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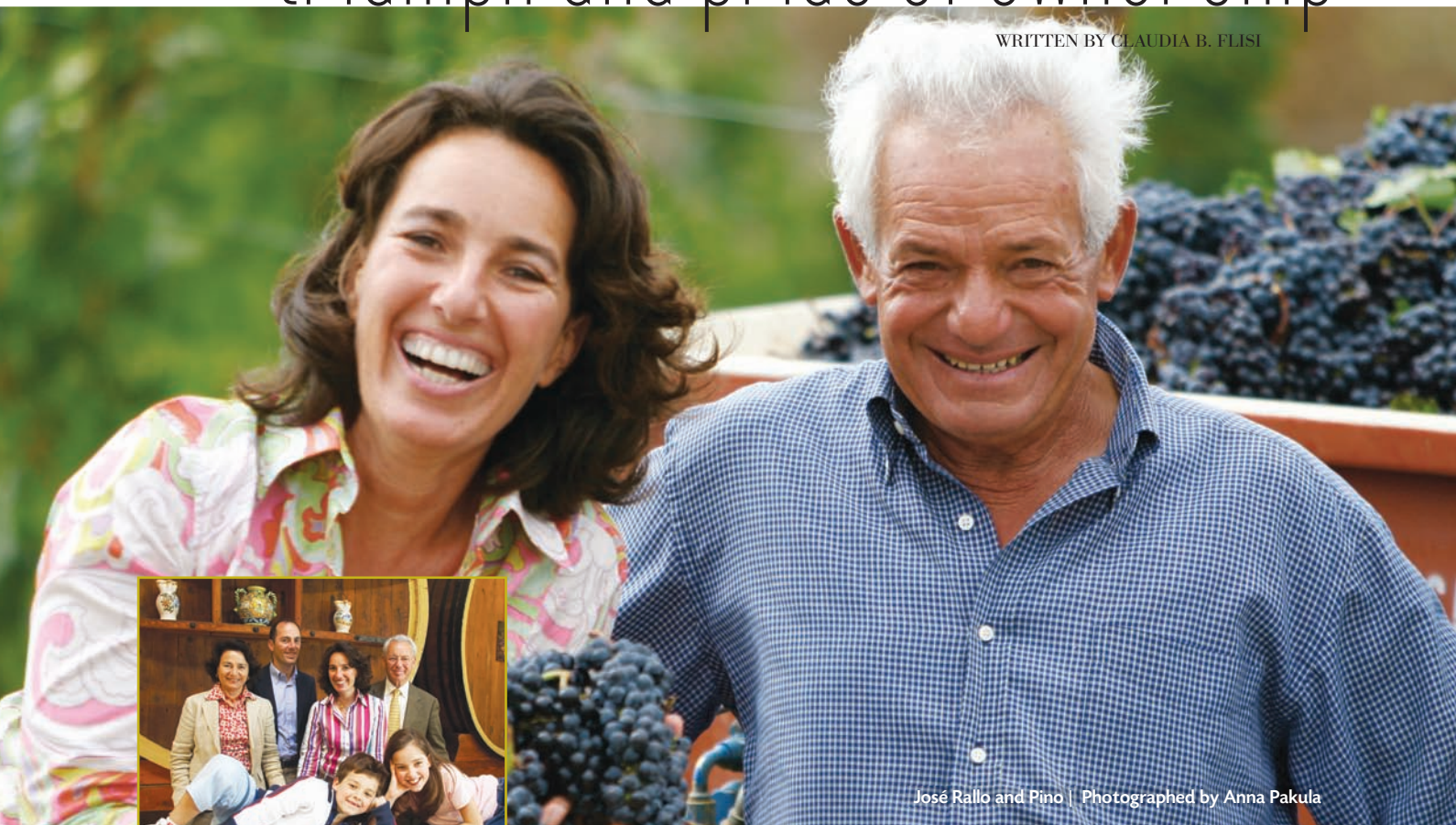


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Donnafugata—a story of triumph and pride of ownership

WRITTEN BY CLAUDIA B. FLISI



José Rallo and Pino | Photographed by Anna Pakula



Gabriella Rallo with daughter, José Rallo, and family

Get a taste of Italy's wine industry from Gabriella Rallo, owner of the acclaimed Donnafugata Winery in Sicily. Her hard work, determination and the help of her children have helped her to overcome the obstacles of a male-dominated field, while establishing her very own legacy in wine.

It's not easy to be a female business entrepreneur in Italy, where the percentage of working women is among the lowest in Europe. It's even harder to be a businesswoman in Sicily, where old macho attitudes have lingered. And it's tougher still to be a businesswoman in the wine industry, a conservative, male-dominated sector worldwide.

But Gabriella Rallo and her daughter José have succeeded in overcoming all these obstacles, and in the process have created one of the best-regarded wineries in Italy – Donnafugata. The name means “woman in flight” (evoking an episode in Sicilian history), but it is at odds with the character of any member of the Rallo family, all of whom have always confronted problems rather than fleeing from them.

José Rallo, the spokesperson for Donnafugata today, describes her mother as positive and determined. Like mother, like daughter.

Gabriella was a high school teacher of literature and history in Marsala, Sicily, when

she inherited 100 hectares of land from her father in 1976. José was a management consultant in Rome. In both situations, the women literally rolled up their sleeves and went to work, one to create a new business, the other to modernize it.

Gabriella was 34-years-old and a mother of two (José and her brother Antonio), when the Contessa Entellina estate in western Sicily, about an hour from Marsala, became hers. “My mother always had a green thumb,” says José. Gabriella decided to develop the land for wine. At the time, the estate was producing large quantities of low-quality indigenous grapes.

