

Sunday, September 14, 2014

## "Heroic Winemaking" in Windswept Pantelleria, Home to Ancient Passito Wine

The wine known as "the liquid of the gods" is steeped in history, myth and the land

Story and photo gallery by Dwight Casimere

Pantelleria, Sicily--The flight into Pantelleria's mountaintop airport was urged on by the powerful winds that give this tiny island just north of Tunisia on the African coast, its name. Upon check-in at the gate at Rome airport, the boarding agent breathlessly announced that that day's single flight to this island paradise would be departing as scheduled, a tentative proposition owing to cancellations frequented by the island's windy conditions.

The view was breathtaking as the plane, which doubles as a mail plane for the local postal service, made its forceful landing on the airport's single landing strip. The most striking visual element; the lack of sandy beaches on the coastline ringed aqua-marine waters that sparkle as if sprinkled with precious stones. The coastline's outcroppings of black rock and boulders look more like something from the surface of the moon than the topography of a tropical island.

Pantelleria is steeped in myth and ancient history. The Greeks settled here, as did the Spanish, the Romans, the Turks and the Byzantines. The Greeks set many of their myths in the windswept setting of Pantelleria. It is here that Odysseus faced some of his greatest obstacles and where, according to legend, the goddess Tanit won Apollo's love by offering him a glass of Passito. In later year, the legendary lover, Giacomo Casanova lured his romantic prey by offering them a glass of the intensely sweet potion.

In spite of the many footprints that have trod these rocky slopes, it is that of the Arabs, that has made the most enduring imprint. Their influence can be seen everywhere, from the names of local towns, Mueggen, Gadir, Bukkuram and Khamma, home to [Donnafugata](#) winery the subject of the day's visit to observe the Zibbibo grape harvest and the drying process known as "Passito," from which the name of the local wine is derived. The Arab influence is seen everywhere, but most strikingly in a later architectural tour of the island's many stone buildings, built by Arab architects and artisans.

Unlike Sarah Palin's bogus claims of being able to "see Alaska from my kitchen window (sic)." you really can see Tunisia and the coast of north Africa from Pantelleria. The continent is only 37 miles away and is entirely visible on a clear day.

It follows that the wine industry in Pantelleria is firmly rooted in the cultural history of North Africa. The Zibbibo grape, from which its famous Passito wine is made, was the favored grape of Egypt and was said to have been brought here by the ancient Phoenicians. The grape is uniquely suited to thrive in the island's volcanic soil and high winds; shielding itself by growing close to the ground, nearly burrowing itself into the sandy clay soil. This ancient grape, also known as Muscat of Alexandria (Muscat d'Alexandrie) is one of the oldest genetically unmodified vines still in existence.

The grapes are all hand harvested. It's back-breaking work, with workers carefully examining each bunch and discarding the spoiled fruit and meticulously removing the stems by hand. Winds whipping across the vineyards, stirring up mouthfuls of dust make the work that much more arduous.

[Donnafugata](#) winery has been making Passito since its inception. Its award-winning wine is called Ben Rye (pronounced ben ree-ay). The name means "born of the wind."

The wine is produced using a centuries-old process, involving drying the grapes on mats in a long shed in the open air and under the hot sun to create a wine that is concentrated with intense flavors and aromas and a high level of sugar. Even though [Donnafugata](#) is a thoroughly modern facility in every way, the method in which it makes its Ben Rye is derived from its pre-industrial past.

Standing amidst 120 year old vines, winemaker and technical director Antonio Rallo describes the labor-intensive process. "We're trying to create a flavor and aroma that is completely different from that of fresh grapes. We're not trying to preserve aromas of the fresh grape, but to find new aromas from the dried grape. We get this completely new flavor and aroma from the sun and the wind that is unique to this place."

Walking through the football-field lengths of drying sheds, one can see the grapes at various stages of the passito process, from fresh, plump, fleshy grapes, to dried fruit that almost look like

### About Me



#### Dwight the Connoisseur

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Dwight The Wine Doctor has been named Best Wine Blog 2011 by New City magazine, and NewCity.com in its Dec 15, 2011 Best of Chicago issue. He has covered Vintaly in Verona, Italy, London Wine Fair, Aspen Wine and Food Classic, New Orleans Wine Experience, Sonoma Wine Country Weekend and the Landmark Tutorial in Barossa Valley near Adelaide, Australia. His travels have taken him to Marrakech, Morocco, Galway, Ireland, Verona Italy, London and Australia. A regular reviewer of the Chicago Symphony and Lyric Opera as well as the Metropolitan Opera, New York Philharmonic, Carnegie Hall concert series, Jazz at Lincoln Center, American Ballet Theatre (ABT) and the Joffrey Ballet and Art Basel Miami. He was a Juror in the 2012 International Wine Competition in Verona, Italy. Mr. Casimere is a Certified Member of the Court of Master Sommeliers.

