



Contessa Entellina Estate

**INSIDE:**

- Where to Stay in the Valle d'Aosta 2
- Mixing Music and Wine 4
- Tasting Notes 5
- Sicily's Ristorante Duomo 6
- All Business to Milan 8

# Valle d'Aosta:

## Italy's Small Wonder



Imagine a part of Italy where French is a second language, where Alpine ways of life persist into the 21st century, where traditional cuisine and viniculture combine with beautiful scenery and challenging hiking and winter sports. That's the *Valle d'Aosta*, Italy's smallest and least populated region, with only 120,000 permanent inhabitants. Less than 90 minutes from *Geneva* or two hours from *Turin* and *Milan*, the Valle d'Aosta has largely escaped the tourists that crowd many of Italy's more famous destinations. Its distinct culture — at once Italian, French and uniquely Alpine — draws those who seek quiet and natural wonders on their travels.

The easiest approach to the region is from Geneva through the *Mont Blanc/Monte Bianco Tunnel*. Reopened after the tragic accident in 1999 that claimed 39 lives, the tunnel provides convenient access under Europe's highest peak. Even if weather on the French side is bleak, exiting the tunnel brings a burst of Italian sunshine. (Be careful, though, when driving; the authorities strictly enforce the speed and "interdistance" limits even if there is no traffic, as the author can personally attest.) From the tunnel, it is an easy drive along the *autostrada* or the more scenic SS26 to *Aosta*, the regional capital. Another approach to the region is through the *St. Bernard Pass* from Switzerland. Driving about the *St. Bernard Tunnel* in summer, stop at the border to see the exhibition of *St. Bernard* dogs and a monastery with a small baroque chapel reflecting the Alpine theme.

*continued on page 2*

# DREAM OF ITALY

Volume 5, Issue 9

[www.dreamofitaly.com](http://www.dreamofitaly.com)

November 2006

## DONNAFUGATA: *Old Winery, New Ways*

Past the scenic *porto turistico* in *Marsala* is a zone inhabited by the great old wineries of this ancient Phoenician trading city. *Cantine Florio*, a well-known Marsala maker, commands a prominent position on a corner. It is a monument to the thirst of 18th-century British traders for a sweet fortified wine that, like their beloved sherry and port, could stand up to long voyages. Across the street is a small sign for *Donnafugata*, a family-owned winery that is in the vanguard of a movement to transform the making and marketing of Sicilian wines.

The fortress-like building is typical of the *baglios* seen throughout Sicily but especially in the west. They are farm structures designed to warehouse agri-

cultural riches, in this case wine. Today the gate is open, figuratively as well as literally, because *Donnafugata* hosts about 8,000 visitors a year, here and on two wine estates.



José Rallo

In the large courtyard, flowering bougainvilleas surround the obligatory Sicilian cart. On an advertising banner is a garlanded *bambino*, sitting in a bacchanalian splendor of newly harvested grapes. He represents the youngest generation of the Rallo family and, as I turn, his mother greets us.

*José Rallo*, a warm and energetic woman with a dazzling smile, leads my friend Lynn and me into soaring wood-framed cellars stored up with treasure. For most of the years since

*continued on page 4*

Marsala was once the main Carthaginian base in Sicily.

It's early October and thin-skinned nero d'Avola  
In Sicily's scorching heat, chardonnay grapes

the Rallo family entered the wine business in 1852, that meant Marsala. Now, there's not a drop to be seen. Instead, we walk through cellars consecrated to *Mille e una Notte*, a barrel-aged red made from nero



Palazzo Filangeri di Cutò

*d'Avola* and other native grapes (the 2003 vintage won a "tre bicchieri" designation from *Vini d'Italia*, a collaboration between *Gambero Rosso* and *Slow Food*); *Tancredi*, a blend of nero d'Avola and Cabernet; *Chiaranda*, half indigenous ansonica grapes and half Chardonnay; and *Ben Ryé*, a luscious dessert wine made on the Sicilian island of *Pantelleria* from fat, honeyed zibibbo grapes.

José recalls the moment that propelled her parents into a radical change of direction: "A marketing analyst pointed out to my father, *Giacomo*, that the average Marsala drinker is 70 years old," she says. The bad news: Fewer people were sipping after-dinner wines or cooking up a batch of veal Marsala. The good: More were looking for fruity, well-made wines to sip with pasta or a fish entrée.

