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Daughter Of The Wind (and the passito of Pantelleria Island) (/wine-posts-reviews/611-pantelleria-island-2021)

Wine Tasting Notebook (/wine-posts-reviews)

04 January 2022

There are no beaches as such, just crags of sharp hardened Pantellerite rock that is chipped and hewn across the island to make the stout dwellings called *dammuso* and 12,000 kilometers of dry stone walls, offering protection to humans and various crops from the relentless blowing wind.

It is only upon closer inspection that this remote Italian outpost softens her complexion and shows the visitor some alluring features that, like a riddle, play upon the mind and deepen the experience of engagement.

Arrival from Mount Etna



'Giardino Pantesco' A traditional walled garden of Pantelleria with 150yr old orange tree

Natalia and I have arrived directly from Catania in the east of Sicily after a few days scaling the active volcano, Mount Etna, as guests of Donnafugata, one of Italy's most colourful and vivacious wine producers, both in terms of flavour and in personality.

Family owner José Rallo explained over lunch the previous day that everything on Pantelleria has to be dug in. The hot scirocco wind mixes with African sand and burns the plants. They lose 20% of the harvest when the scirocco arrives in May.

We are shown a circular walled garden with a solitary 150 year old Portuguese orange tree inside, flagrantly flouting its opulent oranges, shielded behind the 2metre high dry stone wall.

The vines are sunken into the ground in dug-out basins and then trained low so that they are not exposed above the level of the dry stone walls that scale the undulating land. The contrast to what our imaginations might conjure when we say the word 'vineyard' is striking.



Low trained old vine Zibibbo

José emphasises that any form of agriculture on the island is achieved with great effort to defeat a wild relentless nature. It is evidence that if humans decide they *must*, then they very likely *can* find a way.

Donnafugata have their vines on the northeast side of the island. The south side is no longer suitable for vines due to exposure to the heat.

Into the island

By contrast to Pantelleria, Etna was very much alive, throwing lava and ash into the air during the time we were visiting. The volcanic fissure beneath Pantelleria is deep and has not shown any outward displays of

activity since 1891, when there was a subsea eruption on the north east side.

We meet Stefania from Donnafugata at the tiny little airport and pick up our Fiat Panda before zooming along the little lanes towards the winery and then behind it to our own dammuso. The squat dwelling blends almost seamlessly into the landscape with stone walls running off in several directions and the low-set vines retreating up the valley.



Our *dammuso* among the vines of Donnafugata

Each dammuso is characterised by a small domed roof, the old way to support the weight of the heavy stone construction. It is also a good way to capture run-off rainwater.

Inside there is a tangible calm. The wind is at bay and everything is still. The little cottage is the perfect place for a writer. We unpack and make our way back to the winery to meet Stefania for a tour.

Vineyards and winery

As we walk the 100 metres to the winery, the warm wind starts to meld into the landscape, the vineyards and stone walls fall away into the sea that is itself a mere slice beneath the horizon. The winery building has a north African architecture, minimally stylish and proud against the elements.

The grapes used are called by their African name, *Zibibbo*, or, more commonly to many of us, Muscat of Alexandria, an ancient variety originating in North Africa and famed for its aromatic, sweet voluptuous style and fabulous aging potential.

We walk among the vines that have now been harvested. Back in Catania when speaking to José's brother Antonio, he said that the harvest here is very difficult and expensive. The pickers have to work extremely hard.

Donnafugata organise their picking teams so that they are able to move between sites in Masala, Vittoria, and Etna in Sicily and, of course, here. Paying them well is essential if you want reliability and Antonio highlights that the challenge of production has to be reflected in the price. It was his and José's father, Giacomo, who decided to make passito wine in Pantelleria and Ben Rye was born in 1989.



Dehydrated Zibibbo grapes harvested at Donnafugata

Passito literally refers to sweet wine made from dehydrated grapes. The picking is one part of the meticulous process and the sun-dried grapes that we see in the winery are large raisins with a pungent rich flavour.

