

Zibibbo grapes on the Italian island of Pantelleria, bush trained in basins, which is known as the “alberello pantesco” training system.



story and photos by Jonathan Cristaldi

Pantelleria is a wind-blown 30-square mile island with a network of winding roads built during Mussolini's reign, world-class resorts for the rich and famous, and roughly 9,800 acres of vineyards. I toured the island, which is southwest of Sicily and about ten miles from Tunisia, in the fall of 2015 with Antonio Rallo, fifth-generation owner of Sicily's Donnafugata winery, and President of the Sicilian D.O.C. "For 500 years the Arabs ruled this island and they brought Zibibbo [Muscat of Alexandria] to the island," he told me. "And they brought table grapes to make raisins, which started the tradition of making *passito* wines."

Donnafugata Winery is growing 168 acres of Zibibbo for their Ben Ryé Passito di Pantelleria. Vines have to be cultivated by hand, in basins, consisting of two to four branches with horizontal growth—this method of cultivation is known as the “alberello pantesco” training system and was added to the UNESCO World Heritage list in November of 2014—the first time an

agricultural method was included.

Roughly ten pounds of fresh grapes when dried yields about two and half pounds of dried grapes. For every 100 liters of fresh Zibibbo must, roughly 160 pounds of dry grapes are added to the must in three stages as it is fermenting. Color and flavors leech out of the dried grapes during fermentation, which is what gives the Ben Ryé its orangey-tawny tinge, along with some of that classic *passito* character—natural sweetness, and aromas of dried apricots and figs.

At roughly 1,300 feet in elevation on Pantelleria, Donnafugata has planted a working experimental vineyard, designed to enhance and preserve the Zibibo variety. Under the direction of Professor Attilio Scienza, 33 biotypes of Zibibbo grapes have been planted. Touring that vineyard, which is planted in incredibly lightweight pumice stone soils, we tasted several Calabrian and French biotypes, and they were sweet and juicy. Other Spanish

biotypes were more fragrant. The goal, Rallo explained, is ultimately to find “a natural crossing [of Zibibbo grapes] that creates one that offers intense aromas and also develops a thick skin, so it is disease resistant, but also delivers high acidity.”

Back at the winery, I sampled fresh Zibibbo must, which wafts of jasmine and is fresh and juicy with nice texture and a



very grapey taste. Sampling the **Ben Ryé 2013 Passito di Pantelleria** side-by-side, the similarities in aromas and flavors become clear, and with fermentation and aging come aromas and flavors of candied orange peel, hazelnuts, almonds and Mediterranean scrub and fresh and natural sweetness, underscored by great acidity. *sj*

Donnafugata wines are imported by Folio Wine Partners.



Antonio Rallo studied oenology in Sicily and has also spent time working in Alsace and Germany.



When making Passito di Pantelleria, fresh grapes require three to four weeks for drying.



One vineyard worker can pick around 88 pounds per day of dry grapes off the stems.