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raisins. But, instead of having a tart, mouth-puckering flavor, these dried grapes are ultra-sweet.

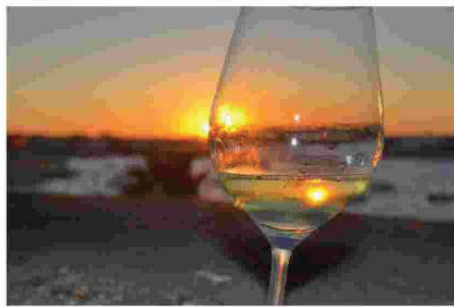
Later that evening, after swallowing a mouthful of dust and developing several charley horses on the back of my calves from the day's strenuous trek through the vineyards, it was time to celebrate back at the winery "Big House" in Khamma. Passito wine flowed like water as tray up tray of the island's prized "Gambero Rosso," the Ruby-red shrimp that feed on the island's coral reefs were served. A sideboard of local cheeses and platters of olives and the popular dish, caponata, featuring the island's native capers begged further inspection. Meanwhile, mounds of sugary sweet pastries, with their mouth crunchy layers of flaky, delicate layered pastry and marzipan covered cakes, jokingly called "the virgin's breast," were quaffed down with heavenly golden Passito wine. This was truly a Feast for the Gods in a place they call "The Land of Liquid Prayers."



The windswept coastline and azure Mediterranean Sea of Pantelleria



Drying sheds for Passito grapes dot the landscape



The golden hue of Passito wines



Donnofugata



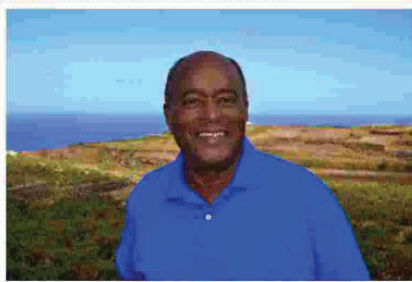
Donnafugata Hospitality Director Mimma Zingale and Dwight The Wine Doctor at the celebration



Native couscous is prepared in the traditional manner by hand



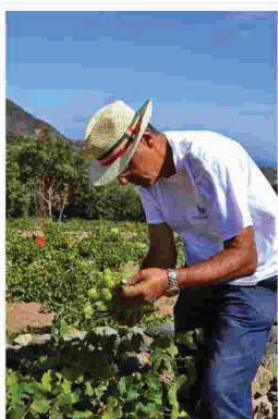
Zibbibo grapes grow in abundance everywhere on Pantelleria



Just another one of the field hands!



Zibbibo grapes are carefully sorted before the crush to ensure that only the best and ripest are used



Each grape bunch is carefully inspected and pruned by hand in the field



**Donnafugata** Owner and CEO Jose Rallo proudly presides over the Zibbibo harvest

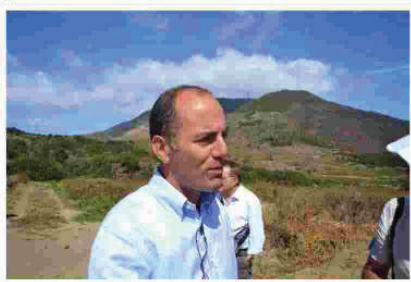




Zibbibo grapes ready to be taken to the winery for the crush



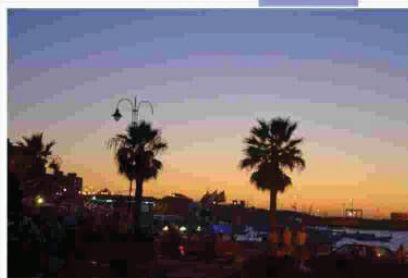
A traditional Caponara



Hand pruning and de-stemming in the field is back-breaking work



Zibbibo grapes drying "in passito" in the drying sheds at Donnafugata



Sunset over the Pantelleria harbor outside Castello Barbacane



The crushing facility and conveyor belt at Donnafugata's Pantelleria facility



The award-winning Ben Rye of Donnafugata



Capers grow wild across the island. Here, they are cultivated by farmers on terra



An ancient Bizantine stone house known as Pantelleria Dammuso  
Below: Sunset over the island of Pantelleria

