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TASTING: WINE

How power of single vineyards
shone at Donnafugata's 2018
Etna tasting



To many, Donnafugata is a byword for Sicilian wine, such is the company's reach and influence. Celebrating its 40th

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anniversary this year the company has 410 hectares of vines spread across five estates on Sicily, all with their own vinification and ageing facilities, and all producing wines with a mix of international and indigenous varieties. To highlight the wines from their most recently established winery on Etna, brother and sister owners, Antonio and José Rallo held a tasting to show the 2018 vintage, along with the spectacular work they are doing in their single vineyard sites.



By **Ines Salpico**

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May 4, 2021



“The two ‘contrada’ wines were the stars of the tasting, showcasing the idiosyncratic minerality of the single vineyards they hail from and the finesse and age-worthiness that, handled correctly, Nerello Mascalese can deliver,” writes Salpico.

Sicilian powerhouse **Donnafugata** needs little if any introduction. Built upon five generations of winemaking tradition, the brand was founded in 1983 by Giacomo and Gabriella Rallo and has been successfully steered into the 21st century by their children, José and Antonio. The Rallos have become Sicilian household names not just due to the successful development of their wines and brand, but also to their intense activity as ambassadors and prominent members of **Assovini**, the producers’ association whose initiatives have played a fundamental role in positioning Sicilian wines in international markets.



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Etna – Contrada Marchesa

The Etna estate was, along with the site in Vittoria, the last to be added to the Rallo family’s five-strong portfolio of Sicilian estates. With 21 hectares under vine it spans across six northern districts of the Etna DOC and has its production facilities at Randazzo. A collection of old Carricante, Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Capucho vines, sitting at between 700 and 750 metres above sea level, provides the raw material for Donnafugata’s Etna range: white, rosé and red estate blends and two ‘contrada’ (cru) bottlings. High-density plantings, the prevalence of traditional training systems (namely albarello Etneo) and the respectable average age of the vines all contribute to low yields of high-quality fruit, particularly expressive of the unique Etna terroir.

Etna was Sicily’s first DOC, established in 1968 and since propelled to world fame by celebrity winemakers and a millennial craze for volcanic wines. Multiple factors contribute to the region’s singularity within the unique, and very diverse, Sicilian context: a continental climate at the heart of the Mediterranean with altitude vineyards subject to wide diurnal and seasonal temperature amplitudes; volcanic soils (‘scare’) with high levels of minerals and porosity; and old, deep-rooted vines of extremely well-adapted indigenous varieties.

Donnafugata faces respectable competition in the Etna DOC, where it shares the stage with collector and sommelier-favourites (think Frank Cornelissen or Girolamo Russo), as well as with other Sicilian key stakeholders such as Terre Nere, Planeta, Alta Mora (Cusumano) or Passopisciaro (Franchetti).

The viticultural and winemaking teams certainly stood up to the challenge and have, since the inaugural 2016 harvest, produced elegant

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Hugely impressive vintage of this Merlot/ Sangiovese blend with rich, pure, red and black fruit, dried rosemary and milk chocolate framed by a lovely wash of blood orange acidity, keeping it fresh and the glass refilled. One of those wines that simply makes you go ‘Wow!’

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wines that will appeal to Etna neophytes and even to those that sometimes find Donnafugata’s style too heavy-handed. It will be interesting to see how the effort to recover old plots through informed mass selection and reconversion of VSP-trained vines to the original alberello will translate, in the long term, into the quality and expressiveness of the wines.



Antonio Rallo

Increased rainfall is the key challenge

Last week, Donnafugata hosted the official launch of the 2018 vintage, with Antonio, José and their team at Randazzo guiding the audience through a tasting of the upcoming releases. 2018 was not without its challenges, with temperatures below and rainfall well above the region’s average (1000 mm versus 801 mm). The dry spell in the weeks immediately before harvest was crucial for a full and balanced ripening, but careful hand-selection of the fruit was still needed given that a significant percentage of berries had been damaged.

