

James the Wine Guy Interview Series: Josè Rallo, Donnafugata Wines

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Gabriella “Gabri” Rallo and Josè Rallo

Josè Rallo heads up communication at Donnafugata and also is a member of the Rallo family that owns and operates Donnafugata. Donnafugata is emblematic for me in terms of gorgeous labels that convey Sicilia, an homage to the book by Prince Giuseppe Tommasi di Lampedusa entitled *Il Gattopardo* and in the English *The Leopard* and is a tale of Sicilian wine in the bottle. Label art is important and it is the cover to the book of wine—the art work which are designed by Stefano Vitale: a very successful translation of the very essence of Sicily in terms of visual presentation.



This graphic highlights Donnafugata sites in Western Sicily – Marsala, Contessa Entellina & Pantelleria; and Eastern Sicily in Vittoria and Etna.



Josè is bright and energetic and passionate about her families labels, vineyard sites and production facilities. Josè has a spirit that is contagious when she speaks about her family's wine history and the many wines they are producing. She is full of amazing ideas that has made Donnafugata a place to visit and to experience their wines. The family's historic cantina in Marsala and their summer event series at the site in Contessa Entellina are fantastic ways of experiencing Donnafugata with foot on ground and wine in the glass. Also the historic site on the island of Pantelleria is where they produce their elixir of goodness—Ben Ryé wine which is a Passito di Pantelleria and is a creation of what the island is known on this windswept volcanic island. Ben Ryé is a gift to us all and a wine that I recommend for your desserts—a silken wine that imparts sweetness and a full spectrum of fruit, nutty, and spice characterization.



And as I mentioned above—she has also has instituted an event series at the Contessa Entellina site in the summer called *Calici di Stelle* (Goblets of Stars)—enjoy the stars with music, food and, of course, wine. This event is in it's twenty second season and is every August – the beginning of the harvest which last in total 100 days (for all Donnafugata sites) for their grapes to be picked for the years current harvest.



Donnafugata produces 22 of wines from Etna, Contessa Entellina, Vittoria and Pantelleria and produces wines from indigenous varieties, international varieties and a combination of international and indigenous varieties. The expression for all of the wines is picking up on the rhythm of what is the heartbeat of Sicilian wines—a gift to palate and the sensory experience. All of their wines (which I am a fan of them all) are well produced with a great sensitivity to the environment as well as styles that give the fullness of Sicily. All of the wines are approachable not just with Sicilian and Italian cuisine but all cuisines. The styles are thrilling and can be found widely in the US and around the planet—the wines are completely reasonable on the pocket book.



I was very fortunate and thrilled to have Josè Rallo participate in my interview series. I hope you enjoy the interview as well. She is vibrant and talented—she is also a singer and encompasses her love for Sicily and passes it on with passion and commitment. I love her singing the sensory perception of her families wine (video is listed below).

JTWG Q1: What does Sicily mean to you?

JR: Sicily is my homeland. I adore the sun and the sea as well as all the colours and scents of this land.

JTWG Q2: Sicilian wines are on the world stage – how did this happen?

JR: It's a story of men and women. Great people like my father Giacomo and my mother Gabriella, but also members of other wine families that in little less than 30 years managed to innovate the perception of Sicilian wine. Strongly engaged in the vineyard to reach ever higher quality goals, in the cellar through refrigeration technologies to safeguard the aromas, on the market with an always modern and innovative marketing approach.

JTWG Q3. Just a generation and a half ago—I rarely saw Sicilian wines; now I see so many more on wine lists and in stores; and yet I do think there is a lot of opportunity especially in the US. Do you share that view?

JR: Absolutely. The U.S. are a huge market, the largest in the world for wine consumption. Today, we drink and eat always more conscious when it comes to quality and this is crucial for Sicilian and Italian wines in general, which are meant for food pairing and for moments of conviviality. I do not see problems from the consumer's point of view, but from the point of view of the distribution system. A complex and expensive system that often makes it difficult to meet the wine lover and the wine brands known through marketing.

JTWG Q4: Sicilian is producing gorgeous international varieties? I would love to see more of them in the US. Is there an opportunity to present this wines?

JR: The international grape varieties grow very well in Sicily: e.g. we have splendid Chardonnays with a marked freshness, which I like to call “Mediterranean” for their flavor; then we have splendid Cabernet Sauvignons that distinguish themselves for elegance and balsamic notes. All grapes that have been grown for decades in Sicily, one of the reasons why we are able to produce great expressions of those.

JTWG Q5. I love tasting the 1996, 2005 and 2014 Chiarandà Chardonnay. The 1996 was lyrical and I will always remember this wine. I would have never expected to have ever tasted an aged Chardonnay from Sicily. And I think this is proof positive of your family’s wines great capability of aging. What are some of the oldest bottles in your library?

JR: We have done vertical tastings of Mille e una Notte with Ian D’Agata starting from the 1995 vintage... and with Monica Lerner of Ben Ryé starting from 1989 tasting 22 vintages. Both were stunned by the ageing potential and results of those wines and grape varieties.

