

In the shadow of the Temple of Juno, workers from the CVA Canicatti cooperative pick Nero d'Avola grapes under a scorching Sicilian sun.

# Harvest in Sicily

FROM THE TEMPLE OF JUNO TO THE HISTORIC CELLARS OF DONNAFUGATA

story and photos by Jonathan Cristaldi

Driving south from Palermo, Sicily, our driver careened down highways, speeding through tiny towns, past the Belice Valley—where seemingly endless vineyards grow on rolling hills surrounded by steep mountains—on past Trapani (where the Sicilian mafia is still active and the locals are wealthier than those in Palermo), on past farms and pasture land and olive groves and bushes of wild oleander, bougainvillea and cactus fruit (fichi d'India), past bright gleaming swatches of exposed calcareous rock, on and on, until at last, we reached Agrigento and the Valley of the Temples.

We pulled into the Diodoros Vineyard, which sits in the shadow of the Temple of Juno. Nero d'Avola, Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Cappuccio grapes grow in three hectares of alluvial soil so incredibly soft, that with each step you sink into crunchy soil, the sound of which is underscored by a nearby brook—a positively serene welcome to Sicily. The vineyard is owned by a cooperative called **CVA Canicatti**, based in Agrigento. Giovanni Greco, President of CVA, who previously worked for the department of agriculture in Sicily, has helped shift the focus of the cooperative from basic wines to more complex, smaller-production offerings. Most growers only work with between two and ten hectares.

At a picnic lunch, the **2012 Diodoros** was sampled. A dark ruby wine, loaded with red berry and mocha spice, bolstered by mouth-gripping tannins, rounded out by a touch of pleasantly integrated sweet oak. Other standouts from the cooperative were a bright mineral and citrus-driven **2013 Fileño** (Grillo grape) and a **2012 Centuno** (Nero d'Avola) of bright raspberry and dark cherry, earth, spice and pleasant mineral character. This winery is currently seeking a U.S. importer for California and other states.

Later, traveling west to the city of Marsala, I visited the historical cellars of **Donnafugata**, where José Rallo—co-owner with her brother Antonio, as well as the voice and visage of the Sicilian winery—hosted a luncheon featuring typical Sicilian street food paired with six of her family's signature wines. An octopus salad accompanied the **2014 Anthilla**, a light golden-colored wine made from Catarratto grapes, showing vibrant flavors of fleshy peach, pineapple and pear with dazzling minerality and a peculiar bright spice note reminiscent of the local sun-drenched *garrigue*, which locals refer to as the “*macchia mediterranea*,” and which Rallo suggestively refers to as a “provocation.” Ricotta and anchovies paired with a **2014 SurSur** (Grillo), which offered notes of lemon, ripe pear, sagebrush and a kind of candied mineral character. Other standouts were a **2011 Tancredi**, a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Nero d'Avola, Tannat and other varieties, with rich black fruit, savory spice, robust tannins and graphite notes, while the **2010 Mille e Una Notte** blend of Nero d'Avola, Petit Verdot and Syrah was sublimely floral with blackberry, tobacco, licorice and mocha spice.

Not only is Rallo a local celebrity, she's a talented vocalist who has staged several “multi-sensorial” experiences as part of the Donnafugata “Music & Wine Live” project. Rallo produced two albums, one released in 2004 and another in 2007, and all proceeds have benefited the pediatric heart department at the Palermo City Hospital in addition to several local non-profit organizations. Donnafugata's wines are imported to the U.S. by Folio Fine Wine Partners. ■



José Rallo broke out into song at the end of our tasting—a sensual jazz number called “An Older Man is Like an Elegant Wine.”

