

PASSAGE TO PASSITO

Michèle Shah visits the
Donnafugata winery in Pantelleria,
home of Passito wines

Sicily has an ancient wine culture, which became a focus of serious colonisation from the Greek mainland, to the extent that it became known as “Magna Graecia”, where the vine found conditions to be ideal.

The island of Pantelleria which lies about 83 km from the coast of Tunisia, is home to some of Europe’s most southerly vineyards. At 107 kilometres southwest of Sicily it has, like the mainland, been influenced through the centuries by Greeks and then Arabs, causing it to develop its own ancient culture and a unique style of wines derived from the variety known as Zibibbo, the Arab name for the Muscat of Alexandria grape. Passito di Pantelleria is an Italian DOC for Muscat wines, which have a distinctively sweet taste because they are made from dried grapes.

Once a volcano, the soils of Pantelleria consist of mineral-rich volcanic sand, and vineyard altitudes vary from sea level up to 600 m. Strong winds sweep the island, and the low, bush-trained vines are planted in holes to protect them from being uprooted by the wind. The name of the island, Pantelleria, in fact means “very windy”.

Many of its vines are more than a hundred years old, and remain ungrafted due to the phylloxera-resistant qualities of the island’s sandy volcanic soil. Vineyard area has declined dramatically in the past century, from 6000 hectares before World War I to about an existing 600 hectares.



Donnafugata, considered one of Sicily’s benchmark producers with its main vineyard and cellars on the mainland of Sicily, is today the single largest producer on Pantelleria. A family owned and managed business, Donnafugata has been producing wine since 1989 and has 68 hectares of ancient terraced vineyards, planted to the traditional bush-trained vines.

Among the first to export wines from Sicily and Pantelleria around the world, Donnafugata is available in over 60 countries, including India. The family is dedicated to producing quality wines using resources responsibly and conserving energy for clean and sustainable agriculture. José Rallo, export manager and a member of the family which owns the winery, explains that the production of premium wine in Sicily is as important as food and tourism. Pantelleria is a Unesco World Heritage site. The family’s strong sense of social responsibility, which is shared by their employees, makes them increasingly concerned about protecting their unique terroir and promoting biodiversity.

Pantelleria is known as much for its scenic beauty, as its



The new Donnafugata vinification cellar at Khamma seems to have always belonged to the island of Pantelleria

Photo: Anna Pakula

wines, and both are a great draw for visitors. The island’s hilly slopes and sheer descents are home to small terraced vineyards distinguished by volcanic lava walls, which protect the bush-trained vines from the high winds, causing their branches to grow horizontally along the ground rather than vertically to the sky.

The kind of viticulture practised here is termed “heroic” due to the labour intensive hours required in the vineyards, where it is almost impossible to use any sort of mechanisation. This is particularly evident at harvest time where mules and baskets are still used in some areas to transport grapes from the vineyards to the wineries. Harvest time which is in the late summer is magical in Pantelleria. Donnafugata receives over 2,500 visitors and wine enthusiasts in its Pantelleria property each summer. Although there are flights from Sicily and also a daily ferry service in the summer, it’s not an easy island to reach.

Donnafugata’s 68 hectares are spread over 12 different “contrades” (districts) within the island each reaching a

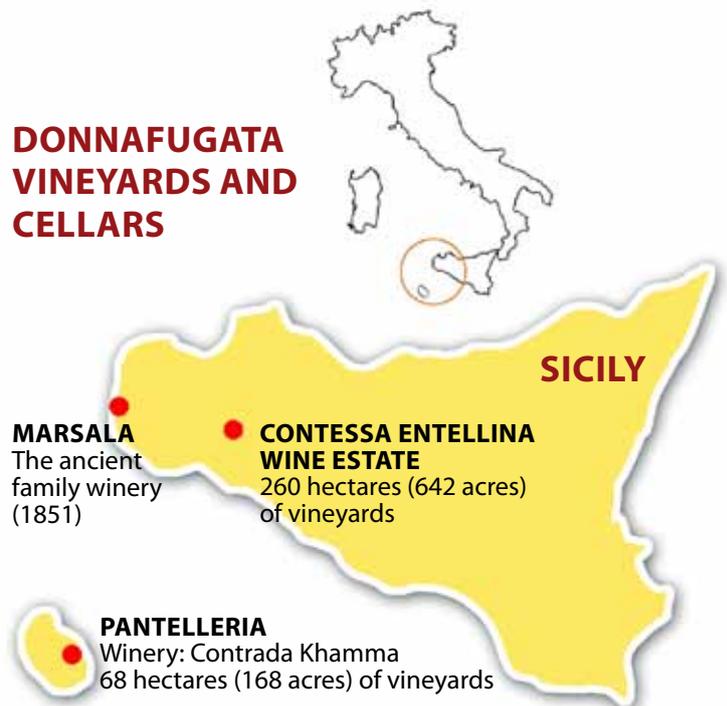


Photo:Enrica Frigerio



The island's sheer descents are covered with small terraced vineyards

THE GRAPES ARE HARVESTED FROM THE END OF JULY TO THE END OF SEPTEMBER. HARVEST STARTS WITH THE FIRST GRAPES TO BE PICKED ON THE SOUTH-FACING VINEYARDS AT SEA LEVEL. MUCH CARE IS TAKEN TO SELECT ONLY THE HEALTHIEST GRAPES

