

# *fine wine* INTERNATIONAL September 2015



**WEBAUCTION** *fine wine* INTERNATIONAL SPECIAL



**MALLORCA AND THE COOL BODEGA 4 KILO** PAGE 11



**SICILY'S PRODUCERS GOING LOCAL-** PAGE 17



**THE STOCKHOLM AUCTION 5-6-7 OCTOBER** SID 57

**PAGE 11** MALLORCA AND THE COOL BODEGA 4 KILO **PAGE 17** SICILY'S PRODUCERS GOING LOCAL **PAGE 25** OLDENBURG VINEYARDS – SMALL PRODUCER WITH BIG WINES **PAGE 31** PALERMO, SICILY **PAGE 34** SLING AWARD 2015 **PAGE 37** A SPIRITED 60 YEAR-OLD **PAGE 40** WHAT WINE SHOULD I SERVE WITH A MASTER CHEF 'S MEAL? **PAGE 43** HUNGARIAN RAPSONY OF FINE WINES **PAGE 50** MORTLACH - – "THE BEAST OF DUFFTOWN" **PAGE 56** BLUEBERRY GINO RECIPE **WEBAUCTION SPECIAL: PAGE 56** THE STOCKHOLM AUCTION 5-6-7 OCTOBER **PAGE 58** THE BERNHEIMER FAMILY STORY, SOTHEBY'S 25.11 **PAGE 60** THE VERTICAL LIMIT CHAMPAGNE REFRIGERATOR BY POSCHE DESIGN, **PAGE 61** 21 OKTOBER SOTHEBY'S EVENING SALE 21.10 **PAGE 66** AT ZACHYS **PAGE 68** HART DAVIS HART GROUNDBREAKING TECHNOLOGY FOR AUCTIONS

# SICILY'S PRODUCERS GOING LOCAL

TEXT AND PHOTO: URSULA HELLBERG

Travelling to Sicily isn't just taking a trip to one of Italy's largest wine producing regions, it's also a journey filled with historic, interesting sites set in natural locations ranging from fertile fields to volcanoes and windswept islands far out in the Mediterranean.



JOSÉ RALLO, DONNA FUGATA SHOWS THE ZIBIBBO PLANTS, WHICH ARE INCLUDED IN UNESCO'S WORLD HERITAGE LIST.



In 1998, three leading winemakers Giacomo Rallo, Lucio Tasca d'Almerita and Diego Planeta Assovini Sicilia, combined to globally market Sicily and establish the island as a world player on the wine market. Now, with over seventy members and impressive results, I started to realize during Assovini's annual event that Sicily has become a force to be reckoned with.

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SEVERAL OF THE PRODUCERS FROM ASSOVINI PERSONALLY PARTICIPATED IN THE SICILIA EN PRIMEUR TASTINGS IN TAORMINA.



TEN BEN RYÉ VINTAGES. PICTURES ARE OF THE OLDEST (1990) AND THE YOUNGEST (2012).

## TWO DONNA'S ON PANTELLERIA

Pantelleria (about 80 km from the North African coast) is one of Italy's southernmost outposts - a volcanic island constantly feeling the effects of hard winds. Without the island's delicacies like the dessert wine Moscato di Pantelleria and its famous capers, no one would probably have ever even heard about it.

Donna Fugata's José Rallo greets us at the Contrada Khamma vineyard. Besides being Giacomo Rallo's (see above) daughter, she is also one of the front-figures leading a new generation of wine producers. Contrada Khamma, one of their three properties, doesn't just sound Arabian; its architecture is reminiscent of North African houses. Just outside of the main facilities lie the Zibibbo fields, named for Muscat

d'Alexandrie. Despite being over a century old, the vines aren't more than a half-meter tall. This is due to the wind, and that the vines have been planted in small depressions for extra protection. This "farming" method, Alberello Pantesco, is so unique that last year it landed on UNESCO's World Heritage List.

