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Donnafugata's José Rallo | Courtesy

On Sicily's Rugged Pantelleria, Donnafugata Captures the Spirit of Italian Winemaking While Preserving Its Future

BUSINESS ECO LIVING WINE + SPIRITS

By **Jill Ettinger** November 16, 2024

The Donnafugata family winery, led by José Rallo, combines Sicilian heritage, artistry in winemaking, and a commitment to protecting Sicily's land and sea.

Amid Sicily's rolling vineyards, where the Mediterranean sun and time-honored traditions converge, winemaker Donnafugata has set the standard for sustainable wine production. The label's award-winning wines are rooted in preserving Sicily's unique terroir — deeply influenced by the island's volcanic landscapes, windswept coastlines, and vibrant culture.

Led by CEO José Rallo, [Donnafugata](#) has been committed to environmentally conscious winemaking for more than three decades, drawing inspiration from the island's storied past and its resilient communities. Rallo, one of the notable [women in the wine industry](#), has advanced the brand's reputation far beyond Italy, introducing global audiences to wines that are as much a story of place as they are an invitation to experience the rich, complex soul of Sicily.

The Cento per Cento Sicilia bottle and Nomatic Ocean closure

Recently, the winery introduced two significant initiatives: the Cento per Cento Sicilia bottle, made entirely from recycled Sicilian glass, and the Nomatic Ocean closure, produced from reclaimed coastal plastic, each a testament to its ongoing efforts in sustainable innovation.

The Cento per Cento Sicilia bottle is more than a unique vessel; for Donnafugata, it is a commitment. In collaboration with O-I Glass and Fondazione SOStain, Donnafugata developed this bottle with a twofold purpose: to use resources sourced from Sicily and to reduce the environmental impact of traditional glass production. The bottle, lighter than industry standard bottles, requires significantly less energy to transport, contributing to lower carbon emissions along the supply chain. By using recycled glass produced locally, Donnafugata minimizes raw material demand and demonstrates how Sicily's unique resources can help reshape practices within the Italian wine industry.



José Rallo | Photo courtesy Donnafugata / Beatrice Pilotto

The label is also the first brand to adopt the Nomacorc Ocean closure, which it uses for its Lighea 2023 vintage, crafted from plastic collected in coastal areas, protecting the Mediterranean, a region that profoundly shapes Sicily's climate and culture. "Marine ecosystems are essential for biodiversity," Rallo told *Ethos* via email, highlighting the company's dependence on the sea. "A winery like Donnafugata, which thrives on Sicily's close relationship with the sea, safeguarding these waters is meaningful."

Coastal ecosystems contribute to Sicily's microclimates, impacting the quality of grapes grown on Pantelleria, a small island off the Sicilian coast where the Zibibbo grape for the label's Lighea wine is cultivated. The unique terroir created by the volcanic soils, intense sun, and Mediterranean winds bestows the wine with a distinct aromatic profile, a balance of minerality, and fresh acidity. The Nomacorc Ocean closure thus not only speaks to the winery's values but also safeguards the integrity of a wine that carries what Rallo says is the island's essence. "Both of these packaging upgrades support the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and underlines Donnafugata's commitment to responsible practices, part of the company DNA for over 30 years," she says.

Winemaking regions across the globe, including Sicily, are struggling under the pressures brought about by climate change. If global temperatures rise more than 2°C above preindustrial levels, 70 percent of the world's winemaking regions could become unsuitable for grape cultivation, according to a recent study published in *Nature Reviews Earth and Environment*. Already, wine growers are seeing changes; in France, vineyards are exploring new grape varieties that can withstand the changing temperatures. Hot and dry areas face the greatest threat, but vineyards everywhere will encounter unique challenges, including extreme weather and disease.

"The challenge in one area may not be the challenge in another," Gregory Gambetta, a viticulturist at the Université de Bordeaux and coauthor of the study, said in a statement. While grapevines are highly adaptable and regional growers have historically adjusted practices like irrigation, vine spacing, and pruning to navigate shifting climates, human-driven changes such as drought and extreme weather could push many vineyards to their breaking point.