Photo:Shobha



Zibibbo grapes withered in the sun and wind and turned into Malaga. Every grape is removed from the bunch by hand, checked and selected

maximum of 400 metres above sea level with vines as old as 100 years.

The grapes are harvested from the end of July to the end of September. Harvest starts with the first grapes picked on the south-facing vineyards at sea level. Great care is taken to select only the healthiest grapes. The ripest bunches with the thickest skins are selected for drying on racks placed outdoors and exposed to strong sunshine and wind. Once dried and shrivelled to 25% of their original size, the grapes are de-stemmed by hand, pressed and added to must (wine juice) made from freshly picked Zibibbo grapes.

Traditionally, the dried grapes are added at the end of the fermentation, but as this can result in too much oxidation, the preferred technique at Donnafugata is to add the grapes a third of the way through fermentation, which lasts normally between 20 to 25 days. This complex process produces the rich sweet Passito wine with some 200 grammes per litre of residual sugar and a minimum 14% alcohol (under DOC law). It takes about four kilos of grapes to produce one litre or even 750 ml of this amazing wine.

Donnafugata produces a range of Passitos from vineyards in different areas and then blends them for added complexity. The fresh acidity of the wine counterbalances its luscious sweetness and its appeal lies in the combination of a sunny Mediterranean

Photo: Anna Pakula



Export manager, José Rallo with a glass of Passito

character with the crispness and pleasantness of the fruit.

“For me Passito di Pantelleria is magic!” says José. “I am fascinated by its layers of complexity: its intense aromas of fruit, such as apricots, peaches, dates, orange peel and aromatic herbs. If I close my eyes, its aromas bring back vivid pictures of the island, the warmth of the sun and the south, where I am happy and feel at home! On the palate it is sweet, yet at the same time it’s zesty and wonderfully balanced.”

Donnafugata produces two natural sweet wines. The first, and internationally prized, is the flagship, **Ben Ryè Passito di Pantelleria DOC** (80,000 bottles) and the other is **Kabir Moscato di Pantelleria** (30,000 bottles). There is also **Lighea Zibibbo**, a 100% dry white aromatic Muscat wine (130,000 bottles).

To make Passito takes time and patience. Nothing about it is fast, modern or industrial. And Pantelleria has a long and ancient tradition in making Passito.

“It is a natural process; to achieve quality takes time and a lot of care,” concurs José, “something that today is considered rare and precious.

“So come to Pantelleria and forget about time. Immerse yourself in this magical Mediterranean island and enjoy the nectar of the gods!” she says. ♦

Ben Ryè Passito di Pantelleria DOC



DONNAFUGATA – PANTELLERIA

BEST MONTHS TO VISIT PANTELLERIA

May, June and part of July but then it starts getting crowded. It can be very busy. From mid-July to end August but September and October are also very nice months to visit Pantelleria.

HOW TO GET THERE

- By ferry from the Port of Trapani on mainland Sicily. The ferry company is Siremar.
- By air from Trapani or Palermo. Fly Etihad.

REACHING THE WINERY

- Hire a car on the island or take a bus from the centre of Pantelleria town. For more details: www.donnafugata.it/pagine/How-to-reach-us.aspx

WINERY HOURS FOR VISITS

- From Monday to Friday at 10:30am, 5:00pm and 7:00pm. Tasting of three wines costs €7
- Don't miss the gardens of the winery. The tour starts at 9.30am. Tel: 0923 915649. E-mail: enoturismo.pantelleria@donnafugata.it. Web: www.donnafugata.it/pagine/Guided-tours-Pantelleria.aspx

WHERE TO EAT

Trattoria “La Favarotta”. Family-run with typical dishes from Pantelleria, near Donnafugata winery

Il principe e il pirata. On the seafront at Punta Kharace.

WHERE TO STAY

Zubebi Resort, 91017 Contrada Zubebi - Isola di Pantelleria (TP) Italy. Tel: +39 0923 913653. E-mail: info@zubebi.com. www.zubebi.com.

Pantelleria Dream Resort

Località Tracino, 91017 Pantelleria (TP). Open all year round. Mob: 334 7824777. Fax: 0923 1773100. E-mail: info@pantelleriadreamresort.it

INSIDER TIP

Take beach shoes that you can wear on the rocky shores or stoney beaches and in the water. The shoes are locally available.