

# A LABOUR OF

# Love

The island of Pantelleria is home to a method training of vines which has been accorded the status of intangible cultural heritage' by UNESCO. **Raymond Blake** takes a trip to the region to investigate its unique charms

**T**he flight from Sicily to the island of Pantelleria takes only a few minutes but, as you descend over the rugged countryside into the small airport, you could be forgiven for thinking you had slipped back a few centuries. Glimpsed below is an antique land, laced with dry stone walls and dotted with sturdy stone dwellings. Pantelleria measures about 15 kilometres long by nine wide and rises to a height of 800 metres; the island is Italian and, although it lies close to Sicily, it is even closer to Tunisia, and on a clear day the North African coast is visible.

Pantelleria is the place to visit if, by any chance, you think you have seen all that the wine world has to offer. It is unique in the true meaning of that much-abused word, which is so often bandied about to inflate the

importance of less-than-special wines and their unremarkable regions of origin. In this instance 'unique' is barely sufficient to capture the essence of Pantelleria and its ancient system of viticulture.

What makes it so is the method of training the vines, known as vite ad alberello, which was accorded the status of 'intangible cultural heritage' by UNESCO less than two years ago. It is a laborious practice, involving an endless grind of manual labour to establish and sustain vineyards where no sensible soul would ever contemplate vine growing. Pantelleria is a windy place; hostile gusts blow with plant-stunting intensity, so the vines have to be cosseted and cared for like few others on the planet. Each one sits in its own hollow, dug out of the sandy soil and constantly maintained

## UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE

It's easy to understand why the Giant's Causeway or the Pyramids of Egypt qualify as UNESCO World Heritage sites. They can be visited; they can even be touched and photographed, but what about 'Intangible Cultural Heritage'? It sounds like the sort of guff dreamt up by a marketing department bereft of ideas but with a good thesaurus to hand. But stay my cynical heart! According to UNESCO: "Cultural heritage does not end at monuments and collections of objects. It also includes traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants..." Examples include: oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, festive events and knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe.

From top left: The harvest of Zibibbo in Pantelleria, (photo: Fabio Gambina); Vineyards and cellar in Pantelleria, (photo: Anna Post drying process, (photo: Fabio Gambina); In the ancient vineyard, a Zibibbo sapling over 80 years old and non-grafted, (photo: Fabio Gambina); Giacomo and José Rallo, (photo: Fabio Gambina)



## CAPERS

Having seen caper bushes (*capparis spinosa*) growing on Pantelleria, I will never think of those olive-green capsules of piquant flavour in the same way again. The bushes, such as they are, are pruned close to the rocky, arid ground and it is quite possible to walk over them without noticing. The unopened flower buds, just inches off the ground, are picked daily, then pickled in vinegar and packed with a liberal dusting of salt. The back-breaking labour involved in producing the distinctive flavour calls to mind the tedious process of harvesting saffron.

so that the vine effectively hunkers below the sweeping wind. Further protection is afforded by the endless lines of dry stone walls that surround the vineyards and which also require ceaseless maintenance.

That sandy soil slips away beneath your feet, turning a vineyard walk into a stagger-and-stumble waltz. But it's worth it, especially when exploring the 100-year-old vineyards belonging to Donnafugata, guided by company founder Giacomo Rallo. Some of the vines are so decrepit that their trunks are supported on judiciously placed rocks, yet the Passito de Pantelleria wine that results is the polar opposite of these harsh vineyard conditions. (see 'Try This')

Passito is the island's speciality, a vinous gem that deserves wider recognition, and it will get that if Giulia Pazienza Gelmetti of

Coste Ghirlanda has her way. Her Passito is a compelling wine, a creamy-sweet concoction of figs and prunes and dates, and she is an engaging, centre-of-attention character with laughing eyes, snowy hair and big plans. These include the opening of a luxury, all-suite, hotel next year, while currently she also has three dammusi available for guests. These are traditional stone-built dwellings with distinctive, domed white roofs that look like giant blisters, and which offer a level of calm and tranquillity that is near impossible to find these days.

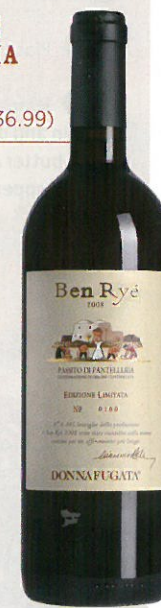
There's no place like Pantelleria. Should you ever visit Sicily on holiday, make it your business to build in an overnight on this tiny island. You won't regret it. Ever. 🍷

## TRY THIS

**DONNAFUGATA, BEN RYÉ PASSITO DI PANTELLERIA 2013**

ABV 14.5% €69.99 (37.5ml €36.99)

Ben Ryé (say Ben Ree-ay) means 'Son of the Wind' in Arabic, referencing the wind that seems to blow endlessly on the island. Made from the Zibibbo grape, better known as Muscat of Alexandria, it is produced by adding dried grapes to the juice of freshly harvested ones. The result is a vivid amber wine that almost glows in the glass. If you like lush, succulent, honeyed fruit, with the faintest herbaceous whiff, this wine's for you. Serve it cool, though not too cold, with blue cheese or tarte tatin.



64 Wine, Glashule; Corkscrew, Chatham St; World Wide Wines, Waterford; Jus de Vine, Portmarnock; Drink Store, Manor St; Terroirs, Donnybrook.

