

VOLCANOES, DESERT ISLANDS AND FUGITIVE WOMEN

WINE AND TRAVELS IN SICILY

Vineyards on the slopes Mount Etna with Etna smoking in the background

ALBERTO DI NUNZI

IT SEEMS THAT ALL WINE REGIONS ARE BEAUTIFUL PLACES, OR AT LEAST DRAMATIC, BUT I DO THINK SICILY IS ESPECIALLY LOVELY, A BELIEF THAT WAS REINFORCED BY A RECENT VISIT.

It is the largest island in the Mediterranean Sea and so I expected it to be wild and rugged, like Southern Spain. Some of it is like that – indeed Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa wrote in *The Leopard*, his great novel about nineteenth century Sicily, “this violence of landscape, this cruelty of climate” – but over all the place struck me as being amazingly lush and green. In fact the trip took in many different aspects of this incredible place with stunning vistas of dramatic mountains, rolling hills, ancient ruins, baroque architecture and enticing towns that made it a constant delight.

I was the guest of Donnafugata, one of Sicily’s most famous wine producers, that has vineyards and wineries right across the island. The company was created by Giacomo and Gabriella Rallo, whose family have produced fortified Marsala wines – in the far west of Sicily – for over 150 years and who set up the Donnafugata estate to produce premium still wines in 1983. Today their estates are managed by their charismatic and charming children José and Antonio, who is also the chief winemaker.

Donnafugata means ‘fugitive woman’ and refers to Maria Carolina, Queen of Naples

and Sicily, daughter of Maria Theresa and sister of Marie Antoinette. In 1799 she fled invading Republican French troops and found refuge in the country estates of a nobleman. These same estates are now home to the Rallo’s original vineyards and in di Lampedusa’s great novel, *The Leopard*, he christened them Donnafugata. The name was adopted by the Rallos as an evocative name for their winery.

Their original wine estate, and still the major one, is in Contessa Entefina in the west of Sicily – near their original base of Marsala. Rather romantically they still maintain the family’s historic Marsala cellars, which they use for barrel ageing their top wines. However, the island has many different regions and a variety of climatic conditions – so much so that the locals refer to Sicily as a continent! So, Donnafugata also have vineyards and wineries in all the other major wine regions, Etna, Vittoria and the island of Pantelleria, which means they are the only producer to make wine from all the island’s grape varieties and in all its many styles.

I have given you tasting notes for the wines that really spoke to me on this trip.



Vineyards on Mount Etna

ANDREW COOK'S TRAVELS



Wine map of Sicily created by Quentin Sadler – all rights reserved



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Vineyards in Sicily

DOLCE & GABBANA

Strange as it might sound, Donnafugata have a joint venture with design house Dolce & Gabbana, who apparently love Sicily. They produce six wines with their name on the label, as well as their own. It might sound like a novelty, but the wines are rather good.

ETNA

Landing at Catania, in the southwest of the island, Etna was clearly visible to the north, puffing smoke and dominating the landscape. This was where I was headed and I loved

the drive, winding up the mountain's lower slopes, seeing where the lava had flowed over the centuries and how the locals used the dark, volcanic stone to build their houses and farms. Agriculture has always been the dominant activity on Etna's slopes, but over the last twenty years wine production has become especially important.

The vineyards sit at high altitudes on Etna's eastern slopes, which enjoy much more rain than the other sides – the vineyard area rings the mountain to the east, north and south. This tempers the hot, dry conditions – together with the height making it cooler – while the rich, mineral, black volcanic soils give minerality,

acidity and complexity. With conditions like these it is no surprise that Etna has become recognised as one of the best wine regions in Italy. The climate is categorised as continental because of the influence of the altitude and it certainly doesn't feel very Mediterranean here.

Donnafugata's Etna Estate lies between 730 and 750 metres above sea level and mainly contains old vines which produce wines with great concentration and depth. They grow the region's key grape varieties, Carricante for white wines – surely one of the best white grapes in the world – with Nerello Mascalese and a little Nerello Cappuccio for the reds. The vines grow on terraces supported by dry-lava-stone walls.



