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Antonio Rallo talks to Chicago about Sicilia DOC and making wine

By Barbara Payne



Antonio Rallo, winemaker at Donnafugata Wineries is a tall, slender, handsome man who is currently president of Sicilia DOC. He came to Chicago recently to share news about Sicily's passionate rededication to consistently high quality. He spoke fervently about the new consortium of Sicilian winemakers, Sicilia DOC. As of 2012, he said, every winemaker on the island banded together to form Sicilia DOC—a rare case of consensus in Italy, where winemakers tend to be fiercely independent.

Alberto and Antonio bring Chicago the news about Sicilia DOC

Sicilia DOC intends to be a new force in the wine world with its many winemakers, one of whom, Alberto Buratto of Baglio di Pianetto, came visiting with Antonio. "Sicily has the biggest vineyards in the world," said Antonio. In the small area around Trapani on the northwest segment of the island, he said they produce 3,500,000 hL (hectoliters) of wine every year. Surprisingly, despite Sicily's 600 miles of coastline, the country has no vineyards in those areas. But since a mere 11% of the land in Sicily is flat—not good for growing grapes—they've got plenty of other space to do so. The island is home to 90 wine producers (where they crush and process the grapes), some of whom are also part of the 3000 vintners who grow their own grapes.

The soil of Sicily is so varied, said Antonio that it is said to "change from the width of one palm to another"—so the country can offer a great variety of wines. The climate is gentle for growing grapes—and makes it easy to grow organically. Summers are dry; in fact, May to September is generally completely dry, and since there is no water to irrigate with, winemakers instead reduce the quantity of grapes to conserve their resources. "Constant breezes help the grapes do their job and eliminate any concerns about mildew," he said. "The island has the lowest-yield grapes and greatest amount of wine produced per hectare compared to any other location in Italy."

Antonio and Alberto graciously showcased some of the DOC members' wines. A few notables included Stemmari 2014 Grillo (distinctive lemony long-finish unoaked white), Planeta Rosé (fresh and fruity, perfect with almost any food), Baglio di Pianetto Ramione 2013 (blend of Nero D'Avola/Merlot with aromas of red berries followed by vanilla and licorice notes), and Donnafugata SurSur 2014 (100% Grillo with fruity and wild flower notes).

Antonio talked a little about Sicily's multi-cultural history and the fact that Sicily has for centuries been a strategic location for armies on the move. Arabs dominated the area for 300 years. Next the Phoenicians, then the Romans, and then the barbarians, the Byzantines, the Normans, and the Germans. "The Greeks finally brought the concept of growing grapes to Sicily around 800 B.C.E." "Sicily is the highest producing area for wine in all of Italy," he said. The DOC was formed in order to exert better control of the processes for growing and the quality of final products on the market, and the only DOC in Italy that is bigger is Prosecco DOC. A panel of tasters travels about the Sicilian countryside tasting wines in the facility and then tasting the same wines after they're bottled and arrive in the shops and restaurants. The mission is to make sure the quality and flavor of each wine are consistent at each step with what originally went into the bottles. Anything labeled DOC undergoes this rigorous tasting and chemical analysis and must be certified.

The agriculture and artisanal production of grapes is in the blood of many winemakers. Each succeeding generation brings its own contributions of experience and expertise to the process. Antonio remembers going with his grandfather to the wine cellars when he was only three and a half years old. "I rode around on my little bike with an extra training wheel." His family has been in the industry since 1851, and now the fifth generation is involved in all aspects of it - the business side, the law, the language, etc. Antonio talked about how he, as a winemaker, tastes wines. "It might take seven hours to taste up to 300 wines," he said. Starting with white wines, then old reds (in the barrel), they progress to new reds and then dessert wines. The tasters eat grissini (unsalted, crispy breadsticks) to help cleanse the palate. "After 100 to 150 tastes, it's hard to tell the difference anymore," he admitted. So they might taste from 9 am to 1 pm, then have lunch and continue tasting from 3 to 6:30 pm. "In the old days—say, 1975," he said, "we might have had 35 people tasting a thousand bottles of wine, with five people washing bottles. Today, with modern machinery, three people can do 7000 bottles in an hour." Staggering numbers, indeed. He said Italy is a constant source of innovation in winemaking machinery and that, in fact, France and Napa Valley often buy machines developed in Italy. He went on to reveal an interesting trick of the trade. "All wines taste good with fennel," according to Antonio. A common ingredient in Italian cooking, "that flavor makes even a bad wine taste better." In fact, it is such a common ruse that people in the industry have made a verb of the word itself. Some give it to tasters because it clouds their ability to determine the real quality of the wine. The Sicilia DOC wines are anxious to bring their goodness and complexity to the United States market. The consortium will exercise strict control and carefully record data for each Sicilia DOC wine via the Internet. For more information, watch for Sicilia DOC mentions on Facebook and Twitter and in advertorials in Wine Spectator and other American publications. They are intent on bringing the good news about Sicilian wines to the "passionate and demanding American public."