SICILY HAS just made an offer you can’t refuse. And no, you are not likely to find a decapitated head of a horse by your side when you wake up tomorrow morning — that’s what Sicilians do when they migrate to America and get greedy.

The offer is to travel to Italy’s sunniest part, where people count the warmth of the sun, to sample wines that have become the rage across the world. The plump red, Nero d’Avola, is gaining new followers and the subtle white wine spewed intermittently by Mount Etna, one of the world’s most active volcanoes located on Sicily’s east coast, pump those enriching minerals that give the soil the power to nurture the seductive Nerrino Mascalese grapes grown at a height of 1,200m.

Unsurprisingly, it was Janice Robinson, one of the English-speaking world’s finest wine writers, who first suggested in her weekend columns in Financial Times that the “browning cone” of the Etna may just be the “unmantled of the Mediterranean”. In the last five years since the time she made her observation, the popularity of the wines of Etna, and of Sicily in general, has seen a significant surge. It’s been a dramatic turnaround in the image of the region that was not long ago dismissed as Europe’s wine lake — it produced bulk ageing that others used to shore up theirs in the ‘70s.

Sicily, with a little help from the Indian Wine Academy, got to savour the possibilities of Sicilian wines this past weekend when a delegation of the region’s top producers landed in the city to present their offerings at a masterclass conducted by Susana Hulme, Master of Wine (MW). An MW is the wine world’s equivalent of a Medical Doctor — just 260 men and women from 23 countries have qualified for the title since the first examinations for the award were conducted in 1953 — but Hulme (www.susanhulme.com) wears her gown lightly. Sicily, Hulme said, “is very dear to my heart”. Her romance with the region started when she went there as a teacher of English as a foreign language after graduat- ing from the University of Warwick with honours in English Literature. “I fell in love with Sicilian sun,” Hulme said.

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Sicily’s castles and cathedrals atop steep hills (above) are as striking as the vineyards that stretch on the slopes of Europe’s tallest active volcano, the brooding Mount Etna (above, right). The region’s wine estates also produce some of Italy’s finest olive oil (right).
The photographer Ashok Dilwali poses with his trusted companion amid the many pictures he has taken occasionally problematic Indian food, because they don’t have the unaware tampering that overpowers what’s on the plate and yet have the competency to speak for themselves. There’s place for both the wine and the food on the table — one doesn’t overpower the other.

Carrying forward this theme, Sicily’s wine ambassador and one of Italy’s most critically acclaimed producers, Diego Planeta (www.planetawines.com), says his wines sell in 70 different countries because of “the very good balance of price and quality,” which he says is true of most wines from his part of the world. An Indophile who’s been visiting the country since 1972, traveling mostly by train to “know India” and a fighter for the protection of the geographical appellation of Rossini rice, Planeta said Sicilian reds are “like” for Indian food.

For the wine tourist, Sicily — it produces as much wine as Australia and has as much land planted with vines as Chile — is a matrix of 100 different terrains that offer the most amazing diversity. Take Etna, for instance. That tiny region’s foremost winemaker, Giuseppe Benanti (www.vinicolabenanti.it), could check in at Le Foresteria of the Benanti estate and pray at the ancient chapel sitting there, or stretch yourself at Regaliali, the farm villa dating back to the 19th century in the estates of Tasca d’Almerita, whose wines, Giuseppe Tasca, spoke ecstatically of the mouth-watering acidity of his wines and the smoky edges to their tannins. Tasca said his cousin spoke English with an American accent because of the number of tourists who came from across the Atlantic to the cooking school his aunt, Anna Tasca Lanza, ran on the estate. “You too can be a part of the experience,” he said, rolling a cigarette. “Sicily is all about warm people, good food and great wine, and you can enjoy all three by checking into a wine estate resort.” Carry those words with you when you fly to Sicily.

**Himalayas through Roerich**

But of course, the exact moment of a blanket of clouds embracing Nanda Devi before moving on, or a shot of Leh’s high mountains emerging from under thick clouds, is what the photographer classifies as a Roerich moment. “Photographing landscapes is so much better than photographing people on shoots,” says Dilwali. “There’s no one dictating anything to you, no requests to tilt your head a little to the left or a little to the right, no instructions on how much to smile — you’re just left in awe of the sheer majestic landscape in front of you.”

Dilwali, who believes that bad weather is a photographer’s best friend, has ventured into the range from all places possible — from Leh, through Himachal and Arunachal Pradesh, along the Indo-Tibetan border and Sikkim. He has been to every Himalayan peak you have ever heard of, and has even camped under the shadow of Mount Everest at one point.

“When I’ve been regularly visiting Lahaul since 1998, and every twist on Lahaul’s roads have always been stunning,” he says. While the Kalash Maruvarov in Tibet, he promises, will draw you in with its air of spirituality and beauty, the rainforests of Arunachal will leave you speechless. “The thing that is really fascinating about the Himalayas is that every month lends a different personality — the colours of the landscape change with the passing of summers, winters and autumns,” he says. Before the snow melts away, head to the mountains for your own Roerich moment.