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# Celebrating Heroic Viticulture with Donnafugata's Ben Ryè

**Michelle Williams** Contributor ⓘ

Dining &amp; Drinking

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Ben Ryè captures the essence of Pantelleria in each bottle.



“We believe one contributing factor to the uniqueness of our Ben Ryè is the extraordinary quality of the dried grapes, which enhances the outstanding complexity of the wine



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Donnafugata Winery on Pantelleria Island MICHELLE WILLIAMS

Pantelleria is home to “heroic viticulture: strong wind, little rainfall, absence of natural ground water, steep terraces, and isolated position,” explains Antonio Rallo, Winemaker at Donnafugata. Yet Giacomo Rallo, the winery’s founder, fell

in love with this divisive land, seeing a diamond of viticulture potential hidden in the rough.

Located in the Straights of Sicily, in the Mediterranean Sea, lies the Italian island of Pantelleria. Closer to Tunisia than Sicily, this small, secret volcanic outcrop, total area of 32 square miles, endures unrelenting gale force winds from Northern Africa. It is here Giacomo Rallo, chose to plant vineyards in 1989. “Inspired by the most prestigious sweet wines of the world, such as Tokaj, Sauternes, and Ice wine, in terms of quality and elegance,” Giacomo Rallo foresaw the sun and wind producing different yet equal conditions to noble rot and freezing temperatures for sweet wine production.





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Zibbibo clusters are hand harvested at the ideal time by skilled harvest workers. MICHELLE WILLIAMS

Noble vision aside, viticulture on the island is unique. Planted by the Phoenicians, the white grape, Zibibbo, aka Muscat of Alexandria, preserves in the harsh climate. Because of the wind, heat, and lack of water, the vines are grown bush-style, low to the ground in small hollows for protection, while also collecting the limited rainwater and dew at the root of the vine. Stone terraced vineyards and wind breakers made from canes provide additional protection from



erosion. “The wind can be both enemy and best friend,” shares Rallo. “It’s the enemy during flowering season, increasing the risk of limited bud development, and the friend in prevention of mold due to humidity or other possible diseases in the vineyard, as well as aiding to dry the fresh grapes.”

This unforgiving land produces one of Italy’s most sought after sweet wines - Donnafugata’s Ben Ryè. By harnessing the sun and wind to dry the grapes and concentrate its sugars, Ben Ryè captures the essence of Pantelleria in each bottle.



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Donnafugata skilled harvest workers hand sort Zibbibo grapes on mats to dry for Ben Ryè MICHELLE WILLIAMS

The harvest and winemaking process of this special wine is laborious and time consuming. To insure balance of acidity, phenolics, and sugar ripeness, clusters are identified from each vineyard at the cusp of harvest. These clusters are typically picked seven to ten days later than grapes harvested for other wines. Once picked, the clusters endure a meticulous sorting process, followed by three to four weeks of drying on mats in covered barns, a process lasting throughout September. Once dried and manually de-stemmed, the grapes are fermented with



juice from fresh Zibibbo grapes to elevate its freshness. Aging takes place for at least seven months in stainless steel, followed by twelve months in bottle.



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Donnafugata Zibibbo grapes are dried on mats in outdoor barns. MICHELLE WILLIAMS

“Adding about 165 pounds of dried grapes to 26.4 gallons of fresh must for the production of Ben Ryè enhances the wine with intense aromatic concentration, while adding good acidity,” explains Rallo. “It takes about 8.8 pounds of grapes



for roughly a one liter of Ben Ryè, which can be translated in a yield of about 25% from grape into wine.



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Donnafugata's Ben Rye MICHELLE WILLIAMS

In its youth, Ben Ryè entices with lively notes of orange blossom, fig, dried apricot, and honey. As it ages (up to twenty years), it develops depth of concentration and complexity. Notes of dried figs, beeswax, salted caramel, and minerality are wrapped in lean acidity. It pairs effortlessly with a variety of

desserts and cheeses, yet its balance lends it to savory pairings as well. However, Antonio Rallo's favorite pairing is “by itself.”

Sweet wines crafted in the same *appassimento* style are made throughout Italy, yet Ben Ryè stands out. Rallo shares, “We believe one contributing factor to the uniqueness of our Ben Ryè is the extraordinary quality of the dried grapes, which enhances the outstanding complexity of the wine 🐦 , offering both freshness and intensity on the palate, with a pleasant sweetness balanced by great minerality and lively sapidity. All to be completed by a lingering persistence.”



**Michelle Williams** Contributor

I write about my three passions: wine, food, and travel. I explore the globe through the lens of a wine glass—preferably full—celebrating the communal experience of wine and food and illuminating the stories beyond the bottle. I’m the author of the award-winning Rockin’ Red...

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## The Chance And The Choice That Changed My Life: The Power of A College Promise

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**Chike Aguh** Brand Contributor  
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*Chike Aguh, a Principal at the McChrystal Group, is a guest contributor for the [College Promise Campaign](#)*

My family’s College Promise story began in the late 1950s in Nigeria, right before the British abandoned it as a colony. It started in the far east of the country, in a small nondescript village that most Nigerians themselves would never go to and never visit. The story started in that village with a young boy and young girl who grew up right over the hill from one another and whose parents never had any formal education past middle school. That boy and that girl lived through poverty