Some of Donnafugata's Etna vines showing the dry stone walls built of lava-stone and Mount Etna in the distance

photography by Quentin Sadler

THE ETNA WINES

2020 Donnafugata Sul Volcano Bianco Etna DOC

A dry, vibrant and exciting example of the Carricante grape fermented in stainless steel. 10 months ageing on the lees with 40% in used barrels.

Bright and zesty on the nose with a palate that is as lithe as a ballet dancer with a silky and creamy texture, a delicately nutty and citrus flavour, a crisp finish and lovely minerality. Marvellous with any light foods, white meats or seafood – 94/100.

2022 Donnafugata Sul Volcano Rosso Etna DOC

A fresh and lightly spicy rosé made from Nerello Mascalese grapes. The palate is soft with a touch of cream and a lick of mineral volcanic stone on the finish. I would love to try this with spicy Asian food – 91/100.

2020 Dolce & Gabbana/Donnafugata Isolana Bianco Etna DOC

Another vivacious dry white made from the Carricante grape, fermented in stainless steel with 8 months ageing on the lees.

The nose offers lemon zest, sea salt and sage. The palate is gently creamy with preserved lemon, minerality, saltiness and something tropical like mango and pineapple playing around the edges – 94/100.

2020 Donnafugata Sul Volcano Rosso Etna DOC

Nerello Mascalese with a little Nerello Cappuccio fermented in stainless steel and 50% aged in second and third fill French oak for 12 months.

Quite gamey and Burgundian on the nose with red fruit and herbs, a sensation that follows through on the cool, fresh, mid-weight smoky palate that offers mocha, cherry, plum and clove. It melted into the wild boar pasta dish – 92/100.



The charming Antonio Rallo, chief winemaker of his family's estates



Very old Nerello Mascalese vines growing in Etna's black, volcanic soil

photography by Quentin Sadler

photography by Quentin Sadler



Nerello Mascalese grapes being sorted at Donnafugata's Etna winery

photography by Quentin Sadler



Nero d'Avola vines growing in Vittoria's dry, sandy soils. Look carefully and you can see the irrigation hoses. Irrigation is vital in these conditions

Photograph by Quentin Saloni

VITTORIA

Two hours drive brought us to Vittoria in Sicily's southwest, which is very different from Etna. The parched sandy and chalky landscape seems to be bleached by the powerful Mediterranean sun, whose heat in turn is tempered by breezes coming in from the sea.

Here they only make reds wines and grow just two black grapes: Frappato and Nero d'Avola, which is the island's most widely planted variety.

THE VITTORIA WINES

2022 Donnafugata
Bel'Assai
Vittoria Frappato DOC

100% Frappato grapes fermented and aged in stainless steel.

An utterly lovely, bright, light red wine that is best served chilled with any light dishes. The nose is packed with grenadine, lavender, thyme, sage and cherry, while the palate has soft tannins, a touch of blood orange, plum and rhubarb fruit. Just delicious – 95/100.

2022 Donnafugata Contesa
del Venti
Vittoria Nero d'Avola DOC

100% Nero d'Avola grapes fermented and aged in stainless steel.

If, like me you thought that Nero d'Avola only produced gloopy Shiraz-like wines, think again.

Floral, herbal and red fruit vie for attention on the nose. The palate is refined and silky with suave tannins. Perfect with tomato based dishes, or anything not too heavy – 94/100.

2021 Donnafugata
Floramundi
Cerasuolo di Vittoria DDCG

Cerasuolo di Vittoria is Sicily's only DDCG wine. Made from a blend of 70% Nero d'Avola and 30% Frappato with no oak influence.

Violet, cherry, redcurrant and herb nose with a suave, generous palate offering spice, coffee, rich fruit and balanced tannins – 95/100.



