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Sicilian Wine: A New Quality Standard?



Marisa D'Vari Contributor ⓘ
Dining & Drinking



Sicilia En Primeur Tasting @MANCUINCA

In ancient Rome, Sicilian wine was among the most prestigious wines of its era. It received the equivalent of “5 star accolades” by Pliny the Elder, the Robert Parker of his day.

Yet only recently is Sicilian wine regaining its former glory. This is due in large part to the efforts of Assovinì Sicilia, a group of quality-minded producers dedicated to promoting Sicilian wine.



Madeleine Stenwreth MW Tasting Wine Before Lecture @MANCUINCA

Sicilian Wine Today

The producers of Assovinu Sicilia come from many different wine-producing areas of Sicily and make wine from a variety of native and international grapes. The majority of the producers come from families who have been making wine for generations, though this was typically for personal use.

Starting from the mid-1980s, these producers (or their parents) realized the unique terroir of their family vineyards. A classic example is that of Giuseppe Benanti. Like many of his contemporaries, he graduated university and embarked on a professional career outside of wine.

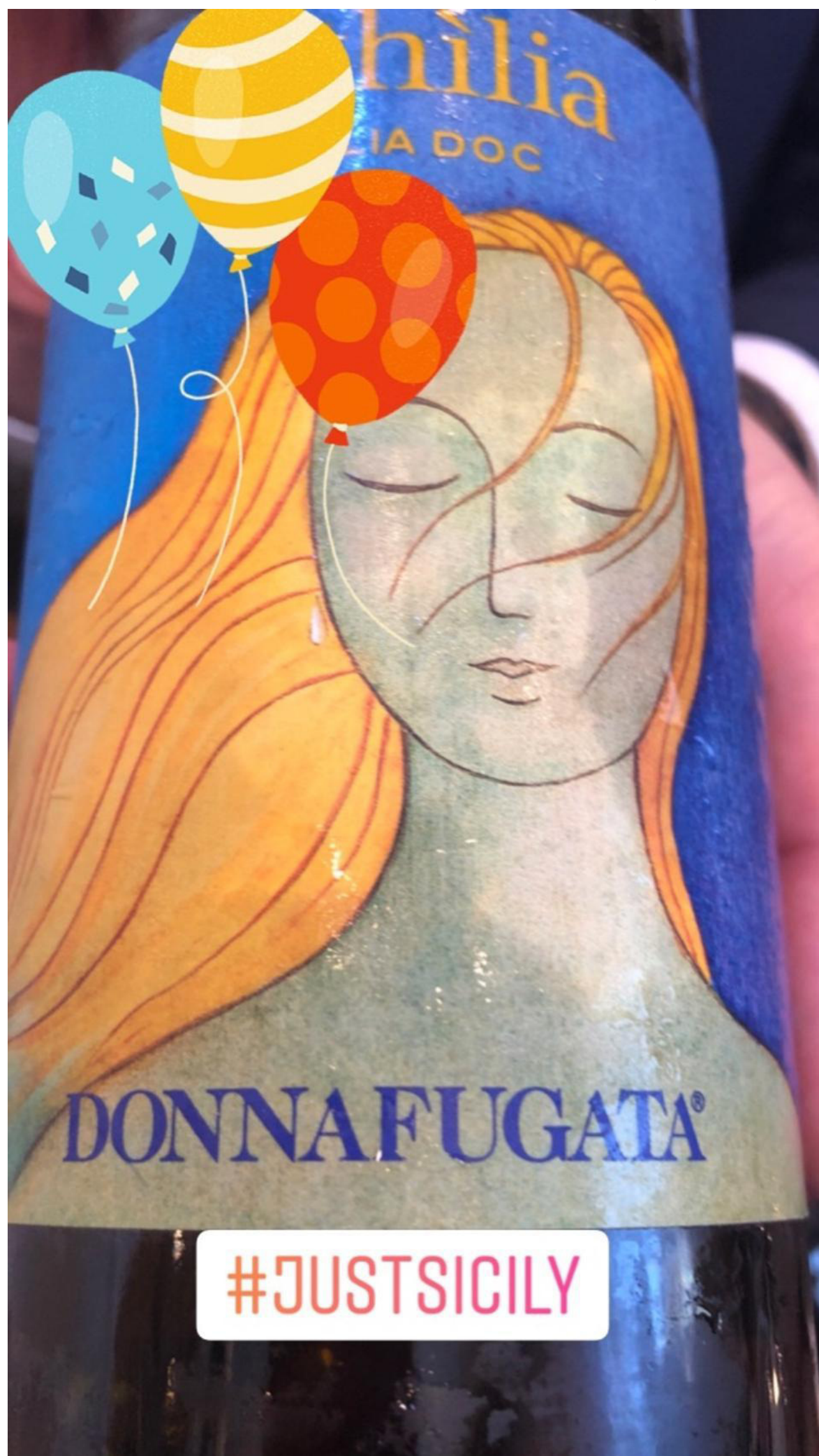


Tasting Sicilian Wine @MANCUINCA

Yet it wasn't long before Giuseppe Benanti became excited about the potential of reviving his family's vineyards on volcanic Mount Etna. He hired an agronomist and winemaker and began to make wine under his own label. According to many, Giuseppe Benanti paved the way for the new quality standards of Sicilian wine.