When asked whether climate change is having any impact on viticultural and winemaking decisions across Donnafugata’s estates, Antonio mentioned precisely the increase in rainfall as the main challenge. When purchasing their Etna holdings, the choice of northern vineyards was indeed a strategic decision and addresses this mounting pressure. The exposition provides natural shelter and, as a result, the vines are less prone to disease and enjoy a longer, steadier ripening season. This is particularly important for Nerello Mascalese, with its stern tannins, to achieve full physiological ripeness.

The 2018 wines are clearly the product of a restrained vintage, with lower alcohol and gentle, filigreed aromatics. The estate wines will have wider appeal, balancing minerality with an approachable acidity and gentle fruitiness. Wines to be drunk young, released close to or exactly at their peak, with great aromatic vibrancy. But the two ‘contrada’ wines were the stars of the tasting, showcasing the idiosyncratic minerality of the single vineyards they hail from and the finesse and age-worthiness that, handled correctly, Nerello Mascalese can deliver. A comparative tasting with the appellation’s iconic, long-established reds would be an interesting exercise.

And so onto the actual wine tasting...



‘Sul Vulcano’ Etna Bianco DOC, 2018

100% Carricante, 12.18 % ABV

A very elegant, quasi-Burgundian, expression of the Etna’s indigenous white variety. Complex nose with a dense citrus core lined by floral and balsamic notes. Expressive palate with juicy lemon, white grapefruit, fennel and an elegant hint of toasted almond. Great persistence supported by intense, but well integrated, acidity and mineral backbone.

‘Dea Vulcano’ Etna Rosso DOC, 2018

Nerello Mascalese, with a small percentage of Nerello Cappuccio, 13 % ABV

This ‘Dea’ is produced with fruit from the estate’s younger vines and indeed shows a youthful, red fruit vibrancy. Wild strawberries and cranberries dominate the nose, with hints of violet, pepper and dried herbs. Soft palate with Nerello Cappuccio rounding Nerello Mascalese’s more angular tannins. Best enjoyed slightly chilled.



Contrada Marchesa Etna Rosso DOC, 2018

100% Nerello Mascalese, 13.62 % ABV

Contrada Marchesa is a two-hectare plot at 750 m above sea level with vines aged 80+ years. The wine has a lovely mineral backbone showcasing Nerello’s trademark structure. Intense nose, driven by mineral freshness, with clear notes of raspberry, violet and sweet spice. Enveloping texture and firm gravelly tannins that will surely gain a delicious roundness with age. Darker flavours of plum, black cherry, Mediterranean herbs and balsamico. Long finish with lingering fruit and crisp acidity. (Released to market in September 2021)

‘Fragore’ Contrada Montelaguardia Etna Rosso DOC, 2018

100% Nerello Mascalese, 13.93 % ABV

Contrada Montelaguardia is a four-hectare plot at 750 m above sea level with vines aged 70+ years. Montelaguardia’s soils have a very specific mineral composition that resulted from a lava eruption in 1614-24. It has milder temperatures than Marchesa, allowing earlier ripening and, therefore, producing more generous wines. Complex, lifted nose of wild berries, black pepper and forest floor. Broad palate balanced by vertical minerality, starting to show a hint of the delicious umami character that will develop fully with age. Very long finish with lingering flavours of sour cherry, cranberry, plum and dried thyme. (Released to market in September 2021)

In addition to the 2018 releases, and for context, Donnafugata also provided samples of the following wines:

‘Sul Vulcano’ Etna Rosato DOC 2020

100% Nerello Mascalese, 12.46 % ABV

A structured and food-friendly Rosato with a very pleasant salinity and vibrancy of fruit. Seductive nose of red berries with a touch of freshly cut grass. Fresh flavours of raspberry, pomegranate and pink grapefruit driven by Nerello Mascalese’s trademark minerality.

‘Sul Vulcano’ Etna Rosso DOC 2017

Nerello Mascalese, with a small percentage of Nerello Cappuccio, 14.10 % ABV

An interesting ‘control-sample’ that exemplifies the product of a hotter, drier vintage. It lacks the same exact balance of the ‘Dea 2018’, with the alcohol quite at the forefront and not fully integrated. The red fruit and earthy aromas are pleasant but not very well defined. Still, it has a lovely linear acidity and measured tannic structure.

Donnafugata’s wines are imported into the UK by Liberty Wines.

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