Around the same time *Gabriella*, José's mother, inherited *Contessa Entellina*, an inland estate that turned out to be an ideal place to test grape varieties and build a winery. The couple traveled to the Napa Valley and elsewhere, learning about unfamiliar grapes and wine-making techniques. Wholesale changes were soon under way.

Among them was selling the rights to the *Cantine Rallo* brand (Marsala wine continues to be produced under that name) and taking on a new identity as *Donnafugata*. The labels, depicting a woman with flying tresses, play with

the meaning of the word *Donnafugata*—fleeing woman.

*Donnafugata* is also, of course, the fictional palace that *Tancredi* and *Angelina* wander through in *Il*

*Gattopardo*, based on author *Tomasi di Lampedusa's* childhood home in *Santa Margherita di Belice*.

Later, driving east to the *Contessa Entellina* estate, we stop there to visit *Palazzo Filangeri di Cutò*. I had read about the devastation to the town wrought by the 1968 earthquake and decades-long delays in rebuilding it, a heartbreaking story told well by *Theresa Maggio* in *The Stone Boudoir* (see *DOI's* September/October 2002 issue). So I am not surprised to learn from our guide, as we walk through rooms with memorabilia ranging from di *Lampedusa's* letters to replicas of costumes for the film's ballroom scene, that all but a few walls were destroyed and reconstructed. A bittersweet aura hangs over the palazzo, though the

mood turns festive at least once a year, when *Donnafugata* presents an international literary prize—*Claudia Cardinale* did the honors a couple of years ago, looking older but almost as luminous as in the film.

At *Contessa Entellina*, there's acre upon acre (or, as virtually everyone but Americans would have it, hectare upon hectare) of vineyards, though not planted as densely as in much of western Sicily, which accounts for about 70% of the island's wine by some estimates. To make the well-balanced wines for which *Donnafugata* is known, the family chose to forego quantity in favor of quality. "When my mother told the workers we were going to produce 8,000 bottles of wine per hectare instead of 40,000, they thought she was crazy," says José.

It's early October and thin-skinned nero d'Avola grapes, the last variety to ripen, were harvested just a few days ago. In Sicily's scorching heat, chardonnay grapes are dead ripe by mid-August and the frenetic *vendemmia*

## Music and Wine, A MELODIOUS MIX

On the right night, you might hit a nightspot in *Palermo* or *Catania* where José Rallo is singing with her backup band (including her husband, *Vincenzo Favara*, on percussion). The *Donnafugata Music and Wine Band* has also treated audiences to jazz and the sultry rhythms of Brazilian music in China, Russia and Manhattan's *Blue Note*. At some point José will urge everyone to join her in tasting a glass of *Donnafugata* wine—perhaps matching a sweet dessert wine to a sensual samba or a barrique-aged red to a ballad comparing an older man to a vintage wine.

"Music opens your heart to emotion and new sensations, and you appreciate the wine in a more complex way," says José. She's



found that music also provides a common language for audiences who are unschooled in wine tasting terminology.

On a CD called *Music & Wine Live*, vocals alternate with instrumentals. *Journey to Donnafugata* is a jazz arrangement of the *Nino Rota* score of *Il Gattopardo*; enologically, it's meant as a meditation on *Donnafugata's* red wines.

# Garibaldi landed at Marsala in 1860,

grapes, the last variety to ripen, were harvested just a few days ago. are dead ripe by mid-August and the frenetic vendemmia (harvest) begins.

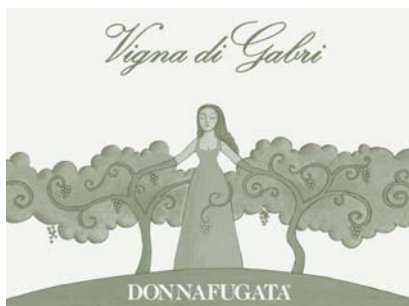
(harvest) begins. Donnafugata adopted the practice of “night harvesting” a few years ago, saving on refrigeration costs by capitalizing on the fact that temperatures drop as much as 30 degrees from their daytime highs. On August 10, the feast day of *San Lorenzo*, traditionally passed by making wishes on falling stars, Donnafugata opens Contessa Entellina to the public for a nocturnal festival.

After touring the vineyards and gleaming winery — one of the first in Sicily to use solar power — we sit down for lunch in the villa, filled with family photos and afternoon light. It’s a simple meal of foods that are an everyday blessing in Sicily: large olives warm from the oven, an herb-flecked local cheese, salami and cherry tomatoes from *Ragusa*.

