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Discover Pantelleria With Donnafugata Wines – Sicily's Secret Island

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It is hard to imagine that a tiny obscure island straddled between Sicily and Africa is making cult-like wines that are highly sought after around the world. Pantelleria is a windswept island in the middle of the Mediterranean Ocean, a remote island known for capers and the ancient grape variety Zibibbo. The greatest chefs know of Pantelleria's capers and wine aficionados most certainly know of Donnafugata's Ben Ryé sweet wines made from Zibibbo grapes. Pantelleria is a Sicily's secret island, closer in proximity to Tunisia than Italy. It is a secret island that attracts wine lovers, history and nature lovers, celebrities, foodies and those in the know.

Pantelleria

So where exactly is Pantelleria? Well, it was a question I asked myself before visiting the island. Off the coast of Sicily, Pantelleria is a sunbaked island 62 miles southwest of Sicily and 37 miles east of the Tunisian coast. Pantelleria is the largest volcanic island of Sicily. The last eruption occurred below sea level in 1891, and today natural phenomena related to volcanic activity can be observed, such as hot springs and fumaroles that are scattered throughout the island.



Donnafugata's Khamma Vineyards

I spent a few days on Pantelleria with Antonio and José Rallo, fifth-generation winemakers for [Donnafugata wines](#). We spent time in the fields, the vineyards, the gardens, and the winery in Khamma, which is located in a natural amphitheater with terraced vineyards surrounded by dry built lava stone walls. It was truly a magical place to visit and taste Donnafugata wines in Khamma with its centuries-old terraced vineyards.



On the outskirts of Khamma, there is an orange garden, Giardino Pantesco. This is not just some ordinary garden, the origins of this garden date back 3000BC. Donnafugata donated this protected garden to FAI(National Trust of Italy whose purpose is to protect elements of Italy's physical heritage which might otherwise be lost) in 2008. Inside the protective lava stone wall is a single ancient orange tree. The wall protects this single tree from nature's elements, most notably the Pantelleria winds. A unique piece of history that has been preserved for all to experience.



As we walk through the vineyards of Khamma with José, she points out the volcanic soils which are loose and powdery. José explains, "there was once 5000 hectares of vineyards on Pantelleria, now only 500 hectares remain. It is a very heroic terroir because it is extremely hard to cultivate on this island." Pantelleria is a remote island, with few inhabitants. There is no mechanical cultivation, everything is done by hand, often in extreme heat(105 Fahrenheit) with high winds, high humidity, and low rainfall.



In the past many winemakers worked in the heat by themselves, today no one wants to work these vineyards alone. Donnafugata employs a team of workers so they can sing, laugh, tell jokes, and form a community while they are working in the vineyards. To create a sense of community for their employees, maintain and preserve the stone walls and terraces and grow grapes on a remote island is expensive. It costs Donnafugata three times more to cultivate on Pantelleria than mainland Sicily. ***The Rallo family's commitment and passion for maintaining and preserving unique terroir and cultivating indigenous varieties are apparent, admirable and heroic.***

meaning “raisins”. Zibibbo, also known as Muscat of Alexandria, is a white grape variety that thrives on the steep, hot, dry and windy island of Pantelleria. It is a white grape with a bright golden yellow color that is intensely aromatic with notes of almond, apricots and orange zest.



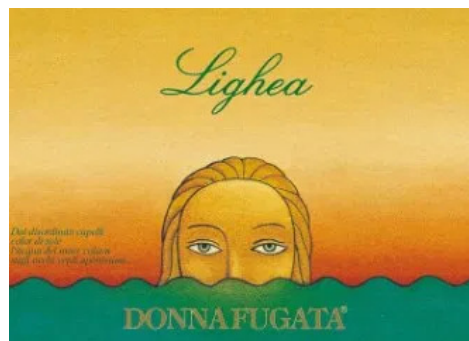
Zibibbo on Pantelleria is grown on bush trained vines(vite ad alberello), with horizontal stems. This creative viticulture allows for the bush to remain low to the ground, giving it a creeping vine appearance. The low vines allow for protection from the sun, and concentration of flavors and sugars. The practice is creative and sustainable because its cultivation is entirely manual. This old tradition of alberello trained bush vines was first introduced by Phoenicians 2500 years ago. In 2014, this method was inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List Of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. For the first time, agricultural practice is considered an intangible cultural heritage: a wonderful recognition of its value and significance.



