hills around Naro, the Belice valleys and inland zones in Caltanissetta province. Their shared message is that Catarratto should not be treated as a uniform grape but as one capable of expressing distinct places and farming choices.

The association says its members support an artisanal model of viticulture based on lower yields, manual work and less invasive methods. It also presents Catarratto as a practical grape for a hotter and drier climate because of its resistance to drought and major vine diseases. That argument has become central to its promotion strategy as sustainability concerns weigh more heavily on growers across southern Europe.

The Festa del Catarratto also marks the final stop of ARCA’s Tour del Catarratto, which organizers say has visited 10 cities over the past 12 months in Sicily and beyond. The roadshow was designed to introduce trade professionals and consumers to wines made from a grape that many outside Sicily still know only vaguely or associate with bulk production. Producers involved in the project say reactions have often been shaped by surprise at the freshness, structure and range they believe modern Catarratto can deliver, from still whites to sparkling wines.

Historically, Catarratto has deep roots on the island. Literary sources cited by organizers trace its widespread presence back to the 16th century. Its long success in Sicily has been tied to its adaptability across microclimates and its dependable productivity. Those same traits helped make it one of the island’s agricultural constants for centuries. What is changing now is not its place in Sicilian farming but its position in the quality conversation around Italian white wine.

Santa Cristina Gela offers a symbolic setting for that shift. The town lies about 40 minutes from central Palermo by car via the Palermo-Sciacca highway and is one of Sicily’s Arbëreshë communities, founded by descendants of Albanians who settled in

southern Italy centuries ago. By placing tastings alongside costume parades and local dishes, organizers are trying to frame wine not as an isolated product but as part of a living rural culture.

That approach reflects a broader trend in Italian wine tourism, where smaller appellations and lesser-known grapes are increasingly promoted through festivals that combine tasting with place-based storytelling. In this case, ARCA is betting that Catarratto can gain stature not only through technical arguments about vineyards and vinification but also through direct contact between producers, residents and visitors in one of western Sicily’s historic inland communities.