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Sommelier Selects – By Julian Hitner –  
~ Donnafugata & Sicilian Wineries; plus Portuguese  
wineries to visit at next week's tasting ~  
Tuesday, March 22, 2010

**A visit to Donnafugata:**

Three weeks after the fact, I can still remember my evening trip to **Donnafugata** as if it was yesterday -- great wineries tend to have that effect on me. A distinctly family-run affair, Donnafugata was founded in 1983 by Giacomo Rallo (with origins dating back to 1851), and has since emerged as one of Sicily's most respected



winegrowing operations. These days, most of the operations are carried out by Giacomo's two adult children José (see above-right) and Antonio at their beautiful winery in Marsala, located on the western coast of the island.



Less than a month ago, around fifteen other writers and I were given a tour of this remarkable facility, followed by an equally pleasurable tasting and dinner. Though one of the larger winegrowing estates in Sicily (boasting 260 hectares), quality seems to occupy centre stage at Donnafugata. Aside from harvesting at night (highly useful on an island as hot as Sicily), extensive work has been done to improve quality in the vineyards, from modern soil analyses and climate examinations to higher plant densities and lower yields. Such heavy-handedness has also extended into the winery, with the inauguration of a pristine new *chai* in 2008.

Indeed, quality is considerably improving, with even back vintages of certain wines showing remarkable personality and strength. Represented



in the Ontario market by **Noble Estates Wines & Spirits (416.398.0031)**, many of Donnafugata's wines can fortunately be obtained in Toronto, sometimes in the LCBO, other times on consignment only.

For whites, a favourite of mine was the **2000 'Chiarandà', Contessa Entellina DOC, Sicily (90/100; the '06 sells for \$29.00)**: enticingly Burgundian-like (a blend of Inzolia and

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Chardonnay), with lovely baked hazelnuts, lemony apricots, poached pears, and lime; incredibly vibrant and minerally. For reds, the top labels are really something else, especially the **2006 'Milie e una Notte', Contessa Entellina DOC, Sicily (92/100; the '04 sells for \$53.00)**: toasty, with beautiful mocha, plums, currants, light earth, graham crackers, vanilla, and spice; smooth, bold, elegant, and delicious; at present exceedingly youthful -- predominantly Nero d'Avola. Finally, for stickies, the **2008 'Ben Ryé', Moscato di Pantelleria DOC, Sicily (92/100; the '06 [half-bottle] sells for \$29.00)** was the perfect digestif to end off the evening: revealing intense pure orange peel, exotic figs, honeyed maple, and spice; brilliantly vivid and polished -- 100% Zibibbo (or Moscato d'Alessandria).



Ultimately, the estate of Donnafugata serves as a fitting example of the direction Sicilian winegrowing ought to be taking, from sound viticultural choices to significant investment in winemaking operations. The future certainly looks bright for this continually improving estate.

**Other great Sicilian wineries (see last week's column for specific wines):  
Benanti:**

A winery with attitude, with quality worthy of such an assertion. Founded on the slopes of Mount Etna at the end of the 1800s by **Dr. Giuseppe Benanti**, the estate was revived in 1988 by Giuseppe's grandson of the same name. Quality is very high, with special regard paid to more traditional varieties of the Etna DOC region,



particularly Nerello Mascalese, Nerello Cappuccio, and Carricante -- the Nero d'Avola-blends can be especially beautiful. During my visit, export sales manager **Lisa Sapienza** gave my colleagues and me a delightful tour of the vineyards and cellar, not to mention a really stellar tasting and

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luncheon -- remember my photo of the pork leg from last week? At present, Benanti is represented in the Ontario market by **Frontier Wine Merchants (416.939.5442)**.

**Cottanera:**

Another success story out of the immensely promising Etna DOC region. Founded in the 1960s by **Francesco Cambria** (with substantial improvements made thirty years later), Cottanera is today managed under the skilful leadership of granddaughter **Mariangela Cambria**. Though production has always been smaller-scale, my visit



to Cottanera would suggest that equal attention is nowadays paid to both local varieties and more famous international grapes -- the straight-up Syrah was a particular favourite of mine. Modern winemaking techniques have been adopted whole-heartedly, as can be seen by their generous use of new barriques (see above photo) in their finest wines. At present, Cottanera is not represented in the Ontario market -- a pity to Sicilian wine lovers everywhere.

**Tenuta di Fessina:**

A winery that takes you back a few centuries the minute you set your eyes on it. Based out of a set of old winemaking structures some 300 years old on the slopes of Mount Etna, Fessina is presently run by **Silvia Maestrelli** (current winegrowing operations are actually only several years in development, though



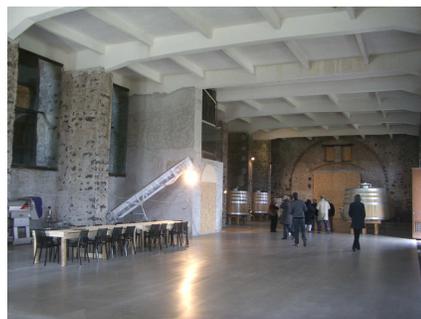
there are plenty of old vines still around), with notable emphasis placed on Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Cappuccio, along with a little Chardonnay here and there. At present, Tenuta di Fessina is not represented in the Ontario market -- another vinous brunt to bear.