Photo courtesy Daniel Salgado

For regions like Sicily, where winemaking on the island dates back centuries, this is a particularly heavy blow. Sicily is Italy's second-largest wine-producing region — an industry worth more than \$10 billion annually, producing 17 percent of the world's wine. But it's not just the wine itself that could be lost to climate change, but the history, the stories and the cultures interwoven into every bottle. "Sicily has been shaped by various civilizations, including the Greeks, Arabs, Normans, and Spanish," Rallo explains. "This rich tapestry of cultural influences is mirrored in the complexity and depth of Donnafugata's wines."

Donnafugata is already taking extreme measures to grow Zibibbo grapes in Pantelleria's arid landscape. The vineyards are terraced into volcanic slopes, bordered by lava stone walls that mitigate soil erosion and protect vines from powerful Scirocco winds blowing in from North Africa. Mechanized farming is virtually impossible, so each step, from pruning to harvesting, is done by hand. A unique water management technique called the "Conca" is employed, which involves creating shallow depressions around vines to capture nighttime humidity, essential in a climate where rainfall is scarce.

"The Pantelleria Alberello method significantly influences the Lighea wine," Rallo explains, referring to the painstakingly low-growing, sun-drenched vines on the island of Pantelleria. "This method enhances the aromatic complexity and mineral freshness of our wines, bringing out citrus notes and floral aromas unique to Zibibbo grapes." For Rallo, this labor-intensive approach is fundamental to the authenticity and character of Donnafugata wines, particularly the Lighea, which she calls "a unique expression of both nature and culture."

An artistic tribute to Sicily

Each Donnafugata label is also a canvas of Sicilian culture and mythology. The Lighea 2023 label, designed by Stefano Vitale, depicts a mermaid — an image evoking Sicily's allure and its connection to the sea. "Lighea is the bewitching mermaid central character in one of Tomasi di Lampedusa's tales," Rallo notes, describing the label's visual story. "With the 2023 label, we move from the shades of sunset to those of the Pantelleria sunrise in the backdrop." This design celebrates both the wine's Mediterranean roots and the mythical essence of the island, bringing to life a sensory narrative that extends beyond the glass.



The Lighea 2023 wine bottle | Donnafugata

For Donnafugata, the label design is integral to its identity, each one crafted to convey the story of the land, climate, and cultural influences that shape the wines. Through partnerships with artists, the winery brings its connection to Sicilian history and environment to life, making each bottle an invitation to explore the island's layers. While the winery's commitment to sustainability runs deep, Rallo emphasizes that creativity and scientific rigor work hand-in-hand. "The balance between science and creativity is our essence," she explains, noting that innovations like the Cento per Cento Sicilia bottle and the Nomacorc Ocean closure are grounded in the need to protect Sicily's environment while producing high-quality wines.

Sicilian legacy

As a family-owned business spanning six generations, Donnafugata draws from Sicily's vast cultural mosaic, honoring the island's history while pushing the boundaries of modern winemaking. The Rallo family has committed itself to bringing Sicilian wines to the world, cultivating indigenous grape varieties like Nero d'Avola, Grillo, and Frappato, each representing distinct Sicilian terroirs.

The Rallo family's dedication to Sicily's diverse landscapes is evident not only in the wines but in their reverence for the island's ancient viticultural methods. The Alberello-trained vineyards on Pantelleria are a living testament to Donnafugata's approach, where tradition, culture, and innovation converge to create wines that celebrate Sicily's unique identity.



Photo courtesy Donnafugata

In recent decades, Italian winemaking has also seen a surge in women winemakers with Rallo at the forefront, challenging convention and leading innovation. Donnafugata's preservation of Pantelleria's ancient vine-growing method, Alberello, has earned UNESCO recognition, underscoring the winery's role in championing cultural practices that protect the land and enrich its wines.

As Donnafugata expands its reach, Rallo hopes to inspire a stronger global appreciation for Sicilian wines grounded in authenticity and environmental stewardship. "We want to foster a deeper appreciation for Sicily's cultural and environmental heritage," she says. For Rallo, this includes conveying an understanding of the labor that goes into cultivating grapes in extreme conditions as well as the creative inspiration drawn from local myths, art, and history. Rallo says Donnafugata believes that by sharing these stories and sustainable practices, the global perception of Sicilian wines can be elevated, "positioning them as both world-class and deeply meaningful products."

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