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How One Family's Wine Saved A Remote Italian Island

Making the sweet wine Passito is backbreaking work but has given Pantelleria, an island off the Tunisian coast, a new lease on life

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It's the first day of grape harvest on this remote Italian island. Biagio smiles as he picks grapes in the blistering heat. "Passito is the work of our sweat," he says, referring to the sweet straw wine that is putting Pantelleria back on the map. Despite the heat and the rough terrain, the sweet grapes here give life to a wine many seek to imitate but few are able to match.

Pantelleria, one of the most beautiful places in Italy, would have been abandoned long ago if not for the quality of its grapes and the hard work of pickers like Biagio. From fashion designer Giorgio Armani to French actress Carole Bouquet, people have come from all over Europe to seek refuge in this far-flung paradise in the Mediterranean Sea. Even though Pantelleria is beautiful, the island would have struggled to survive without the Passito grape and the dedication of one Sicilian family to grow it.

In 1989, Giacomo Rallo purchased several hectares of abandoned vineyards on Pantelleria. The grapevines here are difficult to cultivate. Reaching a maximum height of 10 cm (3.9 inches), the vines grow on mountain terraces that descend into the clear blue sea. But Rallo was determined.

Vineyards spanned half the island 50 years ago but now cover only a tenth of Pantelleria. Rallo's vineyard, Donnafugata, breathed new life into the cultivation of grapes on the island. Rallo has since passed away but his son Antonio carries on his work. Donnafugata employs 35 to 40 people around the year and up to 75 workers during the harvest season.

It's 35 degrees Celsius on the first day of the harvest. The temperature rises to 37 degrees in the tunnels where the picked grapes will be laid out to dry — an essential step in making Passito. Work begins at dawn, with short breaks for a morning snack and for lunch.

Biagio, 51, worked as a mechanic in the Sicilian town of Marsala before moving here in the year 2000. "Working on Pantelleria's vineyards is much better. I prefer working in the sunny countryside rather than staying indoors inhaling car exhaust," he says. He and 10 other farmers arrived on Aug. 16 and will stay here another two months, that is, until the end of the harvest season.

"You have to bend down to pick each bunch of grapes," explains Biagio. Calling the work tiring is an understatement. Each picker bends down hundreds of times, picking the good grapes and discarding any that are rotten or dried. After a morning's work, the boxes of grapes are taken to tunnels, where they're placed in special greenhouses with open sides that protect them from Pantelleria's humid nights. Bunches of grapes are laid out to dry in the tunnels for 30 days until about mid-September, when the grapes are individually picked and their juices are drained.

Pantelleria's Passito has provided work to many people as long as they can commute to this island located 100 km away from the Sicilian coast. Workers in the local wine industry have to spend most of the year on the island. "Harvest season is a cakewalk, the real work comes in winter," says Vincenzo, 48, who came to Pantelleria three years ago after leaving his stationery shop in Marsala.

Winter on Pantelleria involves braving strong winds to carry a water pump through the terraces, spraying water to remove grass, and digging basins to plant the grapes. It's a complex process but one that people are passionate about. "I wouldn't have it any other way," says Ali, 65, an expert on the complex drying techniques needed to make Passito.

"I'm proud of doing this work," says Vincenzo. "Back home they made a bet that I wouldn't be able to take it and that I'd return after 15 days. Three years later, I'm still here and I don't plan on leaving."

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