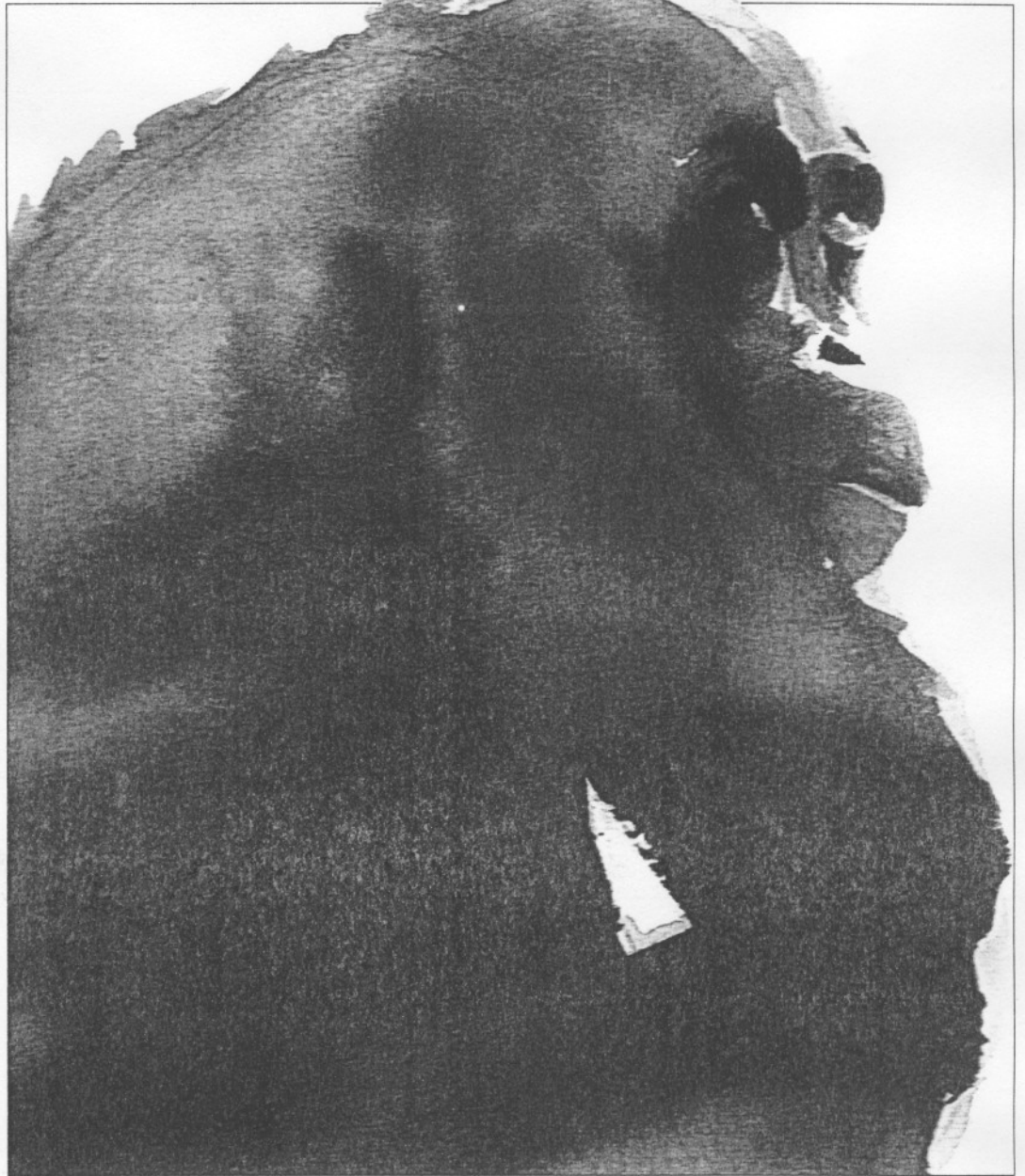


# THE WORLD OF FINE WINE



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(wine and words)



