

FOOD & WINE

How This Tiny Island Off the Coast of Sicily Produces Stellar Wines Amid Treacherous Conditions

For winemakers willing to work in adverse conditions, fantastic wines are the reward.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF DONNAFUGATA / FABIO GAMBINA

On the remote island of Pantelleria – off the coast of Sicily but closer to Tunisia than to mainland Europe – farmers have been practicing heroic agriculture for centuries. An arid, volcanic island with craggy coves where black lava rock contrasts with the vibrant azure sea and mountain peaks reach more than 2,600 feet above sea level, Pantelleria produces outstanding wines in adverse conditions. The most renowned of these wines is Passito di Pantelleria, a dessert wine prized for its rich caramel and apricot notes. And the most renowned Passito di Pantelleria is Ben Ryé by [Donnafugata](#), one of Sicily’s leading wineries.

“The heroic agriculture on the island brought men to live in almost extreme conditions in which they’ve learned to cultivate using the primary resources of the land with nothing but their own manual capacity,” says Gabriella Favara, who represents the sixth generation of the Donnafugata family. “It’s a magical island that makes you live with its slow rhythms and brings you to discover new places.”

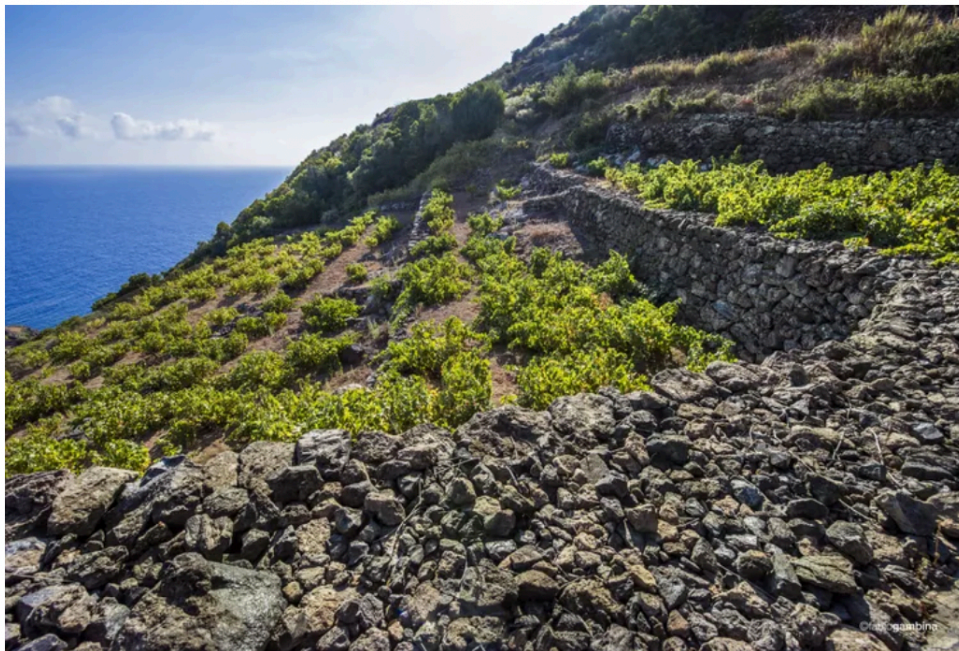


PHOTO: COURTESY OF DONNAFUGATA / FABIO GAMBINA

But what exactly makes agriculture heroic? Essentially, it's a type of agriculture that requires an almost superhuman effort from both the farmers and the plants themselves. Mechanization is impossible because of the terrain's rugged characteristics, so everything – from the planting and pruning to the harvest – is done by hand. According to the [Center for Research, Studies and Valorization for Mountain Viticulture](#), in order to be considered heroic viticulture, the following conditions must be met: a minimum 30% slope, an altitude exceeding 1,600 feet above sea level, cultivation on steps or terraces, or growth on small islands in difficult growing conditions.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF DONNAFUGATA

In Pantelleria, not only do the vines grow on man-made dry-stone terraces that climb the mountain slopes on this small island, but they must also contend with the fiercely strong Sirocco wind that blows in from Africa. That's how the *alberello pantesco* was born. Recognized by UNESCO as 'Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity,' the *alberello pantesco* is the name given to the vines that have been trained to grow low to the ground to protect themselves from the wind. When the farmer plants them, he digs a shallow hole in the volcanic soil before planting the vine there. The hole collects the morning dew and directs the moisture and humidity toward the vine's roots. They're nourished by the sun, the soil, and the humidity, as irrigation is impossible in Pantelleria as it rains very little.

"The traditional dry-stone walls used to create terraces help prevent soil erosion, while the *alberello* training system protects the vines from wind and captures rainwater, thus allowing the soil to retain moisture longer. Water stress can reduce yields, but leads to the production of wines with more concentrated flavors," explains Antonio Rallo, Donnafugata's winemaker and CEO, adding that using the terraces also encourages sustainable practices and protects the island's biodiversity.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF DONNAFUGATA / FLAVIO LEONE

The only grape variety produced in Pantelleria is Zibibbo, aka Muscat of Alexandria, has origins in North Africa. Donnafugata vinifies it in three ways: as a dry white wine called Lighea, which has notes of orange blossom and bergamot, with a mineral finish; as Kabir, a sweet yet fresh Moscato di Pantelleria with notes of passionfruit and orange blossom; and as the intensely rich Ben Ryé Passito di Pantelleria, with its amber hue and aromatic bouquet that takes on honey notes as it ages.

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“The island’s extreme conditions – strong winds, arid climate, and rugged terrain – create unique growing conditions for Zibibbo, which is perfectly adapted to thrive in this environment,” says Rallo. “These natural factors give the wines their characteristic intensity, balance between freshness and sweetness, and expressive aromatics.”



PHOTO: COURTESY OF DONNAFUGATA / FABIO GAMBINA

Despite the differences these three wines have, they each showcase a distinctive minerality and freshness thanks to the terroir and the heroic viticulture that produces them. When you drink them, you can almost feel the heat of the sun and the sea breeze.

“The wines of Pantelleria showcase intense aromas and flavors, and a distinct mineral backbone that captures the essence of Pantelleria,” Rallo says, concluding, “There is simply no other place in the world outside Pantelleria where our wines could be produced.”