

# Wine Travel Stories

In-depth tales of winery visits around the world

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Thursday, August 11, 2016

## Donnafugata – A Legendary Sicilian Winery

(June 2016) [Donnafugata](#) has always been one of my favorite Italian wineries – ever since I had tasted their magical wines at VinItaly several years ago. The experience of tasting their famous dessert wine, ***Ben Ryé Passito di Pantelleria***, with its honey, apricot and nutty notes, has long stayed on my palate memory.

Even more memorable were the photos they showed me of the zibibbo grapes that went into the wine. Growing on the tiny island of Pantelleria, south of Sicily and closer to the coast of Africa, the vine must be protected in holes dug into the sandy volcanic soil to shield them from the fierce winds that whip across the island. The long shoots of the vine then creep across the land, hugging the soil for protection.



Zibibbo Vine Growing on Island of Pantelleria, Photo Credit: Donnafugata

### What does “Donnafugata” Mean?

The other beautiful aspect of this winery is its name – Donnafugata, which means “fleeing woman,” and is in reference to Queen Maria Carolina, who hid from Napoleon’s troops in the 1800’s in the vineyards near the winery. This story was immortalized in the novel, ***The Leopard***, which describes some of the history of Sicily.

The winery was actually started in 1851 by the Rallo family, and is now in its 5<sup>th</sup> generation of family ownership. In the beginning, they primarily produced Marsala, but have since expanded to western Sicily and the island of Pantelleria. They adopted the name “Donnafugata” in the 1980’s to highlight their new focus on premium and luxury wine production.





## Donnafugata Tasting in Messina

When we discovered that it would take us 5 hours to drive from Messina to Donnafugata's closest winery south of Marsala, it nearly broke my heart because I knew we would not have time to visit, and this was one of the major wineries I wanted to see on Sicily. Fortunately, Donnafugata's marketing and PR team came to the rescue, because they offered to send two wonderful representatives to Messina to provide us with a private tasting at our hotel.

Therefore, we were most grateful to meet Baldo Palermo and Simona Governanti who drove 5 hours to conduct a 2 hour tasting, and then drove 5 hours back! Again, we were completely overwhelmed at the generosity and kindness of the wineries of Southern Italy and Sicily.



Baldo (Standing) Conducting Donnafugata Tasting in Messina

## Background and Statistics on Donnafugata

Baldo provided an overview of the company history, vineyards, and locations. Everyone was impressed with the background of Donnafugata, and how in 1983 the Rallo Family became one of the first Sicilian wineries to break away from the old winemaking production techniques and focus on modern winemaking and labeling.

Today they have 338 hectares of vineyards in various locations across Sicily and the island of Pantelleria. With 90 employees, they produce 2 million bottles per year, and sell their wine in 90 countries. Even more impressive, they are certified in both sustainable farming and winemaking, and are a member of the [Istituto Grandi Marchi](#), which is an organization of the 20 most well-known wineries in Italy.



Five Fabulous Donnafugata Wines We Tasted

## Tasting Five Fabulous Wines from Donnafugata

We tasted five wines, and all of them were impressive and well made. I was especially pleased with their tech sheets, which were the most detailed I have ever seen, with information down to the number of vines that were used for each wine!

**2015 *SurSur Donnafugata*** – made from the Grillo grape. It had citrus and mineral notes carrying through on the textured palate. Crisp refreshing acid. Great for seafood. 12 euros

**2012 *Chiarandà Donnafugata***– a very sophisticated chardonnay with generous French oak, half ML, apple, lemon, and an intriguing minerality. Burgundian in style, but with a unique volcanic mineral note that whispered Sicily. 22 euros

**2014 *Sedara Donnafugata*** – a red blend made with nero d’avola, cab, merlot and syrah. It was pleasantly fruity with plum and spice notes. The tannins were soft and approachable, easy drinking. 12 euros

**2011 *Mille e una Notte Donnafugata*** – A massive, complex, and very tasty red blend made with nero d’avola, petit verdot, and syrah. With 14 month aging in new French oak, followed by 36 months in bottle, this was a masterpiece of winemaking with deep, dark fruit, spices, earth, fine-grained tannins, well-balanced, and a finish that lasts forever. I remember tasting this wine at one of the Grandi Marchi tastings at Vin Italy several years ago, and it is truly one of the icon wines of Sicily. Very seductive. 50 euros