I am a huge fan of Ben Rye and often request it by the glass when I see it on restaurant lists. It is the complex richness and sweetness that is contrasted by a fabulously fresh palate pleasing acidity.

José explained that they have innovated the passito process by adding a quantity of non-dried Zibibbo to the dried grapes during the fermentation in order to preserve both concentration of flavour and the bright acidity.



Tasting Ben Ryé 2018 and then later the 2012 - deliciously rich and complex

The 2018 has familiar notes of apricot, orange peel, and a rich raisin flavour with reminiscent carob notes. The acidity gives great structure and pleasure sweeping across the palate.

Later that evening, Stefania and her partner, Valerio, invited us to a restaurant called Il Principe E Il Pirata, where we were served a selection of raw seafood delicacies followed by linguini with aubergine, tomato, ricotta, and red prawns. A selection of dry Zibibbo wines accompanied.

For dessert, spoilt for choice, I ordered a *Pantesco Kiss* accompanied by a glass of Ben Ryé 2012. The kiss was indeed memorable, however, my affections lay with the passito, darker in hue, browning at the meniscus, the orange peel notes, enriched by time with an aroma of dates and nuts. The acidity is a little more integrated but there is plenty of vitality and life. A seductive pleasure.

Signs of geological life



A warm spot to swim in the clear water

The following day we drove out with some suggestions from Stefania to explore the rugged coastline. The wind is up, the sun shining, and the sea beautifully clear and inviting. The small cove we dive into is busy with humans huddled on a wooden platform either chatting or slipping into the sheltered water to bathe.

We then drove up to the famous lake, formed from an extinct volcanic crater. The name of the lake translates as 'Mirror of Venus' and upon entering the enclosed area of the crater where the lake is fully visible, we abandon the car at the top and take in the view before driving down to the water's edge.



'Mirror of Venus' volcanic lake, Pantelleria

Despite its large size, there are only a few others there and we take the opportunity to swim to the middle, quietly hoping that the rich mineral waters have some revitalising qualities to bestow on our aching aging limbs. A taverna close to the water's edge offers lunch and, of course, we accept.

There is one more swimming spot to locate. At certain locations on the coast there are hot thermal pools where people go to soak. The scene is quite surreal. Several bath-size rock pools are inhabited by humans.



We bathe in gorgeous hot pools until dusk

We dive into the water in front of the pools and notice the temperature is considerably warmer than expected. As one pool becomes empty we clamber in. This is the first real expression of the living volcano I have experienced and it is magical. These rock pools are actually very hot. We both squeeze in and soak our bones once more.

We try all the pools as the sun sets and the curtain of night falls. In the darkness we walk round to a small bar with a terrace on the stars and we order wine and food. There is a tranquility in the air; Pantelleria is opening up.

A morning walk

The next morning we walked up behind the camusso into surrounding vineyards to take in the view. Twisted vines knotted themselves into their dug-out basins. I recalled Stefania telling us that the Zibibbo vines below

are 40-80 years old and above there many ungrafted vines from the pre-phylloxera period in the late 19th century.

Today is about getting lost and as we run out of paths we clamber up steep banks onto another trajectory. Descending we notice the view has changed perspective.



Lost among the prickly pears

There are numerous remote camusso, each with a cultivated wilderness and a watchful presence over a timeless vista. We walk beneath the wind, along a small gully carpeted in prickly pears (or Indian Figs as they call them in Italy). Pantelleria is like a dream in which the elements wrap around the visitor, providing lonely contentment.

Cave saunas and car park passito

Back in the car we are lost. It is of course my fault. Overflowing with confidence I have missed a turn and are now zooming blind into the surrealist landscape. Stefania has messaged us about a cave sauna and,

intrigued, we agree to meet.

Before this we stop for lunch in a small taverna on the water's edge. There is no protection from the waves here and the slipway is treacherous. We order raw prawns and salad with a dry Zibibbo made by Marco De Bartoli called Pietranera. The prawns are imported from Sicily and are oily and rich, subdued and enhanced by the dry aromatic wine. There is little fishing from the island, we are told because the coastline is too coarse and unrelenting.