The grapes used for Patelleria's famous Muscat wines are picked in stages, starting in August. The most recently picked from the higher vineyards are pressed, and then the dried Zibibbo grapes are added during the fermentation phase. This is a mixture of 25% fresh grapes and 75% dried. After seven months in a steel tank, the wine is bottled and stored for at least one year before being sold - two years after harvest. These

wines have long cellar-lives, and later that evening at a vertical tasting of their Ben Ryé (which means "Son of the Wind"), we got to experience ten (!) vintages from between 1990 and 2012. The 1995, 2001, and 2007 vintages were really something special. José Rallo explained that when these wines were awarded their first prizes, many people were surprised that it was possible to create such fine wines with those types of Muscat grapes - previously only thought of as table-wine grapes.

"We knew the potential. A warm climate isn't an obstacle for quality, while altitude and soil are also important ingredients," says José.

Apricot, honey and minerals from the volcanic soil, as well as salt from Mediterranean breezes are only a





AGRICOLA RALLO HAVE MANY VINEYARDS. TALL ROSEMARY BUSHES BEAUTIFULLY SURROUND PATTI PICCOLO, CLOSE TO ALCAMO.

few of the aromas present in this unique wine. Not just a dessert wine, this one even works without company - a vino di meditazione.

#### **WESTERN SICILY**

After about a 30-minute flight from Pantelleria, we're finally back on Sicily, having landed at an airport between Trapani and Marsala. Trapani is the name of both the capital city and Province located in Sicily's westernmost area. It is also home to the most vineyards than any other Italian Province.

An astounding 65 % of Sicily's grapes come from the western part of the island, while the remaining grapes come from the Etna area in the northwest and from around Ragusa and Syracuse in the south. Sicily has long been associated with viticulture. Towards the end of the second century BC, Sicily became the Roman Empire's first province, functioning at times as the mainland's breadbasket and vineyard. However, it was about 200 years ago that the Marsala wines made the world take no-

tice of the island's wines. The popularity of Marsala wines has waned over time, and some of the families who were previously associated with this wine now focus on other types; this includes José Rallo's father, Giacomo, who sold his Marsala wine division in 1983. Besides the dessert wine Ben Ryé, Donna Fugata produce more than a dozen other wines of varying styles. Their Mille e una Notte and Tancredi have become two of the most appreciated red wines from the island. Both are made

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from the local grape Nero d'Avola, which I'll come to a little later.

### CARUSO AND MININI

In their baglio, once a "country" estate and cellar now surrounded by and in the middle of Marsala, wine producers Caruso & Minini have been active for over 100 years. The company's vineyards lie about 13 km to the east, between Marsala and Salemi. It only takes about 30 minutes to transport the grapes from the fields to the cellar.

"We want to work with small quantities of vineyard wines, and focus on what we do best. That is why we have embraced typicity and local grape varieties," says Giovanna Caruso, a fourth generation family member.

Among these typical varieties is Grillo, which was previously used to make Marsala. Now growing at over 400 m above sea level, these grapes yield dry, slightly bitter wines with mineral characteristics, aged in tonneaux. The altitude makes these completely different from Grillo grown close to the sea, which are the main grapes used in Marsala wines. If you prefer something sweeter, I would recommend their late harvest Tagòs Grillo Vendemmia Tardiva. Inzolia is a low yielding quality white grape, mostly found in the southern areas of Sicily, and even in Tuscany where it is called Ansonica. In Sweden, there seems to be a shortage wines produced solely from Inzolia. This grape feels genuinely Italian. Full of taste, yet unpretentious, with a slightly bitter finish. Their Terre di Guimara is the perfect complement to grilled fish with capers and lem-



GIOVANNA CARUSO HAS A LAW DEGREE BUT ALSO WORKS IN THE FAMILY BUSINESS.

on. This grape has also been used for Marsala wines, as well as Catteratto, the second most used green variety in Italy after Trebbiano. It yields up to 12 kg of grapes per grapevine, and can also be used for grape-distilled and table wines.