**Graci:**

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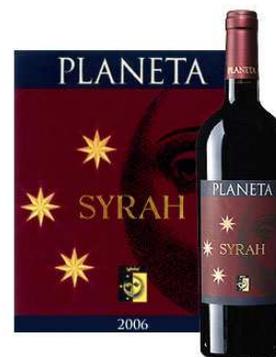
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Like Tenuta di Fessina, Graci is a relatively new winegrowing venture located on the glorious slopes of Europe's most active volcano. Based out of structures surpassing 200 years in age, Graci is presently owned and operated by former Milanese banker **Alberto Aiello Graci**, with smaller-scale production the order of the day. Like Fessina, what I appreciate most about this winery is the way it has incorporated new winemaking apparatuses into existing buildings. Special emphasis is placed on traditional Etna-based varietals, at the same time utilizing all the modern winemaking wizardries at one's disposal. At present, Graci is not represented in the Ontario market -- notice a pattern here?



### Planeta:

The most prestigious winegrowing establishment in Sicily. Founded in 1995 by **Diego Planeta**, the estate is made up of five 'boutique wineries' comprising 390 hectares. Through exhaustive research and a fierce commitment to quality, Planeta is nowadays regarded by many as the 'new face' of Sicilian winemaking: slick, modern, and open to change. During my recent visit to Sicily, I sat



down with the inescapably elegant **Chiara Planeta**, examining each of the wines with a deserved level of thoughtfulness. Indeed, the wines are quite powerful, in fact rather international in style, from sumptuous Syrah (my favourite) to substantial Nero d'Avola; but it would be very difficult to dispute their overall level of quality. At present, Planeta is represented in the Ontario market by **Halpern Enterprises (416.593.2662)**, and even the so-called 'entry range' wines are worth obtaining, especially for restaurant sommeliers (\*hint hint\*).

### Tasca d'Almerita:

During my time at Assovini Sicilia 2010, I enjoyed a long conversation with **Giuseppe Tasca d'Almerita**, exchanging commentaries about the quality of his wines. Founded in 1830, the

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estate (located around 100 km southeast of Palermo) is currently run by said person with all the level of thoroughness befitting a man of such gentle openness and assertiveness. In a nutshell, winemaking activities at Tasca D'Almerita are a compromise of traditionalist approaches and modernist methodologies. While traditional varietals such as Inzolia, Grecanico, Catarratto, and (especially) Nero d'Avola continue to be embraced (and improved upon), Giuseppe is unafraid to employ patently modernist techniques in bringing out the best in them, such as adding a little Cabernet Sauvignon into the blend. At present, the winery is represented in the Ontario market by **Authentic Wine & Spirits Merchants (905.238.0716)**.



### Great Portuguese wineries to visit at the tasting on Tuesday:

Love Portuguese wines? Then keep on reading: on Tuesday, March 30<sup>th</sup>, the **Wines of Portugal** tasting shall be held at the AGO (Baillie Court) from 2:00 to 6:00 p.m. With hundreds upon hundreds of different wines to taste, it was thought that a short list of top wineries to visit might be helpful for sommeliers looking for some superb wines to add to their lists.

### Here are some great wineries for sommeliers to visit at the Wines of Portugal tasting on Tuesday, March 30<sup>th</sup>:

**Caves Aliança:** An establishment with an ever-increasing knack for quality wines. Personally, I would keep an eye out for the **2007 'Quinta dos Quatro Ventos', Douro DOC**, the flagship wine of the outfit.

**PMA Canada (905.257.2116)**

**Bacalhôa Vinhos de Portugal:** An extraordinary estate to behold, with significant, reliable quality across the board. This afternoon, one of the top wines to watch out for is (probably) the **2007 'Tinta da Ânfora, Grande Escolha', VR Alentejano**.

**FWP Trading (416.487.6153)**

**Quinta do Côtto:** A winery with a growing reputation for quality, and the flagship **2007 'Grande Escolha', Douro DOC** is available this afternoon for tasting -- enough said.

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**Herdade do Esporão:** Well represented in the Ontario market. For my part, I'm quite curious to see how the **2007 'Reserva', Alentejo DOC** is going to taste.

**FWP Trading (416.487.6153)**

**José Maria da Fonseca:** One of the most respected producers in Portugal, and an important player in the Ontario market. Aside from the sweet wines (always delicious), you can't go wrong (at least hopefully) with a sample of the **2007 'Domini', Douro DOC**, one of the more premium brands of the estate.

**Philippe Dandurand (416.368.3344)**

**Henriques & Henriques:** One of my favourite Madeira houses, with some really stellar **15-year-old** wines, of which sommeliers ought to line up in droves to taste. Granted, Madeira carries a limited audience for clients, but the quality alone merits some conspicuous consumption at this particular table.

**The Case for Wine (416.482.0241)**

**João Portugal Ramos:** A top-quality producer with a solid reputation for good-value table wines (reds in particular). Personally, I would have a go of the **2007 'Marquês de Borba', Alentejo DOC**, along with the 'Villa Santa' labels.

**Authentic Wine & Spirits Merchants (905.238.0716)**

**Luís Pato:** Located in the heart of Bairrada, this winery means serious business, especially when it comes to taming the ever-tannic Baga varietal. Not to be missed is the **2008 Quinta de Ribeirinho Pé Franco, VR Beiras**, crafted from ungrafted Baga vines. The sparkling Baga might also prove interesting ...

**FWP Trading (416.487.6153)**

**Quinta do Ventozelo:** Much improved in recent years, and now producing some considerably good wines. Useful for sommeliers are the ports and red table wines, both of which can be easily obtained in the Ontario market. This afternoon, I'd recommend trying the **2007 'Reserva', Douro DOC** -- great on the budget, as is the non-Reserva (hopefully).

**B & W Wines (416.531.5553)**

**Lemos & Van Zeller:** A real treat that this winery is in town, run by the former own of Quinta da Noval. On this occasion, the best wines to taste are the **2007 'Quinta do Vale Dona Maria', Douro DOC** and the **2007 'Casa de Casal de Loivos', Douro DOC**.

**FWP Trading (416.487.6153)**