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Exceptional Sicilian Wines

Sicily is Italy's equivalent of Andalusia, a region on the edge of Europe, looking south to Africa as much as north, physically and culturally detached from the rest of the country. It has been mostly known for cheap wines, but many wine aficionados know that Sicily is also home to a number of outstanding wineries that produce great wines from both indigenous and international grapes. The island is blessed with a combination of abundant sunshine, varied terroirs and very good indigenous grape varieties.



The Sicilian climate is Mediterranean and pairs of the most important towns are located on the north part of the island, Messina and Palermo; there are also Catania and Syracuse on the east and Trapani and Marsala on the west. Marsala is the source of famous, since the ancient times, mostly sweet fortified wines. The cooking-wine version of Marsala is what is known better in the United States and, very unfortunately, it reinforces the notion that Sicily produces cheap, indifferent wines.

But when it comes to wine quality, I beg to differ!

There are excellent white wines and a number of good reds produced in Sicily. The reasons for the high quality are the volcanic soil and Mediterranean climate.

I would like to acquaint you with three Sicilian wineries that create, from their own vineyards, exceptional wines. White or red, dry or sweet, the wines produced by the-

se long lived family owned wineries can handily compete with some of the best wines produced in other parts of Italy; or many other parts of the world.



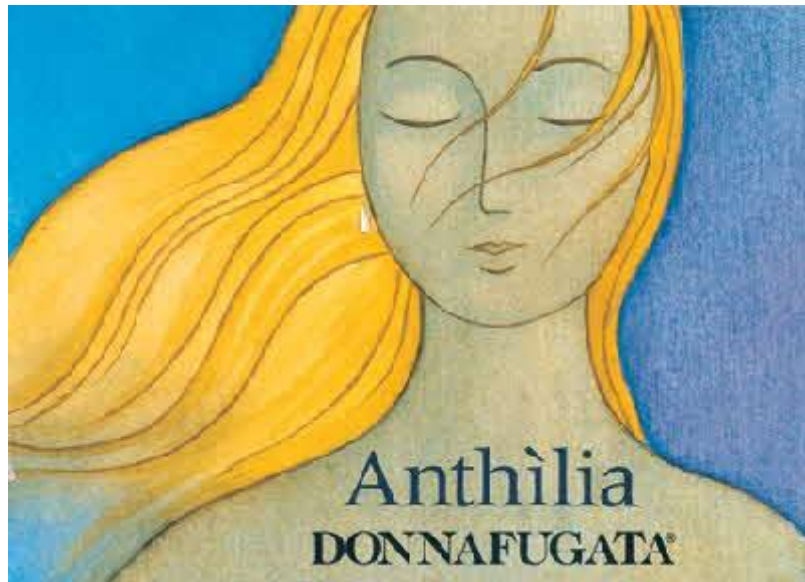
I will start with **Donnafugata** (www.donnafugata.it). The name, which means "woman in flight", goes back to Queen Maria Carolina of Bourbon fleeing from Napoleon to where the winery's vineyards are now located. It was Sicilian author Guiseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa in his novel "Il Gattopardo", who gave the name Donnafugata to this country estate, and many of the wine names and labels, refer to names and places in the story.

José and Antonio Rallo produce some of my favorite Italian white wines. And, parenthetically, José Rallo is also an exceptional jazz singer that, when she is in New York City, jams at the Blue Note in The Village to enthusiastic applause.

The volcanic island of Pantelleria is located just south of Sicily and about 37 miles east of Tunis; it is famous for producing exceptional wines. Donnafugata owns there a number of acres and there is where the produce **Lighea**, made from Zibbibo -- a local clone of Moscato d' Alexandria -- a considerably dry, crisp and very aromatic white wine that is fantastic with raw seafood and grilled or fried fish. José is very proud of this wine that smells like a summer Mediterranean garden full of honeysuckle, orange blossoms, white peaches and jasmine with a hint of thyme. It paired beautifully with my Thanksgiving turkey.



Another exceptional wine also made on Pantelleria from Zibbibo grapes by José is **Ben Ryé** (in Arabic, means "Son of the Wind"). It is sweet, clear amber colored; a passito wine. I consider it one of the top dessert wines made in Italy and is definitely a meditation wine for those pensive moments when silence is the best state of mind. The grapes are air-dried to concentrate the juice (must) and it's thickly extracted, almost syrupy, with very intense aromas of apricot, honey, candied orange, candied ginger and dried figs. There is a vein of fresh acidity towards the finish though, that stops this wine from being cloyingly sweet. It can definitely be drunk solo; but if you have to pair it with food, try it with a farmhouse Stilton or, even better, foie gras. For dessert, it's excellent with a fresh fruit tart, Tiramisu or Zabaglione. The wine is known locally as "the drink of the gods" and I can understand why it was named that way.



From Donnafugata's vineyards on mainland Sicily, there is **Anthilia**, a blend of Catarratto and Ansonica. The predominant Catarratto grape is a cousin of Garganega, a grape that is the 6th most widely planted white grape in Northern Italy as the basis for Veneto's Soave. Ansonica is a white grape planted primarily in western Sicily where it is mostly used in blends to produce Marsala; it is noted for its nutty aroma.

I tasted the 2014 Anthilia vintage, which came as a tasting sample from Folio Fine Wine Partners, and was surprised by the fruitiness of the wine and the rather floral nose with notes of granny smith apples, white peaches and grapefruit. The palate is crisp, nicely tart, with hints of lime zest, grapefruit, green apple and pear; the finish has good acidity and an excellent underlying minerality.

SurSur 2014 was a rather surprising single variety white wine made also in mainland Sicily. Made from Grillo, the other indigenous grape used to make Marsala, this wine sees no oak; it is fermented and aged in stainless steel, then aged in bottle prior to the release. It is pale yellow colored with green highlights. The nose is reminiscent of honeysuckle, pear and white peaches with herbal undertones. It is rather light bodied. The palate is dry, gentle, with hints of white peach, pears and, surprise... surprise... pineapple. The finish is rather short and quite herbal but well balanced. This is another perfect example of a wine to have with grilled fish and seafood, would probably also pair well with white meat from a charcoal grilled chicken.