

# Style and Sustainability



 March 21, 2024  Wine

*Sicily's Donnafugata winery expertly balances art and commerce.*

By Erin Henderson

The wine tasting ended on a high note. Literally.

Her dulcet voice, commanding in the darkened, private dining room, confident and strong in her acapella performance, sung the song of celebration and joy. What the words were, I don't know, it was in Italian, but the feeling was unmistakable. Her voice softened and she raised a glass to us all in appreciation for coming to the tasting. Raising my glass in return, my arms were covered in goosebumps.



José Rallo at a Donnafugata tasting in Toronto

José Rallo, the CEO and co-owner of Sicily's Donnafugata winery is a singer and an artist. Despite being at the helm of one of Italy's most celebrated wineries, Ms Rallo admits she relates more to being a singer than a world-travelling, hard-hitting business woman.

She has "sung her wines" around the world including performing at the Blue Note in New York City and the Acropolis Museum in Athens. She tries to limit her business travels but does make sure to visit Donnafugata's 10 most important markets – including the USA, Germany, Japan, and Canada – at least once each year.

This was the second time I've had the pleasure of meeting Ms Rallo. In 2022 I attended a tasting from various Italian wineries across the country, and this week, at a lunch in Toronto to taste the latest releases of Donnafugata's wines coming into Ontario.

Always stylish and chic, the 60-year-old wears bright colours (a welcome relief amongst the usual somber sea of dark suits). This time a tailored black dress dotted with bright red cherries, a slim-fit red blazer, and a multi-coloured silk scarf draped casually around her shoulders. Playful, patent leather baby-doll pumps, with a shimmering gold-block heel completes her curated, but whimsical, uniform.

"Beauty has many sides," she confides during the tasting.

I'm asking her about the stunning packaging – easily the most impressive designs I've seen from any winery – that Donnafugata insists upon for their exquisite wines. From the boxes encasing the bottles, to the intricately designed labels, each piece is a literal work of art. And intended to be so. I tell her it hurts my heart to throw the boxes and bottles away.

"Me too," she smiles wistfully.



ould (and should!) be the  
ed Italian designers

Dolce & Gabbana for a collection of four wines, a pink, white, and two reds.

Positioning the labels and packaging as art pieces was an initiative of Ms Rallo's mother, Gabriella, and has been carried on enthusiastically by Ms Rallo, who has added vineyard concerts and dances to the winery attractions. It's not unusual, as a promotional video shows, to see Ms Rollo taking the microphone during these festive evenings.

It's not all song and dance running this Sicilian empire. With Ms Rallo and her brother Antonio now co-CEO's of Donnafugata's five estates and 488 hectares of vineyard that grow 10 varieties for 32 labels, there's a continued focus on the delicate relationship the winery holds within its environment. Patriarch Giacomo Rallo began sustainable practices for the winery in 1989 starting with forgoing chemical fertilizers and generating clean energy. Recently Donnafugata decreased glass bottle weight from 550 grams to 410 grams – a 25% reduction – to ease the carbon footprint on shipping. And the winery has begun a pilot project to try out recyclable corks made from recovered ocean plastic.

“With a touch of intelligence, we can work for a more sustainable future,” Ms Rallo explained to the lunch crowd.



As climate change continues to challenge Sicilian wine makers – Ms Rallo admits it's too early to determine one, precise problem, or come up with one, simple answer – Donnafugata is looking at all possibilities including revisiting indigenous grapes that have fallen out of favour over the years.

Sicily has 70 different wine grapes, and research is ongoing to see which might be resistant to draught or extreme heat and better suited to increasing atmospheric pressures. (The day of our early spring lunch, temperatures in Sicily were 16°C – double the normal 7-8°C seen at this time of year.)

The name Donnafugata means, “the fleeing woman,” and is in reference to Queen Maria Carolina, who fled Naples in 1798 and hid in the what is now the winery’s vineyards. This idea also carries over to the company’s imagery which often depicts a woman with flowing hair, blowing back in the wind. Despite this nod to impermanence, one thing is quite certain, with five generations of wine making, and 170 years in Sicily, Donnafugata is moving ahead with its eyes on the future.



José Rallo, sitting, with her co-CEO brother, Antonio

## Wines Tasted

*Pricing and availability based in Ontario. Stock may vary where you are.*

### **Dolce & Gabbana x Donnafugata Rosa \$54 #25860 (currently unavailable at the Icbo)**

Gossamer pink and highly refined on the palate. The blend of Sicilian grapes, Nero Mascalese with a touch of Nocera, this offers tangerine skin, white cherry, and faint rose water. An exquisite sipper for aperitivo, this would pair nicely with salmon tartare, avocado and crab salad, grilled pork chops, or pasta aglio e olio.

### **Anthilia Bianco \$19 #195115**

Made from the indigenous grape Lucido (aka Catarratto) for a deeply aromatic white wine filled with rich jasmine floral, honeysuckle, apricot and a hint of oregano. This was paired with just-cooked shrimp in chimichurri for a compelling pairing. Roast chicken, white pizza, or goat cheese souffles would also work well.

### **Dolce & Gabbana x Donnafugata Tancredi \$63 #35959**

Loads of fresh, bright red fruit here. which surprises me as this is a blend of rich Cabernet Sauvignon, Tannat and Nero d'Avola. It almost – *almost* – reminds me of a Beaujolais Cru for its balance between tart red fruit and complex pepper spice. Delicious, food friendly wine that works well with simple grilled tenderloin, like we had, or, try it with meats in tomato sauces like chicken cacciatore.

### **Mille e Una Notte \$100 #569048**

Mille is brooding and seductive, filled with smoky dark fruit, toasted spice, and uplifting notes of fresh leather. A blend

of Nero d'Avola, Syrah, and Petit Verdot, it's powerful and complex. I would pair this slow braised meats and ragus, or roast game birds or lamb.

**Ben Ryé Passito di Pantelleria \$52 (375ml) #324723 (coming soon to LCBO)**

This is exquisite. A sweet dessert wine made from Muscat (aka Zibbibo in local parlance) that is bright and fresh with buoyant acidity and flavours of white peaches, dried apricots, honey and toasted nuts. We had this with a dark chocolate torte, which was lovely, but I would serve this with salty, runny cheeses for an interesting juxtaposition of flavours.

# Hear From Real People!



“ Our guests had a great evening and Erin made sure that everyone (even non-drinkers) enjoyed themselves! Thanks for making the bridal shower so memorable!

“ [They] quickly engaged our group with our wine themed engagement party. Guests were lined up all evening for the experience. [They] very willing to involve guests in tasting discussion. We are all a little more wine savvy - thank you The Wine Sisters

“ You and y absolute p From the c flexible wi communic and tailor exactly wl

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