

Robert Camuto: Letter From Europe

A Sicilian on the Move

At long last, Donnafugata buys a winery on Etna ... and more



Photo by: Fabio Gambina

Antonio Rallo is now making wine in multiple appellations around Sicily.

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Decades ago, Giacomo Rallo became fascinated with the volcanic vineyards of Mount Etna, long before they became fashionable.

The pioneering founder of western Sicily’s Donnafugata winery “fell in love with the place,” his son, Antonio Rallo, recalls. “He thought he should produce wine on those volcanic soils at high altitude.”

In 1990, Giacomo was negotiating to buy a 20-acre wine estate on Etna’s eastern slopes—150 miles from his base in Marsala, at the other end of the island. But as the mountain itself began erupting again, the deal imploded in an Italian-style real-estate mess as multiple property owners and a bank could not reach agreement.

The Rallos turned their attention elsewhere, particularly the windswept island of Pantelleria, where Donnafugata bought 100 acres of Zibbibo, the local name for Muscat of Alexandria. There they make the island’s specialty, naturally sweet wines in the passito style, from dried grapes, including their flagship Ben Ryé. On Pantelleria, the restoration of rugged volcanic vineyards—including rebuilding 15 miles of drywall terraces—took more investment and sweat than they had imagined.

“Pantelleria took all our energy for a long time,” says Antonio. “We had no time to think about Etna.”

Now, following Giacomo’s death at 79 in May, the Rallos will finally begin producing on Etna, with the 2016 harvest.

Antonio and his sister, José, who run Donnafugata, recently announced that they are expanding to eastern Sicily with the purchase of a winery on Etna’s north face from a small group of grapegrowers. There, they are leasing 37 acres of vines, with the intent to purchase that land and more in the next year.

“This was my father’s dream,” says Antonio, 49. “In the last few years, we have been thinking about Etna more and more. My father and I visited there together just a week before he died.”

In the last 15 years, the Etna region has been booming, as the mountain has drawn dozens of winemakers from around Sicily, other regions of Italy and farther afield. They produce wines primarily from two local grapes—Nerello Mascalese for taut reds and Carricante for fresh minerally whites.

Donnafugata currently produces about 190,000 cases a year, mostly from 640 acres of vineyards in western Sicily’s sleepy Contessa Entellina appellation. On Etna, “we will never make big numbers,” says Antonio. “We are focusing on the kind of wines we like to produce.”

Instead, the move to Etna means a new *terroir* with a dynamic wine scene. “There are a lot of very good producers working on Etna, and for us it’s more stimulating being with other producers who are working well,” he adds. “When you are alone, it’s much different—you are only competing with yourself.”

Antonio, Donnafugata’s chief winemaker, said he and his family have been inspired by a host of modern Etna reds and by one white, Benanti’s ageworthy Carricante, Etna Superiore Pietra Marina. “We will try to make something like that, with time,” he says. “It’s the benchmark.”

Working with Nerello Mascalese, Antonio says, is completely different from making Donnafugata’s heartier Nero d’Avola-dominated wines from Contessa Entellina, such as its flagship Mille e Una Notte (2011, 90 points, \$89). “Nerello Mascalese is so different from all the other varieties in Sicily,” he says. “It’s a wine that has to be elegant. What is really important is not to overextract.”

His favorite Nerellos on Etna today are topped by Girolamo Russo, followed by Andrea Franchetti’s Passopisciaro, Tenuta delle Terre Nere (read Sicilian Standouts) and Graci.

Donnafugata’s current expansion isn’t limited to Etna; the company is also leasing, with the intent to purchase, 44 vineyard acres in southeastern Sicily’s Cerasuolo di Vittoria appellation, to make light, fruity, single-varietal Frappato and the DOCG-designated blend of Nero d’Avola and Frappato.

Antonio says the inspiration to work with Frappato came to him in the United States, where as president of the Sicilia DOC wine consortium, he has led tastings of wines from across Sicily. “I am now drinking more and more Frappato,” he says. His favorites include pure Frappato wines by COS and Valle dell’Acate.

The eastward push puts Donnafugata in the company of other leading family producers such as Planeta and Tasca d’Almerita, which have taken multi-*terroir* approaches across Sicily. But Antonio says he has no further expansion plans.

“I think it’s enough, to stay where we are,” he says, with a laugh. “We have enough to do for the next 30 years.”

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