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Bordeaux Cabernet Sauvignon
Chardonnay Classic Food and Wine

Pairing **France** Greece
Italy Napa New York organic
Pinot Noir Riesling Shiraz Sit
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Monday, April 19th, 2010

Posted by **Patricia Guy**
Donnafugata's Ben Rye

Donnafugata is based in Sicily, where the company produces a range of exceptionally appealing reds and whites. However, the jewels in its crown are the wines it makes on the tiny volcanic island of Pantelleria, which lies between Sicily and Africa. There Donnafugata grows Zibibbo (a.k.a. Moscato di Alessandria). Each vine is left to form its own small bush. (In other areas, vines are usually trained onto wires to form tidy rows.) These bushes grow close to the ground and as a consequence are somewhat protected from the winds that sweep across the island. Some of the vines are over 100 years old and, as you can imagine all work in the vineyards must be carried out by hand.

“The vines grow horizontal to the earth,” says Jose Rallo, whose family owns Donnafugata. “It takes a lot of hard work to tend them. You have to really believe in the wines.”

She confesses that Ben Rye, the company’s exquisite sweet wine whose name in Arabic means “*child of the wind*”, is her favorite wine. “Loving it is almost a duty for me,” she says. “I have to love it and make others love it.”

I was fortunate enough to taste 4 vintages of Ben Rye at the recent Vinality wine trade fair held in Verona. Here are my notes.

2002 Ben Rye. A vibrant yellow sheen over a clear, fine tangerine/pale toffee color; clear rim. The nose presents a bright amalgam of citrus (citron, tangerine), with shadows of apricots and figs and a soft, broad grapiness. It is sprinkled with fine, warm spices. The palate echoes the nose. The sensations are firm, the ideas of figs and blossoms broaden and are joined by flavors of fresh pine nuts. The flavor evolves in the long, fine finish. The shades of figs and ripe but firm apricots remain on the palate long after the wine itself has gone.

After 10 minutes: It remains firm and satisfying with a youthful vivacity. A lovely experience.

After 15 minutes: Its freshness holds.

After 20 minutes: Still appealing, still firmly presenting its luscious fragrances and flavors.

“Zibibbo is an aromatic variety,” says Jose “For us the 2002 is a benchmark vintage. It has great acidity that balances the fullness of the flavors.”

2005 Ben Rye Vibrant. Lightly colored rim. A pea green sheen over a tawny color, with vivid tangerine highlights. Fresh, uplifting nose. The freshness is dominant on the nose followed half a beat later by a clean orange-lemon marmalade tinged sensation. A very tight weave on the palate. Again shades of apricots, orange marmalade and tangerines, with a nuance of fresh hazelnuts. A fine line of rich fruit defines the very long aftertaste.

After 10 minutes: The ripe apricot element unfolds on the nose and palate like silk and a sprinkling of tangerine zest emerges.

After 15 minutes: The apricot settles down and melds with the zest. The finish is even more intriguing.

After 20 minutes: It is still fine and fresh.

2008 Ben Rye More yellow in the yellow/tawny blend of colors. The tangerine highlights are softer. There is the suggestion of an expensive scented powder on the nose. (Dior comes to mind, I do not know why.) This lies over a broad apricot note. On the palate the very ripe apricot notes are fully and richly expressed, yet all the while the lively zesty acidity shapes and enlivens the flavors. Very lively on the palate. The finish is a-tingle with pleasing sensations: ripe fruit, tangerine zest and a touch of very fresh pine nuts.

“The 2008,” says Jose. “is like a *festa*. It has a new label, one that recalls the land and the hard work we have done on Pantelleria.”

After 10 minutes: The wine opens up and the apricot becomes even more generous and inviting. I detect notes of ripe figs.

After 15 minutes: A generous mouthful. The sensation of a comforting cloud of very ripe apricots on the nose. The palate, too, reveals a broad, complex range of flavors.

After 20 minutes. It maintains its luscious generosity.

Last year I served some Italian friends a bottle of 2005 Ben Rye. Let me recount that event here. We served the wine with a Grand Marnier infused cake, decorated with orange slices and gold- flaked pieces of chocolate.

Donnafugata’s Ben Rye 2005 (this note was written a year ago). Golden tinged with orange. A fresh, full perfume of orange blossoms, mandarin oranges and acacia honey. These ideas carry through onto the palate. High-toned. An idea of dried apricots. The richness is lifted and shaped by sprightly acidity.

We scored big points with our friends, particularly Ugo. (Ugo, like most Italians, just does not “get” the pleasures of older vintages.) The Ben Rye, however, brought comments like: “It has such elegance!” Ugo turned to his wife, Stefi, and said: “Remember when I saw this wine at the restaurant in Trieste and I said: these people have good taste!”

“Is this a Pantelleria?” asked Stefi.

“This *is* Pantelleria!” replied Ugo, raising his glass.

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