

TWO

by Gurvinder Bhatia

ISLANDS



They both possess a magical allure, unwittingly attracting the people who need to find them. One is an island, while the other is referred to by its owner as “an island within an island.” Travelling to either is not easy, but both Pantelleria and Feudo Montoni are well worth the pilgrimage. As “islands”, they face peculiarities that, ironically, both threaten and safeguard their sustainability and viability.

PANTELLERIA

Geographically and geologically, Antonio Rallo of Donnafugata mentions it is closer to Africa than Sicily. By “it,” he is referring to the ancient, volcanic, wind-buffed island of Pantelleria, which lies some 100 kilometres southwest of Sicily and less than 40 kilometres from Tunisia.

The arid, wind-swept landscape — jagged, rocky cliffs; dry-stone walls; century-old, ungrafted, low-trained vines (alberello) and olive trees; and ancient, stone dammusi — creates the impression of Pantelleria being even more remote than it is. The wind is significant because it affects all aspects of life on the island including agriculture, which historically, says Rallo, has been its major industry.

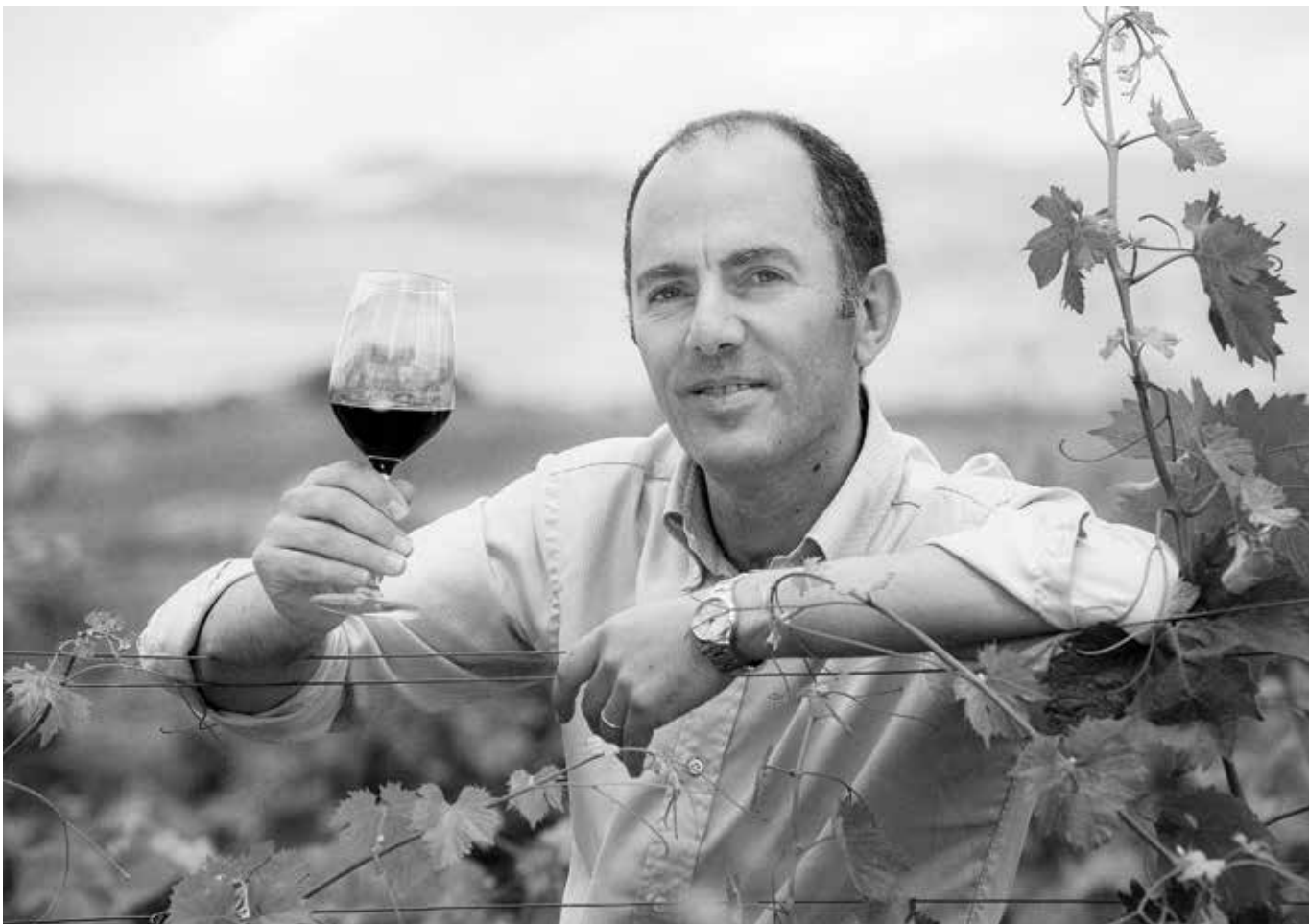
By all accounts, Pantelleria was occupied by numerous peoples throughout its history. However, Rallo explains that it is the Arab influence on the island that remains most prominent. Most districts have Arabic names and the island’s predominant and most important grape variety, Zibibbo (aka, Moscato d’Alessan-