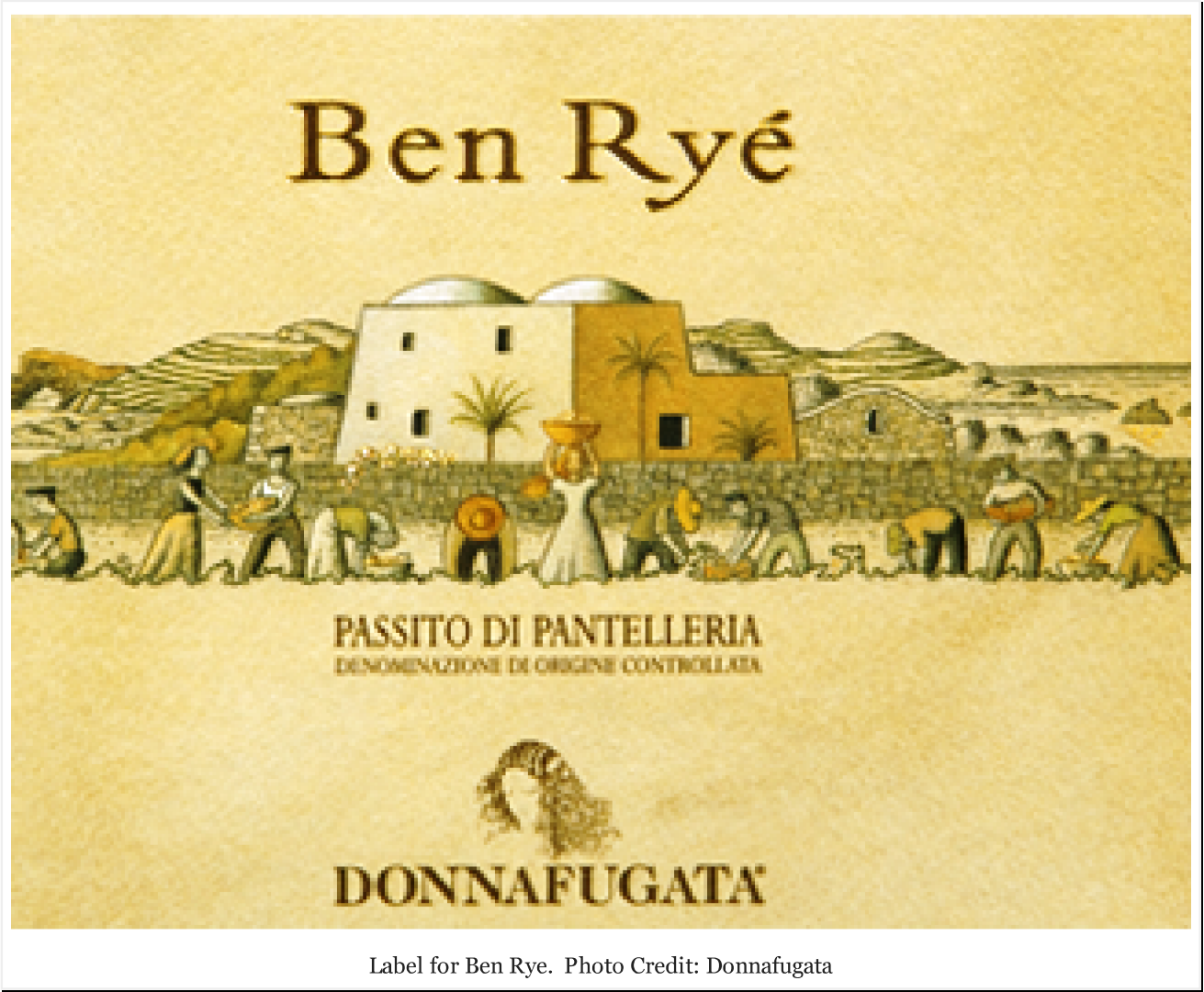
**2008 *Limited Ben Ryé Passito Donnafugata***– This is the wine that I had fallen in love with so many years ago, and has always been my benchmark for muscat made in the passito (dried grape) style. With a nose of dried figs and honey, it glides across the palate with exquisite thickness opening into a nutty, apricot and ending with a refreshing acid. With a residual sugar level of 20% (203 g/l), it is dessert in a glass – nothing else is needed.

In the US this wine is usually sold for around \$38 dollars for a half bottle, but in Italy they sell it in a large bottle for around 50 euros. However, the 2008 is a special vintage that was held back for



additional aging, and labeled “*Limited*”. Therefore this bottle, if you can find it, sells for around \$130 in the US.

Donnafugata’s Ben Rye is made with the Zibibbo grape, the Italian name for Muscat d’Alessandria. This wine comes from their winery on the island of Pantelleria where the grapes are grown in volcanic soil close to the ground. Due to the high winds on the island, the vines are placed in shallow dips to protect them. Ben Rye is an Arabic term that means “Son of the Wind.” Not only is this an amazing wine to taste, but it has a romantic history and name.



Lasting Memories of Donnafugata

Everyone applauded loudly after the tasting, and we helped Baldo clean up the glasses and pack the wines. Then just before he left, he asked if we could take the left over bottles, including some he had not opened. This was very much appreciated by all, and we continued to enjoy Donnafugata wines over the next several days during evening tastings.