

DRINK

# Sicilian Sunshine, Serenades, and the Superb Wines of Donnafugata

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## Sicilian Sunshine, Serenades, and the Superb Wines of Donnafugata



A glass of **Donnafugata** wine with a view of the **Saline della Laguna** salt pans in western Sicily, on the coast connecting Trapani to Marsala.

Sicily, you win. We were only together for three days but I fell completely in love. Without inhibition, I basked in your soul-warming sunshine, devoured your divine food, and drank every glass of wine offered to me. And so many serenades, everywhere there was music. From a charming Sicilian man crooning Nina Simone to an elegant wine diva's soulful Bossa Nova renditions, my Sicilian soundtrack is forever forged in my memory. Allow me to thank the matchmaker who finally brought me and Sicily together: the legendary winery **Donnafugata**.



Donnafugata, the woman in flight, first captivated me in 2016 on a rainy day in New York City when José Rallo enchanted the room with her **singing** voice and her family's wines. From that moment, I was impressed by the wines of Donnafugata and my desire to visit Sicily was ignited. Celebrated throughout Italy and beyond, Donnafugata is one of Sicily's most iconic wineries. The Rallo family has 160 years of experience in quality wine production but Donnafugata was founded in 1983 by Giacomo Rallo and his wife Gabriella. Sadly, Giacomo passed away in May 2016 but the fifth generation, his children José and Antonio, are carrying on his legacy and leading Donnafugata into the future with passion, talent, and



tenacity. The matriarch of the family, Gabriella, creates or inspires the stunning works of art that adorn Donnafugata's labels.



### **Siblings Antonio and José Rallo work as a team to lead their family's renowned winery.**

The Rallo siblings are a great team and balance each other beautifully. Vivacious and extroverted, José oversees Donnafugata's management team and communications. She is also a trained vocalist who has performed at prestigious venues around the world and does not hesitate to break into song when she shares a bottle of wine. Antonio is a highly regarded agronomist and head of winemaking. Shy at first, Antonio's spark is ignited and his smile can't be contained when he is in the vineyards or talking about his beloved wines. Respected by his peers, Antonio is also head of the **Sicilia DOC** wine consortium.





**Donnafugata's Marsala winery was built in 1851 and the impressive underground barrique cellar was built in 2007. [Visitors](#) are welcome for tours and tastings, by appointment.**

I arrived at Donnafugata's cellars in Marsala on a warm September evening. Although I had met José once before, and had sipped their wines several times since that first meeting, I found myself a bit nervous. Sicily was the final stop on a whirlwind journey through Italy that included [Puglia](#) and [Conegliano](#). Would my first experience in Sicily live up to what my very active imagination had conjured up? Needless to say, my expectations were exceeded in every way.



**Visitors to Donnafugata's winery in Marsala are greeted with this quote from Goethe: "Italy without Sicily leaves no image in the soul: here is the key to everything."**



***image courtesy of Donnafugata. photo by Fabio Gambina***

Donnafugata is truly steeped in Sicilian culture. Even their name is inspired by the famous novel *Il Gattopardo* (The Leopard) and refers to the story of a queen who found refuge where the company's vineyards are located today. Their 3 historic production facilities in Sicily include the ancient family cellars in [Marsala](#) (where bottling and aging take place), 667 acres of vineyards (and 22 acres of olive groves) at [Contessa Entellina](#) in the heart of western Sicily, and their Khamma winery on [Pantelleria](#), a stunning volcanic island between Sicily and Africa. They have also recently fulfilled their dream of producing wine in eastern Sicily.





**Antonio Rallo was clearly delighted with the grapes being harvested at their Contessa Entellina estate in western Sicily. Donnafugata cultivates 17 varieties of grapes on this beautiful estate of 667 acres, including indigenous grapes like Nero d'Avola and Grillo, and international varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay.**



**Freshly harvested Cabernet Sauvignon grapes at the Contessa Entellina estate.**





The diversity of grapes planted at Contessa Entellina empowers Donnafugata to produce an amazing array of wines - from crisp whites to rich reds. One of their celebrated reds from this region is **Tancredi**, a full-bodied and elegant blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Nero d'Avola with a kiss of Tannat and other grapes. Luscious flavors of red and dark berries meld seamlessly with hints of Mediterranean herbs, a bit of licorice, and beautifully integrated tannins. Approachable and elegant, **Tancredi 2012 (\$40)** is an attainable luxury.