Stainless steel fermentation tanks at Donnafugata's Vittoria winery. They do not use any oak on this site as the wines are quite delicate

Photograph by Quentin Saloni



Modica chocolate made at the Antica Dolceria Bonajuto, the oldest manufacturer. The texture is quite grainy as the sugar does not entirely melt

Photograph by Quentin Saloni



IT'S NOT ALL ABOUT THE WINE:

After the fasting we explored the nearby city of Modica – where Montalbano was partly filmed – which was destroyed by an earthquake in 1693 and rebuilt in one go in the baroque style, making it a real architectural gem.

From a gastronomic point of view, two things make Modica well worth visiting. Modica Chocolate. The chocolate *la plena* in Spain, is made entirely by hand and is unrefined and a little earthy, but really delicious. You can watch it being made in a number of artisan workshops around the town.

The other local speciality was something that I had never experienced before, the bars all offer their beers with a serving of lemon granita in them. It is a wonderfully refreshing combination and sure beats a lager and lime! I also tried one in a gin and tonic and that is a fabulous drink, although the idea appalled the waiter!



photo by Frank Enayge

The beautiful baroque city of Modica

PANTELLERIA

I have long been fascinated by the island of Pantelleria. This barren, volcanic island is politically part of Sicily, 100 km away to the north, but is actually only 60 km west of Tunisian coast. The island is small – just 15 km long, and on arriving at the airport, which is dead centre, you can briefly see the sea on both sides.

Donnafugata's vineyards sit between 20 m and 400 m above sea level and the vines are farmed as very low bush vines – the *abavato* *panfesco* – that are grown in depressions and bordered by dry lava-stone walls. These both protect the vines from the winds and help prevent soil erosion, as the island is basically the slopes of the 835 m high *Montagna Grande* which sits at its centre.

Pantelleria has a subtropical Mediterranean climate and conditions are pretty extreme here. It is hot, dry, humid and windy. The very name, Pantelleria is derived from the island's Arabic name *Bint al-Riyah*, which means "Daughter of the Winds", because of the gales that blow across the island from North Africa. The island really only focuses on one grape variety – Muscat of Alexandria, known here by its Arabic name *Zibbibo*.



photography by Donnafugata

Caper bushes at Donnafugata's Pantelleria estate, like the grape vines they are trained low to protect them from the island's extreme winds



photography by Donnafugata

The local olive trees are also trained low to protect them from the wind. These are some of Donnafugata's *Biancolilla* olive trees, from which they make some delicious olive oil. My friend, Emanuele Corsage provides the human scale.



photography by Donnafugata

Freshly picked Zibbibo grapes, the local name for Muscat, at Donnafugata's Pantelleria winery



THE PANTELLERIA WINES:

2022 Donnafugata Lighea Sicilia DOC

Bright zesty orange-blossom and fresh sage aromas are followed by a crisp, clean, vibrant palate that refreshes and awakens your sense. Dry, bright, light and clean with a zingy touch of acidity and salinity.

A crisp, dry Muscat, perfect as an aperitif, with Asian food, or with just about any seafood – 90/100.

2022 Donnafugata Kabir Moscato di Pantelleria DOC

A light, fresh sweet wine with rose, lychee and orange zest aromas. The palate is sweet, but lively, fresh and clean, with flavours of orange, white peach, almonds and wild thyme.

Enjoy with light, fruit based desserts, or drink on its own – 92/100.

2021 Donnafugata Ben Ryé Passito di Pantelleria DOC

One of the world's great desert wines, this is made from carefully selected Zibbibo grapes that are fermented with portions of dried grapes that are destemmed and selected by hand.

The resulting wine is astonishingly delicious, complex and powerfully aromatic. It explodes across your senses with aromas of orange blossom, burnt toffee and candied orange peel. While in the mouth it flows across your palate like liquid caramel with swirls of buttery toffee, rich fig, nuts and apricot jam. It is sweet, but there is also a freshness and mineral purity that balances that richness with some spice and saltiness.

Enjoy as the dessert or as a perfect match for Christmas Pudding, mince pies or a panforte – as well as blue cheese – 97/100.



WINES FROM CONTESSA ENTELLINA

As I toured Etna, Milonia and Pantelleria, I was also able to taste wines produced in Donnafugata's original Contessa Entellina Estate in western Sicily. I describe my favourites here:

2021 Donnafugata La Fuga Sicilia DOC

Chardonnay with no oak, aged on the lees in tank for five months.

