



Pantelleria, where the wine Ben Ryé is made

Call of The Leopard

A wine inspired by a classic Sicilian novel, savoured very, very slowly

ON DRINK

13 February, 2025

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Earlier this year I smelled possibly the most beautiful wine I have ever experienced. It brought to mind the scene from *The Leopard* where Prince Fabrizio is wandering in the garden of his palazzo in Palermo and smells “an erotic waft of early orange blossom”.

But whilst the prince’s garden is overripe, “cloying, fleshy and slightly putrid”, in the wine I tasted the sweetness was tempered by freshness and definitely not “distilled from the relics of certain saints”.

It was Ben Ryé, a sweet wine made by a producer named Donnafugata after the fictional estate owned by the prince’s family in Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa’s novel. Tasting it was an almost perfect commingling of history, literature and sensory pleasure.

It comes from Pantelleria, a small island near Sicily where the winds can reach 160 miles per hour and the vines have to be trained in little bushes close to the soil. The name “Ben Ryé” is derived from the Arabic for “son of the wind” — Pantelleria is closer to Tunisia than Sicily and retains a strong Moorish influence. The variety used is Zibibbo, a local strain of Muscat, a grape that can, like the garden in *The Leopard*, tend towards the fleshy and overripe.

Ben Ryé is different. It’s made from a mixture of fresh juice fermented with batches of dried grapes added in three stages. This way you get all the richness and sweetness from the dried grapes and you keep the freshness.

The young wine tastes of apricot, lemon blossom and caramelised oranges and as it ages it starts to taste a bit like marmalade. It’s undoubtedly one of the world’s greatest sweet wines. I was so enamoured with the 2017 vintage I tried at home, that I invited my neighbour over to have a taste.

The family behind it are the Rallos who like many Sicilians are of Spanish descent. Since the 13th century the island had mostly been ruled by Spaniards of one kind or another.

The Leopard opens when Bourbon rule is about to be eclipsed by the arrival of Garibaldi in 1860. “If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change,” as Lampedusa writes.

Diego Rallo founded his business at Marsala in 1851 producing fortified wine on the other side of the railway lines from the merchant houses of Woodhouse, Ingham and Florio at a time the industry was largely in British hands.

In the 20th century, Marsala suffered a precipitous decline, so in 1983 a descendant, Giacomo Rallo, decided to move into unfortified premium wines — a bold move when Sicilian wine meant either Marsala or bulk products used to beef up wines of northern Italy.

I met Giacomo’s son Antonio, a sixth-generation winemaker, and his wife Barbara, over dinner in the Renoir Room at Scott’s restaurant in Mayfair with original paintings by Miró, Chagall and, yes, Renoir, peering down on us. A very Leopard-esque setting.

It was a freezing wet night, but the heady smell of the wines brought a little Sicilian warmth to the occasion. He explained how Donnafugata began at the Contessa Entellina Estate owned by Gabriella Anca Rallo, the wife of Giacomo Rallo, in the the Valle del Belice in south-west Sicily, the same location as the vast fictional estate of Donnafugata in *The Leopard*.

Unusually Giacomo decided to plant the French varieties Cabernet Sauvignon and Tannat alongside Nero d’Avola to produce something like a Sicilian Super Tuscan. He named it “Tancredi” after the charismatic nephew in *The Leopard*, played by Alain Delon in Visconti’s 1963 film.

In 1989 they began expanding and now have five separate estates and vineyards in Trapani, Etna, Pantelleria and Vittoria.

It’s helpful to think of Sicily as a country with a variety of climates and different wines produced in different parts of the island, from the baking heat of western Sicily to the high-altitude vineyards of Etna which produce wines that could come from alpine Italy.

Everything from Donnafugata is worth trying. The Tancredi in particular is impressively balanced, coming in at only 13.5 per cent alcohol at a time when Bordeaux often hits 15 per cent in a warm year. It’s one I’d love to try with some age on it.



Frappato grapes

Ben Ryé aside, perhaps the most evocatively Sicilian wine we tasted was the Bell’ Assai from Vittoria near Syracuse in the south-east of the island. It’s made from the Frappato grape, which gives it intoxicating aromas of strawberry and pomegranate but with a light and refreshing palate. I imagine it would be sensational with the famous macaroni pie from the novel which unleashes “a mist laden with aromas, then chicken livers, hard-boiled eggs, sliced ham, chicken, and truffles in masses of piping hot, glistening macaroni, to which the meat juice gave the exquisite hue of suede”.

The whole novel is a treat for the senses, one of those rare books that thoroughly deserves its classic status. My advice is not to read it too quickly, or you will miss the sly humour and ironic tone. Like Ben Ryé, it’s best enjoyed very, very slowly, savouring every word.



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