## LAMPEDUSA'S SICILY CHANGING THE LEOPARD'S SPOTS

Why, of all his island's wines, did the Prince of Salina, hero of Italy's greatest 20th-century novel, enjoy only Marsala? Giles MacDonogh explores the ways in which Sicily's cultural and viticultural landscape has since been turned upside down

It will come as a shock to most readers of a magazine dedicated to fine wine to learn that the subject of this article, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa (1896–1957)—one of the greatest of all modern Italian novelists—disliked wine and went so far as to claim that water was his favorite drink. He also smoked like a chimney, “never noticing the ash that rained on his jacket.”<sup>1</sup> His character the Prince of Salina, in *The Leopard*, set against the backdrop of Garibaldi's invasion of Sicily in 1860, echoed his negative views. In the long ball scene, he retires to the library to get away from people and finds a carafe of water: “Only water is really good,” he thought like a true Sicilian; and did not dry the drops left on his lips. In the heat of a Sicilian summer, water is more precious than wine. There were always oceans of wine, but a glass of pure, cool, clean water was always both a relief and a delight.

The corpulent Lampedusa's lack of interest in wine was amply compensated for by an extremely keen interest in food, something that is all the more evident from the descriptions in *The Leopard*—from the moment when the prince is depicted spooning out the *minestra* from a huge soup tureen covered by a prancing leopard, to the account of the buffet at the Ponteleones' ball.

In his surviving papers, the writer revels in food, especially the extremely sweet almond and pistachio cakes that the Sicilians appear to have learned to make when the island was ruled by the Arabs. Much of the writer's time was spent reading in the *pasticceria* of Palermo, and his briefcase contained not only books but a few cakes as well. At the end of his life, he wrote a story about a panettone.

Even during World War II, Lampedusa could sniff out the rare treat and was enjoying positive feasts at the home of his Piccolo cousins at their house at Capo d'Orlando. On Easter Sunday 1942, for example, he was eating lasagne, vol-au-vent with lobster, cutlets in breadcrumbs with potatoes, peas, and ham, and “an admirable tart from a recipe from Escoffier.” At a meal that summer, he reported “tender and tasty beefsteaks 2 inches [5cm] thick, exquisite cakes, and a slice of tuna literally as large as a cart tire.” A light meal turned out to be real *fettuccine* with butter and Parmesan, an enormous fish with various sauces, and a *pâté de lapin* stuffed with truffles.<sup>2</sup>

### The noble estate

The Lampedusas' fortunes had been in decline for decades. Giuseppe's mother was descended from the Filangeri di



Cutò family—nobility of Norman origin—and until the last of the Filangeris sold their estate at Santa Margherita Belice in 1921, the author could still experience the style of the old nobility there. The estate was the model for Donnafugata in *The Leopard*:

Donnafugata, with its baroque palace, goal of coaches in scarlet green and gilt, loaded with women, wine and violins [...].

The mention of wine in this context provides an indication that the Filangeris brought it with them.

Lampedusa often stayed at the estate during his childhood. It was about 40 miles (64km) southwest of Palermo, in the Belice district. He went there every summer, and sometimes in winter, too. Unlike Don Fabrizio in the book, who undertakes the entire journey in a carriage, the family took carriages only to the railway station, but it was still a grueling 12-hour journey, and the temperature in the train was unendurable. From the window, young Giuseppe recalled the view of endless fields of corn: Sicily had famously been the granary of the Roman Empire.

They alighted at the dusty inland town of Castelvetro,

where pigs rooted in the abundant rubbish. They were collected by two landaus that then took them to Santa Margherita. This meant crossing the Belice—a proper river with water in it, even in summer. After Montevago, the land began to improve. For part of the journey they had an escort of three carabinieri. When they stopped to lunch in the shade of a ruined peasant's cottage, they sent food and wine over to the policemen. One of the men would come to raise his glass to the nobles, though Lampedusa noted that the liquid was 104°F (40°C) and literally mulled by the sun. When they reached Santa Margherita, the municipal band was ready for them with a polka. The rest passed much as it does when Don Fabrizio and his family reach Donnafugata in the novel.

