

Sicily's Iconic Donnafugata winery

A leading producer of the “wine continent.”

Writer Rod Phillips



Sicily, says Donnafugata’s CEO, Antonio Rallo, is a “wine continent.” It sounds like an exaggeration. Sicily may be the largest island in the Mediterranean, but a continent? Rallo goes on to explain: “Sicily can count over 70 indigenous grape varieties, each of them with a unique interaction with territory and microclimates. If you travel across Sicily from west to east, you will see a plurality of landscapes, soils, and climates that make each terroir special.”

You can drink in a continent’s diversity of varieties and growing conditions, then, without travelling continental distances.

Donnafugata embraces that diversity, with two estates in western Sicily, one in the southeast, and a fourth in the northeast, on the slopes of Mount Etna, the island’s famous (and active) volcano. A fifth estate is planted on Pantelleria, a tiny Mediterranean island closer to Tunisia than to Sicily. Each has distinctive growing conditions, allowing Donnafugata to produce an impressive range of fine wines using both indigenous and international grape varieties.



The Rallo family has been making wine in Sicily since 1851, adopting the Donnafugata name in 1983. Meaning “the woman who fled,” it refers to Maria Carolina, Queen of Naples and Sicily, who took refuge on the island from 1806 to 1811 to escape capture by Napoleon’s forces.

The current CEOs are sister and brother José and Antonio Rallo, who joined their parents’ winery in 1990 as the fifth generation of the family to make wine. They arrived just as Sicily’s wine industry began to transition from high-volume, mass-market wines to a focus on quality. This “Sicilian wine renaissance” involved a number of producers, including José and Antonio’s father, Giacomo Rallo, who was a founding member of Assovini Sicilia, an association dedicated to raising the awareness and reputation of Sicilian wines in the international market.





The transition to quality was gradual. José Rallo says that when Donnafugata began to cut some bunches of unripe grapes from their vines—the process known as a “green harvesting” that produces a smaller crop of higher-quality grapes—some other growers thought they were crazy. But the drive for better quality caught on, and today Assovin Sicilia includes 91 producers. One of its achievements was securing appellation status (DOC Sicilia) in 2011.

For many decades, the Rallo family focused on making marsala, Sicily’s famed fortified wine, but in the last 40 years they have expanded their portfolio to include many white, red, rosé, and sparkling wines. Donnafugata’s signature red is Mille e una Notte, a blend dominated by nero d’avola, petit verdot, and syrah. Aged about a year in new French barriques and two years in bottle, it’s an elegant wine, richly flavoured with complexity to spare, finely balanced, and with a smooth, generous texture.

Red wines from the vineyards on the slopes of Mount Etna include Fragore and Sul Vulcano Etna Rosso. Fragore, which refers to the rumbling of the volcano, is made from the local nerello mascalese variety and has extended aging in barrel and bottle before release. It’s a robust, dense, almost brooding wine. Sul Vulcano, a blend of nerello mascalese and nerello cappuccio, is somewhat lighter than Fragore. It’s a versatile red that shows well-defined fruit flavours and perfectly calibrated acidity.



As for white, Anthilia, a blend of lucido (formerly known as catarratto) and other Sicilian and international varieties, is a lovely wine, full of nuanced fruit flavours and showing excellent balance of fruit and acidity.

From its vines on Pantelleria, the rocky volcanic and wind-swept Mediterranean island, Donnafugata produces a distinctive sweet wine, Ben Ryé. Viticulture on Pantelleria is a form of extreme farming, with the young vines planted in hollows dug in the sandy, volcanic soils to protect them from the strong winds until they are established. Even then, they tend to grow along the ground rather than upright like most grapevines.

Donnafugata's Pantelleria estate is planted with the zibibbo variety, some of the vines more than 100 years old. After the grapes are harvested, they are dried to boost the concentration of sugar. The result is a luscious, richly textured and flavoured wine with the acidity to provide astonishing freshness.

Donnafugata has established itself as one of Sicily's foremost producers of fine wines. Its vines grow in the island's diverse conditions so its portfolio is an excellent representation of the island as a whole. Yet with the exception of wines from Etna, which have gained attention because of interest in "volcanic wines," Sicily remains little known to many wine-lovers. The quality of its top wines, exemplified by Donnafugata's range, means Sicily will soon take its place as one of Italy's leading wine regions.

Some Donnafugata wines

Donnafugata Anthilia 2021 (DOC Sicilia)

Donnafugata Ben Ryé 2019 (DOC Passito di Pantelleria)

Donnafugata Fragore (DOC Etna Rosso)

Donnafugata Mille e una Notte 2018 (DOC Sicilia)

Donnafugata Sul Vulcano Etna Rosso 2019 (DOC Etna Rosso)