Reaching for the stars can be daunting, but a bottle of **Mille e una Notte 2012 (\$80)** is well within reach. The starry skies on its label are inspired by Arabian Nights and the wine within is rich, regal, and romantic. Nero d'Avola, Petit Verdot, Syrah, and other grapes from Contessa Entellina are blended together to create a stunning tapestry of flavors where everything is vibrant and harmonious. Fruity yet savory, powerful yet graceful, spicy yet soft; Mille e una Notte is a winemaking triumph: absolutely Sicilian with global appeal.





## José Rallo with Zibibbo grapes and vines on the island of Pantelleria.

Known as the black pearl of the Mediterranean, I can't get the rugged and dramatic beauty of **Pantelleria** out of my head. Located between Sicily and Africa, Pantelleria is a volcanic island with a rocky coastline that is only about 31 miles long, but this small jewel is rich in stunning landscapes: soaring black rock peaks, grottos, terraced vineyards, thermal waters, and more. And on a clear day you can see Tunisia!



## Donnafugata's Khamma winery on the island of Pantelleria welcomes visitors from June to mid-September.

*image courtesy of Donnafugata, photo credit Anna Pakula*

Donnafugata's 168 acres of vineyards on Pantelleria are spread throughout 14 districts with varying microclimates. A very special grape grows in this terrain: the ancient variety known as Zibibbo (Muscat of Alexandria) and some of the vines are more than 100 years old. Winemaking on Pantelleria is truly a labor of love and a fine example of heroic viticulture. Pantelleria's rough terrain and windy climate require the Zibibbo vines to be trained to a very low bush on small terraces, protected by dry-built lava stone walls.



## Zibibbo two ways: ripe and dry.





Donnafugata uses dried Zibibbo grapes to make their iconic and award-winning sweet wine Ben Ryé. Each dried grape is meticulously destemmed by hand in a process called *Sgrappolatura*.



**Ben Ryé Passito di Pantelleria 2015 (\$40)** captures the essence of the island's terroir and culture. The name Ben Ryé is inspired by the Arabic term "son of the wind" because the wind constantly sweeps around the grape clusters on Pantelleria. The Zibibbo grape is originally from North Africa and its name comes from "Zibibb" - Arabic for dried grape. After harvesting in August, the Zibibbo grapes are dried naturally in the sun and wind for 3-4 weeks to concentrate their sugars and flavors. The dried and destemmed Zibibbo grapes are then added to must produced from fresh grapes that were harvested in September. This alchemy creates something very special. Too often, we dismiss sweet wines but Ben Ryé is an excellent example of a sweet wine with complexity and finesse. Rich flavors of apricot, figs, orange zest, and honey are balanced by hints of hazelnuts, Mediterranean herbs, and vibrant acidity that imbue Ben Ryé with vigor and structure. A great match with foie gras and blue cheeses, personally I prefer to savor



Ben Ryé by itself at the end of a meal. Best served slightly chilled, Ben Ryé's Sicilian spirit will warm your soul.



### **Grazie, Antonio and José Rallo!**

I don't presume to be an expert on Sicily after my three-day wine adventure with Donnafugata, but expertise is not the catalyst for love: it is passion. The Rallo's family passion for their legacy, land, and culture make each expertly crafted bottle of Donnafugata a tribute to their beloved Sicily. I'm not sure when I will visit Sicily again but as long as Donnafugata keeps making wine, each sublime sip will bring back memories of Sicilian sunshine and sweet serenades.

***This article featured three of Donnafugata's flagship wines but they have an extensive and excellent portfolio - visit their [website](#) to learn more. Also, my previous articles about their wines include [Donnafugata Wines from Sicily Hit All the High Notes](#) and [Get Swept Away to Sicily with the Wines of Donnafugata](#).***

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