Ian stated on this occasion that “It’s a great tasting not just for Donnafugata but for Sicily and Nero d’Avola.” Monica Lerner instead said: “I confess to be supremely smitten by Sicily. Donnafugata’s Ben Ryé is one of the thousand reasons why I fell in love with this paradise in the middle of the Mediterranean [...] Passito di Pantelleria is explosive in its intensity and unhinged in its sweet abundance.”

We believe this is not only an exciting result for us, but also a great proof of Sicily’s viticultural and enological potential despite the fact that still some people may have a different idea of our region.

JTWG Q6. It was because of your label that I read Il Gattopardo / The Leopard in both English and Italian. What does the book represent to you?

JR: Il Gattopardo recounts a Sicily of bright colors, a Western Sicily where we as a winemaking company were born. A land of passion and overwhelming feelings, a place that has experienced strong social changes and that today represents a vanguard in the style of production and communication in the world of Italian wine.

JTWG Q7. Your label and the gorgeous artwork are iconic. It is not just beautiful art work but beautiful art in the bottle. How did the brand vision begin and how do you sustain it?

JR: Wine is an art and that’s why my mother Gabriella thought of dressing our bottles like that. The desire to attract the consumer with a “talking” packaging, a series of labels whose colors tell about Sicily and the wine inside the bottles, but also about the many faces and shades of the fleeing woman (Donnafugata) who dreams, marvels and transmits emotions.

JTWG Q8. What is your favourite wine memory?

JR: My best memories are those of my childhood. I grew up in the vineyards and with wine. I remember my first harvests alongside my grandparents. I remember my first sips of wine always from my grandfather’s glass during Sunday lunches. I believe a perfect way of approaching wine is during a family lunch.

JTWG Q9. Donnafugata now has a Etna Rosso and an Etna Rosato wine — is there an Etna Bianco planned?

JR: Etna Bianco has already been produced, but the production is very limited so far, so we could not distribute it in all markets. In the USA we will arrive soon with this wine, hopefully by the end of 2019.

JTWG 10. Ben Ryé is a gift to the palate and I enjoy with cheese—but I do need to expand my horizons. What is an ideal Sicilian dessert(s) to pair with this wine?

JR: Dry biscuits with sesame or almond cakes. Delicious also with the famous Cassata Siciliana especially when prepared with little sugar.

JTWG Q11. What are the oldest bottles of Ben Ryé in your cellar?

JR: 1989, not for sale obviously!

JTWG Q12. What is your most treasured travel moment?

JR: The Donnafugata Music&Wine performance at the Blue Note in New York which was an idea of mine and my husband Vincenzo, both very fond of jazz and Brazilian music. As producer and lead vocalist, I propose a multisensory experience that pairs each wine with a musical piece whose rhythm follows the tasting sensations.

Two resources below 1) wine list of all Donnafugata wines (a majority are imported into the US) and 2) my video review of some of Donnafugata wines. Many of these wines are available in the US—ask your wine merchant to bring the bottles in and also your favourite restaurant to bring some in as well. The wines can be enjoyed with **ANY** cuisine and of course can be enjoyed on their own.

List of all wines from Donnafugata:

- Donnafugata Brut – Chardonnay, Pinot Noir
- Donnafugata Brut Rose – Pinot Noir
- Donnafugata Anthilia Sicilia DOC – Lucido Catarratto
- Donnafugata Prio Sicilia DOC – Lucido Catarratto
- Donnafugata SurSur Sicilia DOC – Grillo
- Donnafugata Lighea Sicilia DOC – Dry Zibibbo
- Donnafugata Sul Vulcano Etna Bianco DOC – Carricante
- Donnafugata La Fuga Chardonnay Contessa Entellina DOC
- Donnafugata Vigna di Gabri Sicilia DOC – Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Viognier
- Donnafugata Chiarandà Contessa Entellina DOC* – Chardonnay
- Donnafugata Sul Vulcano Etna Rosso DOC* – Nerello Mascalese
- Donnafugata Etna Rosso DOC – Contrada Montelaguardia* – Nerello Mascalese
- Donnafugata Bell'Assai Vittoria DOC – Frappato
- Donnafugata Floramundi Cerasuolo di Vittoria DOCG* – Frappato, Nero d'Avola
- Donnafugata Sherazade Sicilia DOC – Nero d'Avola
- Donnafugata Sedàra Sicilia DOC – Nero d'Avola dominate wine with Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Syrah
- Donnafugata Angheli DOC Sicilia – Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon
- Donnafugata Tancredi IGT Terre Siciliane* – Cabernet Sauvignon, Nero d'Avola, Tannat and other grapes
- Donnafugata Mille e Una Notte Sicilia DOC* – Nero d'Avola, Petit Verdot Syrah and other grapes
- Donnafugata Kabir Moscato di Pantelleria DOC – Zibibbo
- Donnafugata Ben Ryé Passito di Pantelleria DOC* – Zibibbo
- Donnafugata Ben Ryé Limited Edition Passito di Pantelleria DOC* – Zibibbo

* Enjoy all the wines now but also get some bottles to place in your cellar to age. Splendid now and have great aging potential

[Donnafugata Website](#)

My video reviews of Donnafugata wines on my [YouTube channel](#)