Not many of the infant Lampedusa's activities involved wine, but one excursion took them to a vineyard at the time of the harvest. They would sit on stones and eat "sweet mottled grapes (vine grapes, for in 1905 table grapes were scarcely ever cultivated in our region)." After their snack, they went to watch the progress of the vintage. In a dimly lit building they found "a lusty young man jerking like a madman inside a



Accustomed to tumult, a group of Sicilian men sit casually in a field, while in the background, smoke rises from the erupting Mount Etna (1880s)



barrel, his feet squashing the grapes whose greenish juice could be seen flowing down a wooden channel, while the air was filled with the heavy smell of must.<sup>3</sup>

There were feasts at a hunting lodge, a few miles away from the palace. "Wines, as always in sober Sicily, were of no importance. The guests expected them, of course, and liked their glasses to be filled to the brim ('no collars', they would call to the footmen), but of their collarless glasses they emptied one, at the most two."<sup>4</sup>

Santa Margherita, together with most of Belice province, was destroyed by the massive 1968 earthquake. Part of the palace collapsed, too, but it has been rebuilt and now belongs to the municipality. The landscape is still blighted by the disaster. Everywhere in this part of Sicily there are ruinous farmhouses and heaps of stones that were once peasant dwellings. The new buildings that have gone up since the '60s are ugly in the extreme. The Filangeri di Cutò palace fared better than the Palazzo Lampedusa in Palermo, which was reduced to a pile of rubble by the Allied bombardment of 1943. Lampedusa noted bitterly, punning on the name of the aircraft, that "Liberators destroyed my home."<sup>5</sup>

The baroque mansion at Santa Margherita had been built in 1680. It boasted 110 rooms arranged around three courtyards, but big as it was, it was hardly the palace he paints in *The Leopard*. The fictitious name *Donnafugata* allegedly derived from the story of the Bourbon queen Maria Caroline, who lodged there in 1813–14, after she had run from Palermo (hence *donna fugata*, or "fugitive lady") at the time when Napoleon's former innkeeper marshal, Murat, occupied the throne of the Two Sicilies in Naples. For Maria Caroline, Santa Margherita had been "part refuge, part prison."<sup>6</sup>

#### Golden Marsala and earthy gastronomy

The only local wine refined Sicilians would have drunk at their tables was Marsala. Lampedusa describes Don Fabrizio eating his favorite dessert—a rum jelly:

One of his glasses was still half-full of Marsala. He raised it, glanced round the family, gazed for a second into Concetta's blue eyes, then said: "To the health of our Tancredi." He drained his wine in a single gulp. The initials F.D., which before had stood out clearly on the golden colour of the full glass, were no longer visible.

Don Fabrizio is sickened by the earthy gastronomy of the island. Lampedusa mentions the Cacciavallo cheese and the baby lambs with their "iridescent intestines hanging out." Such foods were presumably more a match for local wines, made from grapes picked boiling from a scorching August sun and fermented quickly so that what they lacked in color they made up for in alcohol. The only time when the prince drinks local wine in the book is when he is out hunting with Don Ciccio, the organist, and they have taken refuge under the cork oaks. They drink

tepid wine from wooden bottles with a cold chicken from Don Fabrizio's haversack, ate little cakes called *muffoletti* dusted with raw flour which Don Ciccio had brought with him, and local grapes so ugly to look at and so good to eat [...].

Other than Marsala, on festive occasions they drank *rosolio*—an Italian liqueur, flavored with roses or other fruits or spices, that used to be very popular in Sicily.<sup>7</sup> It was perceived as a ladies' drink, and the probity of the prince's steward is proven by the fact that he has left a half-full glass of *rosolio* to evaporate. It was an "infinitesimal part of the





The Temple of Concord at Agrigento. Sicily's rugged landscape has produced wine for centuries, but modern techniques have transformed its quality and style

Prince's patrimony and must not be dispersed." Of course it was dispersed—like his patrimony—by the grilling sun.

