


Bill Zacharkiw: Tiny Italian island produces towering dessert wines

The volcanic island of Pantelleria isn't the most hospitable place for agriculture, but the zibibbo grape has found a welcoming home there.



BILL ZACHARKIW, SPECIAL TO MONTREAL GAZETTE

More from Bill Zacharkiw, [Special to Montreal Gazette](http://montrealgazette.com/author/zacharkiw) ([HTTP://MONTREALGAZETTE.COM/AUTHOR/ZACHARKIW](http://montrealgazette.com/author/zacharkiw))

Published on: March 23, 2018 | Last Updated: March 23, 2018 12:00 PM EDT



Dessert wines may no longer be in vogue, but they have a rich history. Throughout much of the past 500 years, it was these wines, and not dry table wines, that were the most coveted. One of my favourites is the Passito di Pantelleria.

The passito style involves drying grapes to concentrate the sugars, acids and, ultimately, flavours. If you drink amarone or ripasso red wines, you have tasted a passito wine.

Located 50 kilometres from the coast of Tunisia, the volcanic island of Pantelleria is one of Italy's southernmost points. This tiny, 80-square-kilometre island is home to about 7,000 people. It's a rugged place with steep cliffs that descend directly into the Mediterranean. It is almost constantly battered by the sirocco, a wind coming from Africa that can hit 80 km/h for days on end.

With very little rainfall, it's not the most hospitable place for agriculture. They do have bonsai-size olive trees, whose branches are trained down rather than up to escape the wind. There are caper bushes as well. But the island is full of grapevines, and almost exclusively a single variety: zibibbo.

Zibibbo is better known as Muscat of Alexandria outside of Sicily. The Sicilian name is rooted in Arabic, meaning “dried grape” or “raisin.” The grape has been planted on the island for more than 1,000 years, and was most probably brought there when western Sicily was colonized by Arab invaders in the ninth century.

Zibibbo is very aromatic and ideal for drying. It is also great for making wine. As is often the case, circumstance creates opportunity, and the hot, dry wind is ideal for quickly drying grapes after harvest.

The traditional way of making a passito on Pantelleria was by drying the grapes in the sun and adding them to a high-alcohol (16 per cent) dry wine, which the locals called a bitter wine. These raisins marinated in the wine, bringing sweetness and a complex array of flavours.

But in 1989, when the Sicilian-based winery Donnafugata established itself on the island, the winery decided to do things a bit differently for its cuvée Ben Ryé (\$34.75, [SAQ # 11301482](#) (<https://www.saq.com/page/fr/saqcom/autres-vins-de-dessert/donnafugata-ben-rye-2015/11301482>)). Rather than making a dry wine and adding the dried grapes afterward, the grapes were added during fermentation. The result was a fresher wine with layers of fruit flavours, especially apricot and tangerine, and lower alcohol.

And as I discovered on my recent visit to the island, these wines can age well. When to drink them? Like all sweet wines, they are ideal with strong blue cheese, desserts with honey, caramel and chocolate, and foie gras au torchon.

You can hear Bill Zacharkiw talk about wine on CHOM-FM (97.7) Fridays at 7:45 a.m.

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