At the end we sip Ben Ryé, with a deep amber color and evocative bouquet of apricots and honey. This “naturally sweet” wine is lower in alcohol than a fortified wine such as Marsala (14.5% compared to 18%) and its Arab name means “son of the wind,” alluding to the fierce winds of Pantelleria, the Sicilian island near Tunisia. Makers of the *passito di Pantelleria* category to which Ben Ryé belongs learned long ago to harness the power of

those winds, which are marvelously effective at drying the grapes, by breeding gnarly, low-lying vines that protect them from damage.

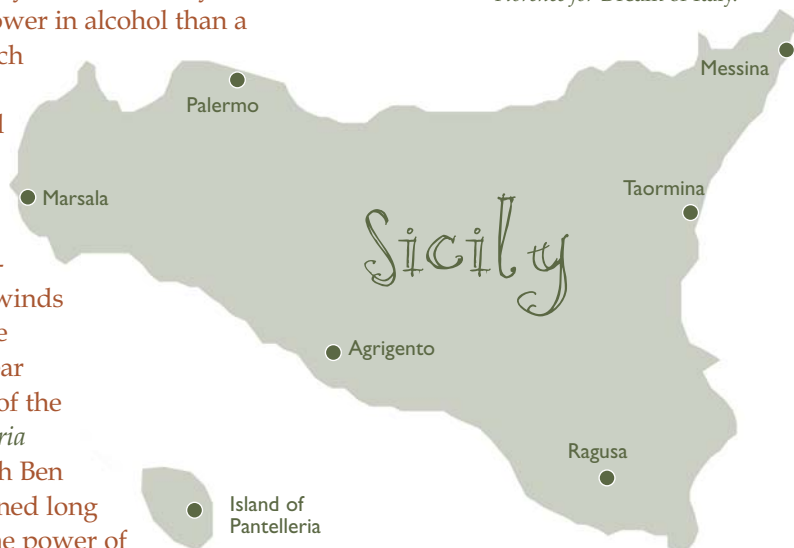
As with other wines, Donnafugata has tweaked traditional formulas, adding fresh grapes to make a *passito* that is not as “cooked” tasting as those made entirely from dried grapes. For a moment, my mind drifts to Pantelleria. I’ve heard about its wild beauty: the houses called *dammusi*, grottoes, lava landscapes, Arab dialect, bushes bearing incomparable capers. Our next stop is Palermo, not Pantelleria, but the wine offers consolation for what will be missed and a promise of future pleasures. Perhaps a summer visit, when the vines are plump with grapes and Donnafugata’s new lava stone cellars open to visitors...



Cantina at Contessa Entellina

— Toni Lydecker

Toni Lydecker has written about Modena and Florence for Dream of Italy.

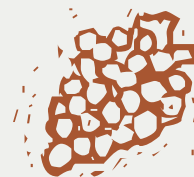


## Tasting NOTES

In Sicily, you can’t wander spontaneously from one vintner’s tasting room to another; advance planning is highly recommended. That said, wine producers are learning the ways of enotourism and Donnafugata is among them.

Year round, individuals can arrange for a free half-hour tasting of several wines in the Marsala cellars, Via S.

Lipari, 18. Groups of 10 or more can book a multisensory tasting (wine, food, music) or rustic lunch accompanied by wines. Summer visits to the Pantelleria and year-round tours of Contessa Entellina estates can be scheduled. For information on tours and special events, call (39) 0923 724245 or visit [www.donnafugata.it](http://www.donnafugata.it)



While you’re in Marsala, take time to visit Cantine Florio, Via Vincenzo Florio, 1 (a stone’s throw from Donnafugata), to learn the fascinating history and techniques behind Marsala wine. To arrange a guided tour, e-mail [info@cantineflorio.it](mailto:info@cantineflorio.it) or call (39) 0923 781111.

## Tomaso di Lampedusa's CHILDHOOD HOME

**Palazzo Filangeri di Cuto**  
Santa Margherita di Belice  
(39) 0925 31150  
[www.parcogattopardo.com](http://www.parcogattopardo.com)

Open Monday through Friday,  
8:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. and 3:30 p.m.  
to 8:30 p.m.; Saturday, 9:30 a.m.  
to 1 p.m. and 4 p.m. to 8:30 p.m.;  
Sunday, 9:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.  
Closed Wednesday in the summer.

initiating the reunification of Italy.