More evidence that the local wine was not socially acceptable comes from the fact that the parvenu Sedàra offers the Prince *rosolio* when he comes to vote in the plebiscite that will bind Sicily to the Piedmontese Crown. The liqueur was served in three colors: red, white, and green—the colors of the House of Savoy. The sight of this ingenious arrangement "tempered the Prince's remorse with a smile," even if he acknowledged that "all three varieties of *rosolio* were equally sugary, sticky and revolting."

The prince always served French wines at the first dinner in Donnafugata, to emphasize the solemnity of the occasion. Before the roast there was also a punch *alla romana*. The only wine mentioned in this context was Chablis. The dinner was the moment when the great timbale of macaroni was brought out, encased in *pasta frolla*:

[T]he aspect of those monumental dishes of macaroni was worthy of those quivers of admiration they evoked. The burnished gold of the crusts, the fragrance of sugar and cinnamon they exuded, were but preludes to the delights released from the interior when the knife broke the crust: first came a spice-laden haze, then chicken livers, hard boiled eggs, sliced ham, chicken and truffles in masses of piping hot, glistening macaroni, to which the meat juice gave an exquisite hue of suede.

It was obvious that a French influence normally pervaded the festivities of the Sicilian grandees. At the ball given by the Ponteleones, the buffet offered a vision of luxury that would not have been out of place in Paris. Indeed, it was said that Paris was the capital of the island in the eyes of the Sicilian

princes.<sup>8</sup> The only Sicilian touch was the mounds of "home-made cakes that were never touched." For the rest, there were coraline lobsters boiled alive, waxy *chaud-froids* of veal, steely-lined fish immersed in sauce, turkeys gilded by the ovens' heat, rosy *foie-gras* under gelatine armour, boned woodcocks reclining on amber toast decorated with their own chopped guts, dawn-tinted galantine, and a dozen other cruel, coloured delights. At the end of the table two monumental silver tureens held limpid soup, the tint of burnt amber.

The wine is not mentioned, but it was almost certainly Champagne: 19th-century Sicilian wine would have been out of place at this elegant feast.

Once again, the wine extolled in *The Leopard* is Marsala. The Piedmontese nobleman Cavriaghi, who woos the prince's jilted daughter Concetta, is described as water compared to the Marsala she had drunk from the eyes of the dashing Tancredi. Lampedusa's respect for Marsala may have had something to do with family circumstances and the assistance they received from the originally Genoese Florio family in his childhood. The Florios had made another fortune from their interests in Marsala and belonged to the international jet-set of the time. One of Lampedusa's earliest memories was of staying with the family on the island of Favignana, where he met the "divinely lovely" Franca Florio, and of being kissed by the aged former French empress Eugénie, wife to Napoleon III.<sup>9</sup> The Lampedusas were part of that fast set, though Giuseppe's uncle Ciccio was called "Stinkydusa" by the English families—apparently a reference to his sweaty feet.<sup>10</sup>

When Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa was born, Marsala wealth was all around him. A branch of the Whitakers lived

## (wine and words)

in a Gothic pile next to the Palazzo Lampedusa in Palermo, and their servants used to shout obscenities at the princess, Lampedusa's mother. One of the Whitakers built himself a palace called Villa Malfitano, where he entertained the German kaiser and King Edward VII of the United Kingdom"—not bad going for a middle-class English family living on a sunburned Italian island.

### The beginning of the end

There was clearly money in Marsala, then, but the juice was beginning to run out by the time Lampedusa was born. Like the Florios, the Whitakers had grown bored with the little city on the western coast and moved closer to high society in Palermo. Some of them had returned to England, where

rude to be trusted. Good hot-climate wine is a thing of the present, not of the past.