Back in the Panda we are again ascending along narrow lanes and dark dry stone walls with vistas of olive groves, vines and woodlands falling away beneath us. We arrived at the car park ahead of Stefania and Valerio. We are not alone. The cave apparently is in demand, with cars strewn along the grassy bank. A small gate announces a pathway and parked to the side of it is a man with his boot up and local produce offered for sale. He leans with a lazy repose against the car, amiably enjoying his cigarette while nodding to us in acknowledgment.

Stefania and Valerio arrive and we set off on the track along a ridge that bends and twists upwards. I get a rush of deja vu from childhood walks along the Purbeck Hills from Chapman's Pool up to St Aldhelm's Head; the same desolate calm with a presence of underlying natural forces.



Sauna cave entrance

Eventually we arrived at the entrance to the cave. It is a tall narrow hollow in a vertical shard of stone. Conversing voices reach the entrance from within and the heat from the rock is radiating. We strip to our swimmers and cautiously enter the sauna cave.

Amazingly it lives up to any expectations that one might have of a sauna. We squeeze into the small chamber at the end

with several other fleshy sweating bodies concealed in the absence of light. I manage to secure a higher perch for a more intense heating. This closeness to the life force of our planet is a rare experience. Are we merely exfoliating or are we communing with the radiant heart of Pantelleria... the island has charmed and intoxicated us.

This secluded cosiness is very quickly interrupted as a man of gargantuan proportions enters the

cave. Sensing the limited space, he perches on the edge of the chamber refusing gestures of a place in the heat.

“If I sit up there I might not get out alive!” He says, chuckling to himself. He goes on, “that would be bad because my brother is cooking me dinner.”

Natalia asks, “Do you live on the island?”

“No” he replies, “Luxembourg... but I always return to Pantelleria. My brother is a chef and lives here. I am just on holiday. To enjoy the best food on the island you have to be invited to someone's house for home cooking.... And of course the wine. I love the wines. The dry whites, the Sicilian reds and the *passito*... have you tried it?”



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A universal murmur of affirmation goes around the cave. Of course we have. It is the key to our presence here, to see the treasure yielded from tribulation at its source. The source itself has proven to be like a wonder of the world. Simple in its exposition but achieving great depth in emotion and the marks made up on our memories.

Our small ensemble of bodies are now heated and glistening in the restricted shafts of light that make it this far to the end of the cave. We move out as a group and lounge on a rickety terrace perch, created, it appears, as a collaborative effort between nature and human.

Stefania is quietly content. Valerio retrieves a large pipe from his bag and loads it up to smoke while reclining on a smooth stone with a long cast vista. After another heating session we walk back to the cars. I urgently need more water and purchase a bottle from the man with the open boot. He also has olives, herbs and the famous capers of Pantelleria. We buy these too.

While we are browsing the large man from the sauna appears and speaks cordially to the local man. He then turns to us saying, "Will you try the passito with me? It is very good!"

Of course we accept. Stefania and Valerio say they must leave as they have a social event to get to. We arrange to meet them in the morning to say goodbye and return to the impromptu tasting. His name is Alessandro and we touch on the politics of Italy and Britain, the former having recently discovered its sanity while the latter, we agree, has quite clearly lost it.

He retreats from any political attachments by reiterating that Luxembourg does well to project an apolitical frontage, no matter what may lurk beneath. And he for his part is happy to spend whatever money he has on the best wine he can afford.



Stefania takes us through Donnafugata's Zibibbo wines

After a second cup of the available wine, we each purchase a bottle from the man before climbing back in the Panda and setting back to our camusso among the vines of Donnafugata. As we are concentratedly navigating the tight lanes, Alessandro comes roaring past on his scooter, a modern-day satyr in search of his pending feast.

Island gravitas

The next day we pack up our things and walk to the winery to say goodbye to Stefania. We purchase bottles and capers and take some passito grapes to enjoy later. The magnetic pull of the island is taking effect. There is a solemnity to leaving this place, a face in the wind that calls us to return. Of course we will but in the meantime, we will enjoy her evocative wines at every opportunity.



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