



Photo: Shobha

Hand-picked Zibibbo grapes withered in the sun and wind are checked and selected for the production of Ben Ryè, with aroma and flavour perfectly balanced

Donnafugata steps up to the table

Donnafugata wines are among the pioneers of a new wave of Sicilian table wines, produced from the island's own indigenous grapes as well as international varieties. **Rosemary George, MW,** describes the wonderful diversity of Sicily that the wines represent

Sicily lies at the crossroads of the Mediterranean – which European civilisation has not been there? It has fabulous Greek theatres, awe-inspiring Roman temples, breathtaking Byzantine mosaics, Norman churches, crusader castles and elegant Baroque towns. The southernmost tip of Sicily lies further south than Tunis and the island Pantelleria is closer to North Africa than to Palermo. The wines are equally diverse and fascinating.

Marsala is Sicily's best-known wine, a fortified wine with a long historical reputation. However, like most of southern Italy, over the last decade or so, there have been enormous advances in winemaking with an appreciation of the wonderful indigenous grapes of the island, as well as the inevitable introduction of international varieties.

The Rallo family who have owned vineyards in Sicily since 1851, are among the pioneers of this new wave of Sicilian table wines. Although they had extensive vineyards for the production of Marsala on the western side of the island, they were disenchanted with Marsala. The reputation of the wine had been tarnished since much of the production was destined for flavoured wines for cooking rather than for fine, barrel-aged Marsala with a distinct personality. The family sold their vineyards in Marsala and decided instead to concentrate on establishing a range of table wines. They developed vineyards on the island of Pantelleria for the production of Moscato di Pantelleria. Charming and elegant, and very articulate about her family's wines, José Rallo is the public face of the family and Donnafugata wines. José explained that the label

with a woman in flight, which is the translation of Donnafugata, was an image of Maria Carolina, the wife of Ferdinand IV, king of the Two Sicilies, who fled from Naples when Napoleon's troops arrived there at the beginning of the 19th century. She took refuge in Sicily, where the Donnafugata vineyards are now situated.

José's mother, Gabriella, inherited the vineyards at the beginning of the 1980s when the family decided to develop a range of table wines, introducing international grape varieties and improving the facilities of the cellar. They now farm 260 hectares, some family owned, and the rest under contract. The vineyards are concentrated between Palermo and Agrigento, around the DOC of Contessa Entellina, as well as 68 hectares on the island of Pantelleria. Sicily is scattered with numerous DOCs, many of which mean very little to even the most dedicated follower of Sicilian wine. Therefore many of the newer producers prefer to ignore the restraints of DOC regulations and simply label their wines as a protected geographical indication, Sicilia or IGP. At least that way you know that the wine comes from Sicily, which "Santa Margherita di Benice" or "Contea di Sclafani" certainly would not tell you. Moreover, an IGP also allows for more experimentation, with less constraint as to choice of grape varieties.

Donnafugata now have a varied range of table wines,



Anthilia Bianco - Sicilia IGP

Photo: Letterio Pomara



The Rallo family of Donnafugata, from left to right, Antonio Rallo with wife Barbara, Gabriella and Giacomo Rallo, Vincenzo, husband of José Rallo holding little Gabriella, and José

WINES of Sicily



Photo: Bruno Bruchi

Antonio Rallo in the barrel hall of Donnafugata

illustrating some of the best that Sicily has to offer, encompassing local and international grape varieties. Inzolia, (which is also known as Ansonica) and Catarratto are the two principal white grapes of the island. Consequently **Anthilia** is a blend of these two varieties and encapsulates the delicate flavours of a Sicilian white wine. It has delicate hints of white blossom, and floral notes on the palate with sufficient acidity and a fresh finish. Like so many Italian white wines, it does not pack a punch of flavour but is beautifully understated and satisfying.

The DOC of Contessa Entellina in the southwestern part of the island was created in 1994, very much at Donnafugata's initiative, and includes both red and white international as well as indigenous grapes. La Fuga, meaning the escape, picks up the theme of Donnafugata (all the labels have a story) and this is a pure Chardonnay. But for a lover of Chablis chardonnays, like me, it does not have sufficient minerality, although it is soft and delicate. Other white wines in the range include Lighea, a blend of Muscat and Catarratto from Pantelleria, Polena, an original blend of Catarratto and Viognier, and two more from Contessa Entellina, a single vineyard, Vigna de Gabri, which is a pure Ansonica, and Chiarandà, which is Ansonica blended with Chardonnay.

