

# Donnafugata Is Building A Winemaking Legacy On The Tiny, Wild Sicilian Island Of Pantelleria

Hillside terraces overlooking the Mediterranean Sea define these unique island wines.



*The hillsides of Donnafugata's Pantelleria vineyard*  
*Courtesy of Donnafugata*

Wind, like a fifth season, rules the tiny Sicilian island of Pantelleria. Mostly composed of perforated blue-black lava rocks, the dark island juts out of the sea like a blot of spilled ink. Its arid landscape is dotted with natural hot springs—connected to the volcanic activity that formed the island—and grounded by an eerily iridescent prehistoric lake, *Lago di Venere*, equipped with its own supposedly healing ancient biome. The island is so geographically remarkable that the entire place has been designated a national park. Just off the coast of Tunisia, and closer to North Africa than Sicily, it's about a forty-five minute plane ride from Palermo.

Somehow, despite the wind and arid climate, the island remains lush, the verdant greenery a welcome contrast to the black and yellow landscape. And, through strange, ancient viticulture practices, it's home to some of the most unique vineyards in the world. *"In the late 1980s, my father Giacomo decided to invest in Pantelleria, guided by a precise vision, which later proved successful,"* says Antonio Rallo, the CEO, co-owner and head winemaker of **Donnafugata**, a fifth-generation, family-run producer with vineyards all over Sicily. *"He believed that a world-class sweet wine could be produced on Pantelleria, through an innovative interpretation. The idea was to produce a wine that was absolutely identifiable with the territory of origin."*

## Brother & Sister take Donnafugata to the next level



Antonio Rallo: CEO, co-owner and head winemaker of **Donnafugata**  
Courtesy of Donnafugata



Josè Rallo, co-owner of **Donnafugata** and member of the board of the Italian Trade Agency, ICE  
Courtesy of Donnafugata



As the next generation at Donnafugata, Antonio and his sister, José, have picked up where their parents Giacomo and Gabriella left off in stewardship of the family's company. One of the most distinctive wines in their portfolio is the *Ben Ryé*, which translates to "son of the wind." This sweet passito wine is a signature product from Pantelleria, and is just beginning to show its potential as the older vintages start to age. *"The wines of Pantelleria give 'sense of place' in an extraordinary way: we are proud to say that this wine can only be produced here,"* Rallo continues. *"In each glass of Ben Ryé we find the whole island, from raisins to candied fruit jam, from the saltiness of the sea to the Mediterranean scrub."*



2017 Ben Ryé Passito di Pantelleria  
Courtesy of Donnafugata

Though Giacomo founded the Donnafugata brand itself in the early '80s, the Rallo family had already been producing wine in Italy for over a hundred years. Their family cellars in Marsala date back to 1851—and Giacomo himself was a fourth-generation winemaker when he founded Donnafugata—so his instincts for investing in Pantelleria were guided by more than just a whim. Spend even 24 hours on the island and you'll start to understand the determination that fueled those who decided to adapt to its landscape rather than give up—Pantelleria is spectacularly weird, fantastically alien, and exquisitely beautiful. And, you'll also begin to understand why two generations ago, the founder of Donnafugata thought: what better place to grow grapes?





*Donnafugata's cellar on Pantelleria island*  
*Courtesy of Donnafugata*

The impossibly steep hillsides of the island were tamed by ancient farmers who rather heroically decided that this island would and could be their home, carving plateaus or *alberellos* right into the hillside in order to grow crops. Perhaps in their honor, these age-old techniques are now referred to as “heroic agriculture,” and though in recent years many lie fallow, plenty of them are still in use, with grape vines trained in a very unusual manner, splayed out in small hollows and growing as low, round bushes. This growing style is significant enough that it’s actually **the only viticulture practice to be recognized by Unesco.**

*“The vines are grown as very low Pantelleria saplings, in basins that are almost a foot deep, to accumulate maximum moisture (morning dew as well as rain) and protect the grapes from the island's winds,” Rallo explains. “The vines are set on small terraces bordered by lava stone dry stone walls, thanks to which soil erosion is prevented, protecting landscape and biodiversity. This is a labor-intensive context that’s equivalent to three times the average requirement of a standard quality-oriented vineyard. In addition, the almost 25 miles of dry stone walls that we have in total in our vineyards also require constant maintenance. Pantelleria involves a great commitment that we carry out with absolute dedication.”*



Because of the immense amount of labor it takes to produce, Ben Ryé is one of the most valuable and important wines Donnafugata makes, but it's not their only wine from Pantelleria—a dry white, Lighea, is marked by its fresh minerality and citrus notes, and they also produce a sweet moscato, Kabir. All three wines come from Zibibbo grapes, and though there are vineyards growing on *alberellos* all over the island, a larger, central district called Khamma has become the heart of the family's operation on the island.



Courtesy of Donnafugata

*"All of Pantelleria is in fact special because of its volcanic nature, terracing, the agricultural practice of the Unesco heritage tree vines, and the presence of old vines," Rallo says. "But the part of Pantelleria I'm most attached to is Contrada Khamma, because it's where my family has managed, over the years and with a lot of constant effort and commitment, to acquire the different plots of this beautiful open-air amphitheater. It's also where we managed to build the winery with an architectural design that perfectly integrates it into the landscape."*

Maintaining their winemaking practice in a way that honors the ancient traditions of the island has always been an integral part of Donnafugata's philosophy, and it's a big part of the legacy they hope to build through the production of Ben Ryé. One of their most recent launches is the 2017 edition of Ben Ryé, which showcases both the current expression of the wine, and its potential for longevity. *"This vintage is special because, on one hand, it expresses the personality already known and appreciated by Ben Ryé fans—with its unmistakable hints of raisins—and on the other hand, it allows us to discover this wine's ability to evolve over time, the breadth and complexity it can express thanks to long aging."*