dria), says Rallo, arrived on the island with the Arabs in 800 AD. At the time, the grape was grown and dried for consumption as raisins, as opposed to the production of Passito-style wines, for which it is best known today.

Viticulture on the island is not easy. Steep slopes, terraced vineyards and low-trained alberello vines require back-breaking manual labour. Moreover, the alberello are grown in hollows to protect the vines from the wind.

The Moscato and Passito wines of Pantelleria have received international recognition. Donnafugata’s Passito di Pantelleria Ben Ryé is considered one of Italy’s benchmark wines. The winery has vineyards in 14 different locations on Pantelleria. According to Rallo, the combination of the different districts gives the best balance, which is why they only produce one Passito.

It takes four kilograms of grapes to make one litre of Passito wine. Donnafugata produces approximately 80,000 bottles (750ml equivalents) in this style a year. Today, Donnafugata can make a sustainable profit on its Passito, but for the first 10 years “not at all.”



ANTONIO RALLO

According to Rallo, approximately 7,000 people currently live on Pantelleria, down from a peak of 20,000 over half a century ago. He also explains that the island is 8,000 hectares in total, of which only 400 hectares are under vine. But, he adds, in the 1970s, half of the total area of the island was vineyards.

The decline of viticulture is due mainly to that fact that the work is too hard for the money. Young people don't want to stay on Pantelleria and it is difficult to find people to work. The average age of vineyard workers is over 65 years old.

According to Rallo, Donnafugata was the first producer from outside Pantelleria to make wines on the island. Its first vineyard was just 2.5 hectares; now Donnafugata has close to 70 hectares.

Each year, Donnafugata acquires vineyards, often not because they want to, but because they feel they have to — otherwise the vineyards will be abandoned. In many instances, older vineyard owners don't have children who want to farm. On average, Donnafugata acquires one to three hectares a year from estates, or from those who no longer want to work the vineyards themselves.

The cost to purchase vineyards, says Rallo, is relatively low. But, theoretically, he says, "there should be no price as growing grapes on the island is not sustainable. The only way to make it work is to make a good Passito and farm the land yourself."

Giulia Pazienza Gelmetti of Coste Ghirlanda first came to Pantelleria in 2001. The former professional basketball player

and Italian national team member fell in love with the island and now has 30 hectares, growing Zibibbo and Grenache, and also owns Sikelia, a luxury five-star resort.

Gelmetti explains that everything on the island is difficult: "You can try fighting against nature, but nature always wins." Everyone, including her husband, initially said she was crazy to open a five-star resort on the island. But, even at more than 800 euros a night, Gelmetti says the hotel's top suite is always full. Guests are 70 percent international and 30 percent from Italy.

The peaceful solitude, remoteness and beauty of Pantelleria have always made it an attractive getaway for the rich and famous. Giorgio Armani has owned a house on the island for decades and still retreats to it for a month each summer.

But the winds, lack of accessible beaches and lack of hotels have kept Pantelleria from being overrun by tourism, which is precisely why, according to Rallo, so many wealthy people from northern Italy own vacation homes here. There are also several luxurious homes on the island that are rented by those who wish to temporarily fall off the grid.

Eight producers comprise Pantelleria's wine consortium and account for 85 to 90 percent of the island's total production. Some producers are very small but they work with the larger producers to explore commercial sales off the island. Sustainability is the greatest challenge as more and more

young people choose to leave. Together, the producers discuss, collaborate and conduct training programs for youth and those who work in the eno-gastronomic sector. They hope that by investing time and energy in trying to give a future to the island's youth, that they will become ambassadors for Pantelleria and be encouraged to stay and attract others.

Pantelleria's recent status change to one of Sicily's national parks, as well as UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity recognition for the alberello cultivation of Zibibbo and the art of building dry-stone walls, may also result in renewed interest and perhaps more resources.

Donnafugata produces wines all over Sicily, but Rallo chooses to work the harvest on Pantelleria. Gelmetti could live anywhere, but she was drawn to Pantelleria from the moment she set foot during her first visit. Rallo says, "when you start coming here, you will never stop."

