



WINE INTEL FROM KAREN MACNEIL

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# THE BEST SIMPLE WHITE?

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“We think grillo (GREE-yo) will be the next pinot grigio.” That was Antonio Rallo talking. Rallo is the winemaker and the CEO of Sicily’s Donnafugata winery and an expert on indigenous Sicilian varieties. Grillo, he says is one of the best simple white wines no one has ever heard of.

I agree with him. Although I’d say that grillo shares the spotlight with vermentino. Both are snappy whites that deserve to unseat pinot grigio. They’re straightforward like pinot grigio; they’re affordable; they’re refreshing. But they’re also much more *interesting*. Eric Asimov of the *New York Times* has a great description for these kinds of whites. He calls them “pinot grigio with a brain.”

Donnafugata’s “SurSur” Grillo from Sicily (\$20) is dry, a little spicy, citrusy and fresh. It reminds me of the air after it rains. “SurSur” refers to the sound, in Arabic, that crickets make (Arabic was once spoken on the island). The name Donnafugata—Sicilian dialect for “woman in flight”—is taken from the famous Italian novel *Il Gattopardo* (The Leopard).

I had breakfast with Rallo recently at Napa General Store. Here are the highlights of what he shared:

- There are more than 70 indigenous varieties in Sicily alone. Nearly 60 of these almost disappeared in the economically depressed years after World War II when Sicilian viticulture and winemaking were focused on making cheap wine from grapes grown at high yields.

- Over the last two decades, Donnafugata and a number of other producers have scoured the island, collecting clones of what remains of Sicily's indigenous varieties and have begun growing the plant material in special plots and making microvinifications.
- During the last several decades, many Sicilian producers have also planted international varieties. For Rallo, this has had a silver lining. As a result of traveling to other countries, Sicilian producers have been exposed to practices, philosophies and a commitment to quality they'd never experienced before. They've brought that knowledge back to Sicily and raised the standards of viticulture and winemaking on the island.
- Some of the vineyards on the tiny satellite island of Pantelleria (where Donnafugata's sensational sweet wine Ben Ryé is made— see [WineSpeed](#)) are more than 150 years old.
- There are more than 280,000 acres of vines on the island of Sicily alone, making Sicily Italy's second most important wine region after the Veneto.

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