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Italy, Sicily: A Generational Change

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A short distance beyond the entry gate to the Donnafugata winery in Marsala, this quote from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe remains inscribed on the courtyard wall:

*"To have seen Italy without having seen Sicily
is not to have seen Italy at all,
for Sicily is the clue to everything."*

When I read those words for the first time, I felt as if Goethe was speaking them directly to me. It was sixteen years ago and I was on my very first wine assignment for a daily newspaper. Suddenly, all of the little threads I had been dutifully gathering as an expat reporter came together with startling focus. I too had found a "clue to everything" on this maiden voyage in my discovery of Italian wine. Perhaps mine was a little different than what Goethe intended, but it was an important key to understanding the context of *vino Italiano*, nonetheless.



A new generation of Sicilian vintners includes (left to right) Alessio Planeta, Antonio Rallo and Alberto Tasca d'Almerita among many new young faces, both male and female.

I would later learn that others in my generation - winemakers, wine lovers and wine writers - would be similarly inspired by the deeper meaning of those words. In essence, they represent a paradigm shift for Italian wine that can be summed up as follows: It's not that Sicily should learn from Italy when it comes to wine. It was that Italy could learn from Sicily.



The Grillo grape is showing fantastic results and is one of the protagonists of this year's tasting. Grillo is said to be a cross of Catarratto and Zibibbo was once the base of Marsala. Today, it has come into its own as an excellent monovarietal white.



Raw seafood is Sicily's prized culinary attraction to pair with white wines made from Grillo, Insolia or other blends.



Wines made on Sicily's satellite islands such as Pantelleria, Favignana and the Lipari islands are gaining traction. This is an interesting red from Salina made with a blend of Calabrese, Alicante and Nocera grapes.

Many of the major trends to characterize Italian wine in the two decades since my first writing assignment trace their roots to this sun-kissed island at the heart of the Mediterranean. The popularity of indigenous varieties and their success in overseas markets sees the Sicilian grape Nero d'Avola as a protagonist. Cohesive unity among Sicilian vintners proves that individual brand building is accomplished through big picture, territorial branding. Much of the modern "natural wine" philosophy starts here. The island's ideal, disease-free growing conditions allow for more rigorous experimentation and innovation when it comes to organic and biodynamic farming. Sicily demonstrates an impressive ability to reinvent itself, as seen by the explosive rise of Etna wines and the young band of garage vintners who populate the volcano. Lastly, Sicily proves to the rest of Italy that a seamless and absolute transition from one generation to the next (with equal representation of young men and women) can be executed without so much as the slightest ripple. These are just a few of the important contributions that come from Sicily.



Sicilians are known for their sweet tooth and dessert wines are a local passion.

The person to paint Goethe's words on his winery wall was Donnafugata founder Giacomo Rallo. This essay is dedicated to his memory. At 79-years-old, he died of a sudden heart attack while getting dressed for work at his Marsala home on May 10, 2016. In an obituary published in the leading Italian daily, one of my colleagues wrote that Mr. Rallo dedicated his life to proving Goethe right. As I reflect on the life of this transformative leader in Sicilian wine, I am convinced he succeeded in his mission.



Giacomo Rallo passed away this year at 79. He founded the Donnafugata winery and was one of the architects of the Sicilian wine renaissance.

He was a father figure to me during my years of professional growth. Similarly, he was a source of guidance and inspiration for every Sicilian winemaker in my age group from Pantelleria to Messina. I remember his broad smile when I first met him sixteen years ago sitting next to his wife Gabriella during a press event to promote the Donnafugata night harvest. I last chatted with him less than a year ago, under the shade of giant olive tree before a complete vertical tasting of his celebrated Passito di Pantelleria Ben Ryé. Knowing that I love hand-painted Sicilian tiles, he nudged me away to show me his latest ceramic acquisitions. Mr. Rallo showed unparalleled energy and enthusiasm up until his last day of life.

Born in 1937, Mr. Rallo became the fourth generation vintner of his family. He studied law, but shifted to wine to rebrand his family winery as "Donnafugata," with inspiration from Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's Sicilian novel *The Leopard*. Mr. Rallo would turn a family wine patrimony that started with fortified Marsala into a quality-minded, table wine brand.



Here is one of my favorite hand-painted antique ceramic tiles among the late Giacomo Rallo's collection.



Fishing boats capture the late afternoon sunlight in Marsala.

His friendship with Lucio Tasca d'Almerita and Diego Planeta would spark the so-called "Sicilian wine renaissance" that marked a philosophical shift from quantity-to-quality production. These efforts would culminate with the creation of the Sicilia DOC appellation in 2012 to institute greater quality controls on Sicilian wine. Efforts to push the Sicilia DOC through were spearheaded by Giacomo's son Antonio Rallo. Another major accomplishment from Giacomo and his family was UNESCO World Heritage recognition for the ancient prune-trained grapevines found on the island of Pantelleria. That honor was confirmed in 2014. His greatest achievement, however, is the transfer of legacy. Antonio Rallo and his sister José gracefully carry forth their father's vision.

Rest in peace, Giacomo Rallo, and thank you for letting me see your Sicily.

—Monica Lamer