Unoaked Chardonnay can be so underrated, but it makes such a delicious and versatile dry white wine when done well. This is done very well. It is fresh, bright and clean with just a touch of some tropical fruit, zesty citrus and a soft, easy-drinking texture. This would go with anything, or nothing – 92/100.

2018 Donnafugata Brut Sicilia DOC

The Chardonnay and Pinot Noir grapes in this traditional method sparkling wine are purposely grown on high north-east facing slopes which protect the grapes from the sun and so preserve the grape's acids. It was nicely balanced with good fruit and acidity as well as complexity from 36 months ageing on the lees. A great aperitif or partner to light meals and Asian dishes – 93/100.

2021 Donnafugata Vigna di Gabri Sicilia DOC

This single vineyard wine – Vigna di Gabri in Contessa Entellina – is a blend of Ansonica, the Marsala grape, with some Chardonnay, Viognier, Sauvignon Blanc and Cataratto. The wine was fermented in stainless steel vats. 85% was aged on the lees in cement vats for 8 months. 15% was aged in second use French oak barrels for 6 months.

A beautifully layered wine with some gorgeous richness from the Chardonnay, freshness from the Cataratto, tropical and green fig notes from the Viognier. The palate offers saline freshness and rich tropical fruit by turn. I loved this and know from experience that it ages beautifully – 94/100.

2019 Donnafugata Mille e una Notte Sicilia DOC

A blend of Nero d'Avola, Petit Verdot and Syrah aged in new French oak barrels for 14 months and then bottle-aged for another 24 months before release.

A gorgeous, lifted nose, enticing and spicy, with savoury notes. The palate delivers ripe, sweet concentrated fruit and tight, spicy, delicious fine grain tannins. A sumptuous wine with blackberry, black pepper, mocha and chocolate. Very impressive stuff that went brilliantly with a veal chop, but would be equally good with the Sunday roast – 94/100.

2019 Dolce & Gabbana/Donnafugata Tancredi Terre Siciliane IGT

A blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Nero d'Avola, Tannat aged in French oak barrels for 14 months and then bottle-aged for another 24 months before release.

Named after Prince Tancredi Falconeri, a character in *The Leopard*, this has a lovely savoury, truffe, bacon and mocha nose with cassia and blackberry notes. The palate brings red cherry, black cherry, plum, cigar, blackcurrant, a creamy texture, grippy tannins and a deep umami savoury finish. It needs time, but it's a great wine – 94/100.

DONNAFUGATA'S LABELS

If you have been looking at the photographs of the bottles, you will have noticed that Donnafugata's wine labels are rather special. I think they are captivating pieces of art that look fantastic on the dining table. They are the work of Padua born Stefano Vitale who absorbs and conveys Gabriella Rallo's thoughts about each wine. I hope you like them as much as I do, too many wine labels are somewhat dull and samey.

OLIVE OILS

I love the fact that on all their estates, Donnafugata also farm a few hectares of olive trees from which they make some fabulous oils from the local varieties of olive. These are very different from each other and just as fascinating as the wines.



Ripe Zibibbo grapes drying at Donnafugata's Pantelleria winery, drying them reduces the water content and so increases the sugars.




Dried Zibibbo grapes being sorted and de-stemmed at Donnafugata's Pantelleria winery

MY THOUGHTS

Donnafugata make a big range of wines that seem to capture a real feel of Sicily and convey the sense of excitement that I got touring around this beautiful island. I think they are superb wines that all have gorgeous labels, drink beautifully as soon as you pull the cork and offer enormous variety from crisp, mineral whites to richly textured whites and light fruity reds, to rich, powerful red wines. They go with

all sorts of cuisine, so deserve to be listed more widely than simply in Italian restaurants and should be noticed for the superbly made and versatile wines they are.

Donnafugata wines are distributed in the UK by Liberty Wines. 

Quentin Sadler is a wine writer, wine educator and magmaker.