Lighea 2018

This dry and aromatic wine is made from 100% Zibibbo. It has notes of apricots, tangerines, white flowers and has a nice crisp minerality. The wine is fresh, flowery and fruity with a long persistent finish.

** Artistic Label – “From the disheveled tresses the color of the sun, seawater flowed over the green, wide-open eyes.” Thus Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa describes Lighea, the bewitching siren and principal figure in his novel. She has inspired the creation of a complex and innovative wine and an equally original label. “It was not easy to print this label”, Gabriella (founder of Donnafugata, with her husband Giacomo) recalled, “and preserve a thousand shadings of colors of Pantelleria Island, painted in the original drawing.”*



Kabir 2018

This is a light fresh naturally sweet wine. It is aromatic with a rich bouquet of flowers and fruit. On the palate, the wine has notes of tropical fruit, lychee, and passionfruit, combined with spice, most notable nutmeg, and pepper. There is a nice minerality that balances the sweetness of the wine.

** Artistic Label – From the Arabic “Il Grande” Kabir, it is the name that Donnafugata has given to its Moscato di Pantelleria, for the breadth and nobility of its perfumes. The label speaks the voice of the island: it expresses the colors, the freshness and the aromatic richness of the Zibibbo. A label, capable of evoking the heroic soul of the viticulture of an island beaten by the wind and the waves.*



Ben Ryé

Ben Ryé is one of the greatest and most beloved sweet wines of the world. Loved by sommeliers and wine lovers from around the globe, it is a brilliant wine with an intense bouquet of apricots and orange. With age, it develops concentrated notes of toffee and caramel. This sweet wine offers immense complexity and mouthfeel. Its sweetness is balanced with freshness and minerality. Ben Ryé's flavor profile intensifies with age and time. It pairs beautifully with foie gras, caramelized duck, and blue cheeses. I am hugely enamored by this wine and can confidently say it is my favorite sweet wine.

Passimento Process – Ben Ryé is made in the passito style. The grapes are dried over weeks to give a deep concentration of fruit and sugar. Ben Ryé is handcrafted, a process that is three to four months in length. Beginning in mid-August, grapes are hand-harvested from the ancient terraces of Pantelleria. The grapes are carefully selected and laid out on racks to be dried in greenhouses by the sun and wind, a process that takes three to four weeks. The drying of the grapes concentrates the flavors and sugars. Then mid-September, the dried grapes are destemmed by hand and added to a must. During maceration, the dried grapes release aromas, flavors, and color into the must. Fermentation is complete around mid-November and the wines are aged in tank and then further in the bottle.





** Artistic Label From the Arabic term "Son of the Wind" because the wind sweeps constantly around the grape clusters on Pantelleria. And the island's winds bring with them a profusion of fragrances so powerful that you can touch them. An author label telling the love, the care and the effort of heroic viticulture on an island unique and fascinating. A fresh and enchanting portrait that reveals its essence.*



2017 – Expresses rich aromatics of apricots and orange peel. The palate is fresh and intense with a nice balance of sweetness.

2010– As the wine ages, Ben Ryé is beginning to strut its stuff. The wine has a deep amber hue showing the 10 years spent in the bottle. On the nose there is apricot, pears, and spicy notes, the notes continue onto the palate with beautiful freshness and intense fruit. Wonderful long and seductive finish.

2006 – The wine shows a further level of concentration, depth, and complexity. The nose expresses aromatic purity of apricots, fig, nutmeg, and nut. On the palate intoxicating notes of caramel, cinnamon, ginger, and spice. There is a nice lush, rich mouthfeel with fresh acidity.

** Artistic Notes Provided by Donnafugata **

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