Donnafugata Winery

In 1983, Giacomo and Gabriella Rallo created Donnafugata, one of the first of the new wave of quality-oriented Sicilian wines. According to their daughter José, the 1980s were a time of change for Sicilian wines. "It was due in large part to modernization of equipment and new techniques to keep the wines fresh and aromatic."



Donnafugata Wine MARISA D'VARI

“Both my parents inherited vineyards,” José explains. “But it took them ten years to really get the brand off the ground. The name Donnafugata refers to a popular, very literary Italian novel by Tomasi di Lampedusa, titled *Il Gattopardo* (The Leopard). Set in 19th century Italy, it features a queen who found refuge in the part of Sicily where the company’s vineyards are located today.

José says that the company name, “Donnafugata,” refers to that novel and can be loosely translated as “woman in flight.” That literary adventure also inspired the corporate logo, depicting the image of a woman’s head with windblown hair,

that dominates every bottle. Today the wines are sold in a variety restaurants and fine wine shops around the world.'



José Rallo of Donnafugata Wine MARISA D'VARI

Casa Vinicola Fazio

Lilly Ferro Fazio is another is another energetic member of Assovinì Sicilia. The Fazio vineyards are located in the town of Erice, in the northwestern province of Trapani in Sicily.



Lilly Ferro Fazio of Fazio Wine MARISA D'VARI

In the 1980s, Lilly's husband, with the help of his brother, decided to stop the bulk wine production started by their parents and focus on quality wine. They bought new machines, built a new cellar, and replanted the vineyards. Today Fazio is one of the best recognized wines of Sicily, the result of many decades of hard work.

Sommeliers and Influencers

Given these significant improvements, many sommeliers and wine influencers are increasingly discovering the fine wine of Sicily. Michael Madrigale, partner in the wine app Grande Cuvee and former sommelier at Bar Boulud in Manhattan, says, "I went to Italy in 2013 to discover what these wines are all about. Sicily is one of those places with indigenous grapes, and incredible terrior and elevation. It's like the Garden of Eden. And the wines are delicious." When asked why he thinks Sicilian wines are becoming so popular today, he says, "People are now looking for authenticity more than a famous wine region. It took the Sicilians a long time to establish their new reputation for quality wines. Now the market is telling them people are willing to spend more money for quality."



Sommeliers pouring Sicilian Wine @MANCUINCA

Sommeliers like Michael Madrigale are in the position to change the wine buying habits of their consumers by suggesting new regions. This is also true of wine writers as well as people who are referred to as “social influencers.” By posting photos of their wine-related travels on Instagram and other social networks, they can open minds when it comes to showing what is new in the world of wine. International wine influencer Georgia Panagopoulou is founder of Wine Gini and has a Master of Science in Wine Management from the OIV (The International Organization of Vine and Wine). Georgia also specializes in digital communication strategies for wineries. She feels the time is right for Sicilian wine.

“Sicily is an island full of history, diversity, flavors, culture and amazing wines. Before visiting Sicily, most of my experience of tasting Sicilian wines had to do with wines from Mount Etna. But Sicily has so many different regions and varieties! Grillo, Catarratto, Inzolia, Nerello Cappuccio, Perricone, Nerello Mascalese to name only a few. Let's not forget it's the biggest island in the Mediterranean.”

Where to Buy Sicilian Wine

Sicilian wines are available in fine wine shops and restaurants all over the United States. The more popular red wines are Nero d’Avola with its bold, fruit driven flavors, and Nerello Mascalese from the volcanic soil of Mount Etna with smoky flavors. Grillo and Cattarato are popular white varieties and sommelier favorites. Grillo is fresh and easy drinking, but has a rich, savory quality that goes great with food, especially fish. Cattarato offers crisp acidity and a pure lemon aroma.

A New Quality Standard

Yes, there is a new quality standard in Sicily. You can taste it in the wines of the quality-focused members of the Assovinì Sicilia and other producers who have this goal.

Currently, Sicilian wine remains one of the best price for quality values in the market today. Yet it may not stay that way for long!

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Marisa D'Vari Contributor

With a winemaking diploma from UC Davis, an English Literature degree from UCLA, and a diploma in gastronomy from the University of Reims (France), it’s natural that I l... **Read More**