The situation is now the reverse of what it was in Lampedusa's day: Marsala is depressed, and Sicilian table wines are now in great demand. This is exemplified in the history of the Rallo family of wine producer Donnafugata. The firm was founded in 1983, when Giacomo Rallo, the scion of a Marsala house created in 1851, decided to sell up and found a new company based on his wife's estate in Contessa Entellina. She was born Gabriella Anca and was the descendant of the mayor of Marsala, who went over to Garibaldi in 1860. Well versed in the history and literature of the region, she conceived the labels of the new domaine, complete with allusions to Lampedusa's writings. The label

Lampedusa's disdain for wine—Sicilian in particular—is a story with a happy ending. The simple truth is that, before our own day, Sicily's climate was too hot and rude to be trusted. Good hot-climate wine is a thing of the present, not of the past

they lived the lives of country gentlemen. Marsala was not only famous for fortified wine. Garibaldi had landed with his 1,000 Redshirts in the port in 1860 and liberated Sicily from Bourbon rule. Many of the labels commemorated the hero and his disembarkation—indeed, some still do. Marsala was also a suitably rich, baroque wine and, with its luscious sweetness, miles away from the sour fire that raised the spirits of the peasants on the prince's estates.

The allocation of land was very different then: Sicily was still a granary, and most of the plantings would have been of hard wheat. That changed when the price of wheat fell to rock bottom and modern equipment allowed Sicilians to make decent red and white wines for the first time. The *riforma agraria* (land reform) completed the destruction of the noble estates. Domains like those of the Lampedusas were capped, and that allowed *hoi polloi* to acquire some of their best fields and vineyards. The Filangeris owned some 40,000ha (98,840 acres) in their day. The two firms that exploit Lampedusa's name and literary legacy these days are Donnafugata and Settesoli ("all corn, first class land, airy and cool," says Sedàra as he pops it into Angelica's dowry, the vineyards being at Gibildolce). Settesoli is the brand name of the leading cooperative on the Filangeri land at Santa Margherita. One of its wines is even named after the prince's dog: Bencicó. Donnafugata takes a more serious stab at putting on the mantle of Sicily's most famous modern writer, to the degree that the restored palace at Santa Margherita is used for its annual award of the Donnafugata Prize for Literature.

### The reverse of Lampedusa's day

Lampedusa's disdain for wine—Sicilian in particular—is, however, a story with a happy ending. The simple truth is that, before our own day, Sicily's climate was too hot and

for Mille e Una Notte, for example, shows the palace at Santa Margherita as it looked after the earthquake. The Ancas had bought some of the land from descendants of the Filangeris; Gabriella's son Antonio told me that one small parcel is still in their hands. It lies in the middle of the Rallos' land but has such sentimental importance to the elderly nobleman who owns it that he refuses to give it up.

With stainless-steel, temperature-controlled vats, cool-macerated grapes, and nighttime harvests beginning in the dog days of early August, the Rallos are able to make wines of real quality on their 260ha (642 acres) of land. This would have been impossible in Lampedusa's time, let alone the mid-19th century, the period in which the hero of *The Leopard* lived and prospered. In the circumstances, it was small wonder he stuck to water. ■

### Notes

1. David Gilmour, *The Last Leopard: A Life of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa* (Collins Harvill, London: 1990), p.91.
2. *Idem*, p.79.
3. Lampedusa, "Places of My Infancy," in Giuseppe di Lampedusa, *Two Stories and a Memory*, with an introduction by EM Forster (Collins Harvill, London: 1962), p.63.
4. *Idem*, p.67.
5. "The Professor and the Siren" in *Two Stories and a Memory*, *op cit*, pp.106-7.
6. Archibald Colquhoun, translator's introduction to *idem*, p.22.
7. Archibald Colquhoun, who translated the standard editions of Lampedusa's works, renders *rosolio* as a wine. In fact, the drink contains no such thing and is made from steeping fruit in white alcohol. Sometimes—as in Sedàra's tricolor offering—natural coloring was used.
8. *Idem*, p.18.
9. "Places of My Infancy," p.32.
10. Raleigh Trevelyan, *Princes Under the Volcano* (Macmillan, London: 1972), p.346.
11. Gilmour, *op cit*, p.20.