Gabriella and her husband, Giacomo, wanted to create an internationally respected label through better cultivation techniques, a wider variety of grapes, including international varieties that would be more familiar to potential customers abroad, and sophisticated marketing.

Giacomo’s family had bottled Marsala wine for five generations from an historic headquarters in Marsala. His marketing and commercial experience balanced his wife’s background in grape growing. With Giacomo’s encouragement, Gabriella spent the next eight years studying the wine business and in 1983, Donnafugata was born.

*“My mother was the first woman
in Sicily to put on boots and supervise
her workers in the field,”*

“My mother was the first woman in Sicily to put on boots and supervise her workers in the field,” recalls José proudly. “She had to overcome not only the prejudices of being a woman, but also the prejudices of traditional grape growers in Sicily, who wanted to grow as many grapes as possible on every vine.” At Donnafugata, yield fell from 10 kilos of grapes per plant to 800 grams, and this was not easy for the male workers to accept. Gabriella had to explain the difference between grape quantity and quality. “As a woman, she was more flexible, more open to innovation and change than the men were,” suggests her daughter.

José’s contributions to Donnafugata have been equally innovation-oriented. After following a classic course of study in high school, José won a scholarship to study economics and business in Pisa. She then went to work in Rome, first with Arthur Andersen and then with Andersen Consulting.

At Andersen, she learned three important management lessons that she would later put into practice at Donnafugata: No one is irreplaceable, information technology is essential, and if you can’t measure it, you can’t manage it.

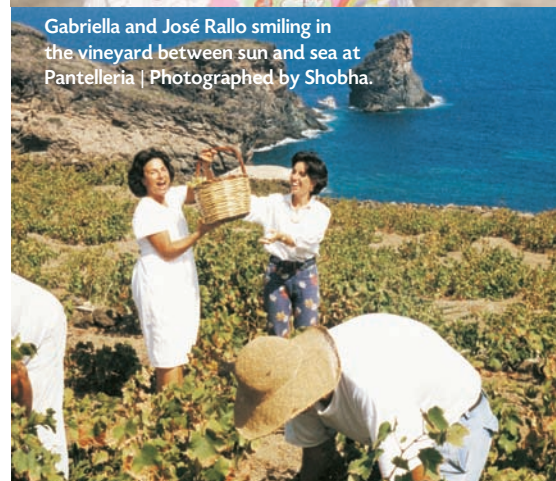
In 1990, José met her husband-to-be Vincenzo Favara at a jazz concert in Rome. Their love of music led to them performing together, and wound up with the music of the Wedding March. Vincenzo wanted to return to Sicily and José agreed. “Since I was coming back to Sicily, it made sense that I would work in the family business.”

After seven years away, the younger Rallo saw the shortcomings of the rapidly growing family business with objective eyes. One of the first things she did was introduce information technology throughout the company.

Another area of the business that required attention was marketing and communications



José Rallo | Photographed by Anna Pakula

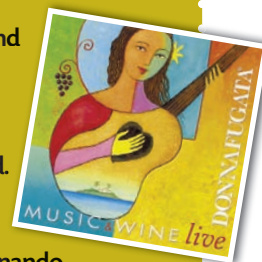


Gabriella and José Rallo smiling in the vineyard between sun and sea at Pantelleria | Photographed by Shobha.

MUSIC & WINE

When José Rallo and Vincenzo Favara returned to Sicily in 1990, they created a jazz band. With the birth of their children

Gabriella and Ferdinando, plus José’s responsibilities at Donnafugata, the music was put aside. In 2000, Vincenzo decided to revive their love of music. He proposed combining the two which resulted in Donnafugata Music & Wine. “That did it,” laughs José. “We formed the group in 2002, and have released two CDs so far.”



A vision of the Khamma Winery and the
Zibibbo vineyards | Photographed by
Anna Pakula.



In 1994, the cantina in Marsala opened to the public for the first time.

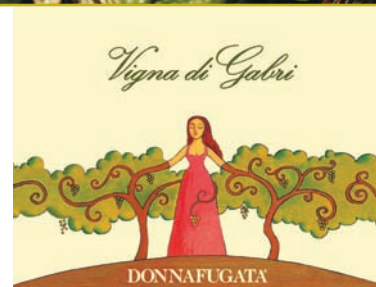
“You can’t open your facility to the public unless you have an orderly appearance,” explains José. Therefore, it made sense to qualify for an ISO rating, and Donnafugata earned an ISO 9001 in 2001. The company has continued to earn ISO ratings ever since.

In 1995, Donnafugata launched its first Web site. In 1998, the company tested the idea of nocturnal harvesting, and made it official the following year. The result is better preserved aroma in the grapes and an energy savings of up to 70 per cent.

In 1999, Donnafugata opened its first dedicated press office. Today, the company’s administrative staff in Marsala is made up of women, a source of pride for José and her mother. “I try to give my female employees maximum flexibility,” says the younger Rallo.

“Women who are good can make themselves accepted in Sicily, in the wine business, anywhere they want.” 

www.donnafugata.it



Donnafugata Polena



Donnafugata Grappa di Nero d'Avola



Donnafugata Anthilia

DONNAFUGATA THUMBNAIL

Donnafugata grows and bottles grapes from three locations in Sicily, and has witnessed a nine per cent increase in sales in 2006. Sales are about 22 per cent outside Italy, a figure expected to increase to almost 40 per cent in coming years.

The company produces six white wines, five reds, two dessert wines and two grappas. All have received international recognition and one dessert wine, Ben Ryé, has been named one of the 100 best wines in Italy.