

A vineyard steeped in social values

By Elisabetta Povoledo

MILAN

When asked whether she had a lot in common with Governor Sarah Palin of Alaska, the multitasking Republican vice presidential candidate in the United States, José Rallo laughed heartily.

"I think most women multitask," said Rallo, 43, a principal at the Donnafugata winery in Sicily. "And it isn't easy."

At the family-run winery, which had sales of €16.7 million or \$24 million, last year from more than a dozen varieties of rich, full-bodied Sicilian wine, Rallo helps run things and supervises the marketing and public relations teams. That's when she's not raising her two children, ages 9 and 12, with her husband, an insurance executive; fronting a jazz ensemble that promotes her wines; or sitting on the board of Banco Sicilia, one of two women ever to do so.

"The problem for a woman is organizing time," Rallo said. In the end, she believes, it makes you a better manager.

A woman's sensibility is at the heart of Donnafugata, which was founded in 1983 by Rallo's parents as an offshoot of a family business started in 1851. The name is an homage to the imaginary town in Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's 1958 epic novel "The Leopard." The name translates as "woman in flight" and alludes to a Habsburg queen, Maria Carolina, who took refuge in Sicily when Napoleon's

troops invaded Naples. "I'm convinced that the values at Donnafugata are

linked to my being a mother and involved in society," she said.

Those values, Rallo said, can be summed up as "enterprise, nature, culture" — an integrated effort to foster social and environmental responsibility in the territory in which Donnafugata operates.

Sitting on the board of one of Sicily's biggest banks by assets, which is now part of the much bigger Unicredit Group, is an integral part of the picture. The sun-drenched Italian island is at the heart of Donnafugata's image. "People like Sicily," Rallo said. "They want sun, they want a taste of the south, they want human warmth. It's our value added."

Massimiliano Bruni, co-director of the new master's degree program in fine food and beverage at Bocconi University in Milan, said efforts like Rallo's were bearing fruit. "In the last 10 years there's been an improvement in quality, as well as in the ability to create the notion of a specific Sicilian product and promote Sicily," which has given these wines an edge, he said.

The cultural side of Rallo's mission comes in with "Donnafugata Music & Wine Sessions," a marketing innova-

tion that lets Rallo and her husband, Vincenzo Favara, meld their interest in music — she is a singer, he a percussionist — with promoting their wine.

They have brought Donnafugata musical wine tastings to restaurants and clubs around the world, including New York, where they played and sipped at the legendary Blue Note. Proceeds from the sale of their second CD are being used for microcredit loans to assist start-up businesses. "We need to

support small enterprise," Rallo said.

Growing up, it was never a given that Rallo would join the family business. She left home after high school to study economics at the Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna in Pisa because "Sicily was a little confining in 1983," she said. "I didn't see much of a future there either professionally or as a woman."

After graduation she went to work for Andersen Consulting and Arthur Andersen in Rome, where she learned that "no one is indispensable and that good managers are those who ensure that their work can be picked up by anyone else at any time," she said.

Rallo imparted that style to the family business when she joined in 1990.

She also brought a green sensibility, installing in 2001 a photovoltaic system to produce clean energy at the three estates in Sicily and on the island of Pantelleria where grapes for Donnafugata wine are grown. For the past decade, the winery has held night harvests in August, lowering the risk of untimely fermentation and reducing the energy consumption needed to cool the grapes.

Why the early jump into environmental issues? "I have children," Rallo said simply. "Of course I think of the environment."



Photographs by Lidia Costantini of Donnafugata

José Rallo in her vineyards, left, and in a cellar at the Donnafugata winery, where she mixes social and environmental responsibility.

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