The vineyards' altitude differences provide a long harvest period. Chardonnay is harvested as early as in August, while Greciano gets to wait until October. Even though Chardonnay isn't an original Sicilian grape, it thrives in the local conditions, providing very individual wines. Caruso & Minini first ferment these wines in barrels,

and then let them develop further in steel tanks.

Among the native red grapes, I became interested in Perricone, a historic grape reminiscent of Barbera, currently cultivated on a much smaller scale than previously. Normally, it is blended with other varieties, like in Tasca d'Almerita's prestigious Rosso del Conte from central Sicily. Perricone was almost decimated by plagues of grape phylloxera, and when the vineyards were replanted, Nero d'Avola (Sicily's now most popular red wine grape) took its place. Caruso & Minini's Sachia Perricone is a unique single-

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grape wine, special because, unlike their other reds, Sachia Perricone is never barreled.

“It is a conscious, respectful choice to express the characteristics of the grapes,” explains Giovanna.

#### **AGRICOLA RALLO AND MUSITA**

Azienda Agricola Rallo is yet another producer with roots in Marsala, and they currently own the vineyards Bugeber on Pantelleria and Patti Piccolo in Alcamo. Yet another family that have taken note of the potential of local grapes. The Patti Piccolo vineyard has adapted to altitude and created an environment where grapes can thrive at

250 – 600 m above sea level, and have even been growing organic grapes since 1997. From the Pantelleria vineyards comes Al Quasar, their dry Zibibbo containing only 5 g residual sugar and an aromatic, flowery taste. Al Quasar is a great fit with Sicilian cuisine, food with inherent, exotic Arabian nuances. Evrò, made with Inzolia, is another example of a fresh, attractive option. Among the reds, la Clarissa stands out. It is made with Syrah, a grape that has actually been used on the island since Greek colonization in the fifth century BC.

Going higher, literally! Musita’s vineyards reach up to 800 m above

sea level. During the 1970’s, the Rallo’s acquired the Ardagna’s generational, cooperative family wine production situated in the hills around Salemi. After six years of careful restorations by the Rallo family on weekends, they were finally able to start producing their own wines. Patience is a virtue. The white wines are especially attractive. Their complex, sparkling Passocalcara, made from Chardonnay and aged three years, shows the potential of wine from the white calcium-rich soil in the area. Additionally, their Grillo and Cataratto exemplify the terroire. These are, of course, mountain wines. Not sur-



MUSITA’S WINEMAKER MATTIA FILIPPI, ORIGINALLY FROM TRENTO IN NORTHERN ITALY, HAS FOUND HIS HOME IN SICILY.



INSOLIA ( INZOLIA) IS A QUALITY, SICILIAN GRAPE WHICH WE SEE TOO LITTLE OF IN SWEDEN. AGRICOLA RALLO IS ONE OF THE MANY PRODUCERS THAT UNDERSTAND AND APPRECIATE THIS GRAPE.





FEDERICO LOMBARDO DI MONTE JATO, SURROUNDED BY THE UNIQUE VINES AT FIRRIATO'S VINEYARD CAVANERA ON ETNA.



GIUSEPPE RUSSO BEGAN AS A PIANIST, BEFORE TAKING OVER THE FAMILY WINE BUSINESS GIRULAMO RUSSO.



ETNA'S VERY OWN VINEYARD CONTRADA SAN LORENZO CAREFULLY CULTIVATES THE NERELLO MASCALESE GRAPES USED IN GIUSEPPE RUSSO'S EXQUISITE RED WINE SAN LOREZO



WINE FROM ETNA

prisingly, oenologist Mattia Filippi from Trento in northern Italy feels quite at home here. The reds I tasted still gave a sense of youth.

“The red wines need aging, especially regarding Nero d’Avola,” he said.