The principal red grape of Sicily is Nero



Photo: Enrica Frigerio

Terraced hills on the island of Pantelleria, off the coast of Sicily

d'Avola. Nero means black in Italian, which suggests that the grape produces deep coloured wine, as indeed it does. The flavours are generally warm and ripe; Sedara is quite soft and appealing, with ripe fruit and a backbone of tannin. There is no oak ageing and the wine is designed for easy drinking, and certainly fulfils that role. Mille e Una Notte or "a Thousand and One Nights" is their flagship red wine, made principally from Nero d'Avola, blended with just 10% of other varieties. It is aged between 14 to 16 months in French barriques.

Donnafugata has a suitably impressive barrel hall, carved out of the rock some seven metres deep. It retains natural humidity and holds a mere 1000 barriques, or 500-litre tonneaux. They have some 32 different versions of barrels, with different types of oak, degrees of tasting, and coopers. They are adamant that the use of wood is merely to help the *élevage*, the 'raising', rather than ageing of the wine. The oak must not overwhelm; the wines must speak of Sicily and encapsulate the work in the vineyards.

One of the key factors is choosing the right moment to pick the grapes. They tend to harvest early, often in the middle of August for the earliest ripening varieties. This is because Sicily enjoys hot summers and they want to retain the acidity in their wines. Also, although the tannins are



Photo: Donnafugata

Bottle Tancredi

ripe, they do not want wines that are too powerful. What they are looking for is elegance.

Mille e Una Notte is deep in colour. The young wine is redolent of ripe oak, with a firm tannic streak. It is rich and concentrated and really benefits from some bottle age. The last time I visited Donnafugata, I was lucky enough to enjoy the 2003 in jeroboam, when it was five years old. It was just beginning to develop some maturity with some intriguingly complex, meaty notes, although it was still quite youthful. Other red wines in their portfolio include Angheli, a Merlot and Nero d'Avola blend, and Tancredi, a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Nero d'Avola from the town of Contessa Entellina. Tancredi is a character in Lampedusa's famous novel set in Sicily, "The Leopard", which is about the unsettled years when Garibaldi was leading the unification of Italy in the 1860s.

Pantelleria is a small island off the coast of Sicily, an hour's flight from Palermo. You can drive round it in a couple of hours. The scenery is dramatic, and on a dull spring day, when I was there, the atmosphere was sombre and foreboding. The island is volcanic and the soil, deep black. Conditions are hard. In summer it is very hot, and often very windy, as I discovered when our plane nearly turned back to Palermo. No trees grow there, just short stubby bush vines, with kilometres of dry stone walls, separating small plots of land. Viticulture on the island of Pantelleria had been endangered, but along with Marco de

Gabriella and José with Mille e una Notte, a great Sicilian wine appreciated throughout the world



Photo: Letterio Pomara

Bartoli, who makes some of the most original and genuine Marsala, Donnafugata can be credited with contributing to the renaissance of Pantelleria.

Ben Ryé is their Passito di Pantelleria. Appropriately the name means 'son of the wind' in Arabic. The grape variety is Moscato d'Alessandria, which is called Zibbibo on the island. It is not a fortified wine like Marsala; instead the grapes are dry or *appassiti*, as the Italians would say, and then pressed very slowly. In their 68 hectares, Donnafugata have 11 different plots, with some quite different growing conditions. The vineyards in the centre of the island are higher and cooler, so that the grapes ripen later and have thicker skins than those nearer to sea level, and some of the vines are 100 years old. It is all very labour intensive, what they would call 'heroic viticulture'. There are two harvests; one in the middle of August for the grapes that will be dried, while the second harvest provides fresh juice to which the dried grapes are added, making a marriage between grapes and raisins. To 100 litres of juice they add 60 kilos of dried grapes. The fermentation is very slow and the wine is kept in tank, rather than barrel, with the fresh grapes adding acidity.

Ben Ryé is delicious, amber gold in colour with a rich apricot nose and hints of marmalade. On the palate, it is smooth and unctuous, rich but not overly sweet, and is a wonderful example of the diversity of Sicily. ♦

Donnafugata wines from Sicily are imported by Aspri Spirits Pvt Ltd.