FEUDO MONTONI

Feudo Montoni is located at elevations of 400 to 750 metres above sea level in the centre of Sicily where the provinces of Agrigento, Palermo and Caltanissetta meet. Owner Fabio Sireci calls it "an island within an island."

Sireci's characterization is not just in reference to the property's remote location, but also the isolation of its vineyards due to the massive fields of durum wheat that have surrounded Montoni for centuries. The result, according to several wine professionals, including Ian D'Agata, Bill Nesto MW and the late Giacomo Tachis, is a purity in the DNA of the estate's vines. Unaffected by outside influences, Montoni's wines have a unique sense of place.

Wine has seemingly been produced at Montoni for centuries. According to Sireci and partner Melissa Muller (an American of Sicilian heritage who owned several Sicilian restaurants in New York before selling them and moving to Montoni), the property passed hands many times, but always remained in the possession of aristocratic families.

While the exact date that Montoni was built is not known, Sireci says that written documents show that the property comprised more than 2,000 hectares in the 14th century and that a stone of benediction found on the estate bears the date 1469.

Sireci's grandfather purchased Montoni in the late 1800s. Old vines existed on the property, but wine was not considered as important as durum wheat at the time, with the area known historically as the granary of the Roman Empire.

It was Sireci's father who started to provide energy to the estate's wine production. The majority of grapes were initially sold to producers like Tasca d'Almerita (the nearest winery to Feudo Montoni). It was Tasca, says Sireci, that gave significant guidance with respect to how to manage Montoni's vineyards in order to make quality wine.

Sireci listened and observed and, in 1985, started to "play" with the wines by making numerous micro-vinifications each year to understand the different characteristics of the different sites on the property. He says that he is not an oenologist, but a mechanical engineer. He believes that he can only make good wine at Montoni because he "knows his baby and knows the grapes."

It was Tachis that, after tasting Feudo Montoni's Vrucara, a single-vineyard Nero d'Avola from pre-phylloxera vines, told Sireci that the wine had a richness of elegance, style and class to distinguish it from the ordinary and stand apart from even the more structured Nero d'Avola produced in Sicily.

Standing in the Vrucara vineyard among the century-old, pre-phylloxera vines is a spiritual experience. Numerous posts each represent a "son" of Vrucara. Sireci explains that they needed to plant new vines in 2005, but when they tried to plant wild vines from the property, they always died because the "baby" could not compete with the roots of the old vines.

However, to protect the genetic identity of the Vrucara vineyard, Sireci didn't want to plant vines from outside the property, such as by purchasing vines from a nursery (which is what most wineries do). So, instead, he extended an arm from a Vrucara vine and buried it a metre underground while still attached to the "mother" plant. Sireci explains that it takes at least five to six years before the baby is self-sustaining. The mother plant can't sustain supporting itself and its baby forever so eventually the umbilical cord connecting the two must be cut. Sireci believes that the genetic identity and sustainability of the Vrucara vineyard can be maintained through this process. The Vrucara vineyard is only 2.2 hectares, but three people work at Vrucara full-time, year-round.

Feudo Montoni today consist of 100 hectares of which 40 hectares are under vine, with a mix of Catarratto, Inzolia, Grillo, Nero d'Avola, Nerello Mascalese and Perricone. Montoni also grows heritage grains, wild oats, fenugreek, chickpeas, honeysuckle, fava beans, lentils, dill, wild fennel and olive trees. Durum wheat is still grown, but because it takes nutrients from the soil, it's only planted in a site for one year. The next year, nitrogen-fixing legumes, such as chickpeas and fava beans, are planted in the site to enrich the soil.

Sireci says Montoni is an island, an organic island, that provides work for 15 people. "Organic" in Italian, he explains, is *biológico*, and *bio* means life. For him and Muller, organic doesn't just have to do with the plants, it also has to do with the people. Giving people the opportunity to work gives them a purpose and an identity. Sireci says that if Montoni was not organic, it could just spray or mechanize, which would mean that not as much labour would be required. But he believes in having a bigger concept of sustainability and his purpose goes beyond just making wine for money.

For Sireci and Muller, "organic is not a leaf on a label." Rather, it is the philosophy with which they live their lives. Since the wines of Feudo Montoni have started receiving greater international recognition and accolades, Sireci has been approached by large distributors, but he always says no to them. Muller says that the right partners — ones who understand their philosophy — will ultimately find them. Montoni, she adds, attracts the people who should be a part of it. How Muller found her way here is a story unto itself, but when she first visited, she felt this place "is the truth."

Isolation also allows these islands to maintain a purity of spirit as everything around them changes. Montoni stays timeless, but not lost in time because, as Muller points out, they are not lost. ✱