



Liquid Bliss (lik'wid blis)

1) melty, unconditionally happy, totally relaxed and fluid feeling one experiences after taking an amazing yoga class
2) phenomenon that occurs when sun, soil and love transform ordinary grapes into extraordinary wine

La Dolce Vita: Stefano Valla of Donnafugata Winery

Administrator | Interviews, Travel, Wine | Tuesday, July 29th, 2008



As I prepare for my upcoming Yoga & Wine retreat to Sicily in August, I am excited to introduce the pleasures of 'la dolce vita', or 'the sweet life', to my students! In Sicily, and in Italy in general, taking time to enjoy the little pleasures of life is something that happens on a daily basis. From the long, leisurely lunch with family on a Sunday afternoon to the evening walk through the piazza, eating a pistachio gelato with someone special...it is all about the simple pleasures.

One of the pleasures that we will be experiencing is a visit to renowned winery, Donnafugata in Marsala. Donnafugata is one of Sicily's top wineries, known for creating wines that express the emotion of Sicily as well as for the iconic image of the 'fleeing woman' on their labels. I spoke with Stefano Valla, winemaker at Donnafugata winery in Sicily to learn more about the winery, 'la dolce vita' and his passion for winemaking.

How did you first get interested in winemaking as a career?

It has always been my passion and passions are difficult to explain rationally...they are drives that come from within. I have always loved anything that has to do with taste, flavor, and fragrance, and wine is perhaps the most natural expression of these elements.

What is your winemaking philosophy?

My philosophy is the obsessive search for perfection or the harmonious union of a number of components that a wine needs in order to evoke emotion. A wine has to have character, personality and has to be the authentic expression of its region. My goal is to correctly interpret our terroir by respecting its uniqueness, insuring the utmost of quality and paying the greatest attention to detail.

Wine has been produced in Sicily since antiquity. What makes the 'terroir' of Sicily special? How do you see that terroir being expressed in your wines?

With the enormous variety of its different terroirs, Sicily is comparable to a micro-continent: it is this complexity that makes it so fascinating. In Sicily one finds the volcanic soils of Mt. Etna that reach 3,000 meters (9,000 feet), the sandy plains of the island's extreme southern tip that are nourished by the sea, and the strong, clayey-calcareous soil of the interior. Donnafugata Winery itself has two distinct production zones: one in Contessa Entellina, in the heart of western Sicily, and one on Pantelleria, the sunny, windswept, volcanic island situated halfway between Sicily and Africa. Within these two areas we have extremely different terroir, each with a very strong characterization. In broad terms, the terroir of Contessa Entellina produces elegant wines that are complex and rich in character, while Pantelleria yields wines blessed with a refined, mineral and aromatic quality.

The cuisine of Sicily is a surprising, complex and fascinating reflection of many different cultural influences as well as the bounty of the sea and the land. What do you think makes the food of Sicily so special and how do your wines complement Sicilian cuisine?

Wine and cuisine are both offspring of the same land and its rich culture. They both embody the complex history and traditions of a people that over centuries came in contact with the greatest civilizations in history ... from the Phoenicians to the Greeks, from the Romans to the Moors and Normans. Sicily, in every one of its cultural expressions, still carries visible, and skillfully blended, elements of this passage of time. The island's very complex gastronomic traditions must be seen as a direct result of all of these processes.

In Sicily, life revolves around the table and enjoying all of the little pleasures of life. How do you think that Americans can benefit from this philosophy and learn to integrate a little of 'la dolce vita' in their own lives?

Sicilians appreciate the beauty of what is simple and genuine. They love what nature offers them and they respect the seasonal nature of their products, valuing the different gifts the earth gives them each season. This is a little secret one learns by living here.

I think that in every wine lover's life there are the wines that you never forget and that make you remember what you loved about wine in the first place. Tell me about one of your 'epiphany' wines.

For a true wine lover the best wine is the one that has yet to be made. This is what we, as wine makers, are trying to realize. It is the impossible dream we are always pursuing, driving us to improve how we perform our jobs a little more each day.

If you had one last meal (and of course one last bottle of wine) what would it be?

I hope the day of my 'last supper' is very far away! In any case, I hope that on that day I might have the satisfaction of knowing that the impossible dream I have always been pursuing has finally been realized!