### ETNA INCLINATIONS

We quickly crossed the island in an attempt to reach even higher. Wine grapes are also grown on Mount Etna, Europe’s tallest active volcano. The mineral-rich soil is a hallmark characteristic of wines from this area. Etna is more than 3300 m high, but the vineyards only grow at about 1000 m. It’s not just the geography that is special,

even the grape varieties grown here. Carricante – an aromatic green grape with high acidity and tinges of plumb, apple, pear and sage - dominates the white wines. As for the reds, Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Capuccio are often used – two indigenous grapes with hints of minerals, cherries and oriental spices. It isn’t difficult to compare Nerello Mascalese with a French Pinot Noir.

Girolamo Russo is run by Giuseppe Russo, who took over the family properties in 2004 to start creating his own wine. Giuseppe Russo is actually a trained pianist, but it is apparent that he a green thumb.

Previously the wine weren’t bottle, just sold in bulk. The year after he took over, Giuseppe decided bottling would increase quality. Seven years later, he was named winemaker of the year by Gambero Rosso. I tasted his San Lorenzo 2013 from the Contrada San Lorenzo vineyard on volcanic Etna, about 700 m above sea level. These Nerello Mascalese vines are between 70 and 100 years old. Post-harvest, the must is steel tank fermented for about three weeks before being transferred to barrique, where it is further aged for sixteen months before finally being bottled.



Firriato is yet another regional producer. Owner Salvatore di Gaetano and his wife Vinzia began their journey close to Trapani more than 30 years ago. Today, they have several vineyards, including Cavanera on Etna's northern slope. Son-in-law Federico Lombardo di Monte Jato took us on a hike up to the fields. The sandy, volcanic soil provides the best environment for these vines to thrive in, and even protect them from aphids. As a result, some of the vines are more than 130 years old. Besides the area's more common grape varieties (Nerello Mascalese, Nerello Cappuccio, Carricante and Cataratto) some more unusual grapes can be found here – one of which is Minella, an exotic white grape with taste of anise and cinnamon. It is usually used in Carricante and Cataratto blends. The grape is not permitted for Etna DOC, which is why wines with this special grape are classified as IGT Sicilia. "Minella" in local dialect is a word for "small bust," based on the shape of the grapes.

At an altitude of somewhere between 600 and 800 m above sea level, Federico points to how far the lava flow reached after the huge eruption in 1556. Even though we know how much the soil can give, it was made apparent how quickly the Earth can take it back.

"We're only guests here on Etna," he humbly adds.

#### **ETT DOCG IN SOUTHEAST**

It is impossible to write an article about Sicily without naming Cerasuolo di Vittoria, the island's (so far) only DOCG. This wine comes from Sicily's southeastern



SICILY'S ONLY (THUS FAR) DOCG, CERASUOLO DI VITTORIA (PRODUCED BY VALLE DELL'ACATE), HAILS FROM THE ISLAND'S SOUTHEASTERN CAPE, AND GETS ITS NAME FROM VITTORIA, A TOWN BETWEEN RAGUSA AND GELA.

corner, named for Vittoria, a town between Ragusa and Gela. This is the same area where the famous television detective Montalbano solves his cases. This particular wine is comprised of both Nero d'Avola (50-70%) and Frappato (30-50%) grapes. Nero d'Avola is Sicily's most popular red grape, enjoying the warm climate and giving robust, ageable wines. Frappato is an aromatic red grape, with low tannins and a berry taste. The result of this fusion is Sicily's lone DOCG. An elegant wine whose color and aroma are reminiscent of cherries, just as the name (cerasuolo) alludes to. Planeta, Feudi del Pisciotto, Terre di Giurfo and Valle dell'Acate are among a handful of producers that make Cerasuolo di Vittoria.

September 13th, 2015, was the ten-year anniversary for this DOCG. Isn't it about time for yet another?! Reflecting upon my visit to Sicily, I can certainly say that there are several strong candidates...



THE GIANT FENNEL - A COMMON SIGHT ACROSS SICILY'S COUNTRYSIDE.



ANTIPASTI - DIVERSE, TASTY SICILIAN CUISINE.



ETNA FROM TAORMINA.