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Wines From Mount Etna, A New Adventure For Sicilian Wine Producer Donnafugata



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Lifestyle



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The wine bottles of producer Donnafugata are striking. On each label is an image of a woman’s head with windblown hair. The woman is morphed with a volcano. It is not only colourful; each label also tells a story. Donnafugata is a well-known producer on the Italian island of Sicily. We met José and Antonio Rallo on Zoom. They are the second generation in charge and we talked about their wines from Etna and taste the new vintage, 2018.

Giacomo Rallo founded Donnafugata in 1983 in Marsala, on the west coast of Sicily. With a total of 1,000 acres, the family Rallo makes wines also on the island of Pantelleria, in Vittoria in the south-eastern part of Sicily, and on Mount Etna, the volcano.



Landscape with vineyards on Mount Etna, Sicily, Italy, copyright BKWine Photography BKWINE PHOTOGRAPHY

“We started investing in Etna in 2016”, says Antonio Rallo, “and we now have almost 52 acres, all on DOC Etna land and all on the northern slopes of the volcano. It rains less here than on the other sides of the mountain slopes as we are protected against cold currents from the north, which favours a regular ripening.”

Etna, at 10,912 feet, is the highest active volcano in Europe. It erupts regularly; the most recent one was in March 2021. Etna DOC was established in 1968 as the first DOC (*denominazione di origine controllata*) in Sicily. The vineyard area around Etna covers the north, east and south slopes of the volcano. It is a mountain area, and the climate differs substantially from other vineyards in Sicily; it rains more, and there’s snow in the winter. But the spring is mild, and the summer is warm; however, with important day and night temperature differences which give the wines both freshness and finesse.

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The soil is, of course volcanic, but very varied, composed of lava from different eruptions over a long time. In general, it is sandy, porous soil with good drainage. The vines, often trained as bush vines, called *alberello* in Italian, are planted with high density. Some vineyards are on terraces with walls built with dry lava stone. “It is a labour-intensive viticulture,” says Antonio.

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Antonio Rallo co-owner of Donnafugata, Sicily, copyright BKWine Photography BKWINE PHOTOGRAPHY

“There is an incredible degree of diversity inside the vineyards”, says Pietro Russo, oenologist at Donnafugata. This diversity has given rise to specific plots called *contrada* or *cru*. Donnafugata makes two prestigious contrada wines: Marchesa in the area of Castiglione di Sicilia, and Montelaguardia in Randozza, situated far west on the northern slope.

These two contrada wines from vintage 2018 will be released after the summer (2021). 2018 was a challenging year, colder and rainier than usual. The grapes needed to be sorted carefully. The quality was high nevertheless, and the upside of a cooler year is the more pronounced freshness.



Etna Doc Rosso Contrada Marchesa 2018, Donnafugata, Sicily, copyright BKWine Photography BKWINE PHOTOGRAPHY

Etna Doc Rosso Contrada Marchesa 2018, Donnafugata, Sicily

It is a superb and complex wine with concentration, elegance and length. It has nuanced aromas of tobacco, raspberries and fresh herbs. The tannins are smooth, and you can drink this wine with pleasure already. The acidity is refreshing and adds to the structure.

In 2018, Donnafugata made 5,336 bottles and 208 magnums of Contrada Marchesa from a plot of 5 acres only. The grapes grow at an altitude of 2,460 feet in lava soil with a sandy texture. The vineyard is formed like a natural amphitheatre. It is sunny but breezy. The wine ages in older oak barrels for 14 months and stays 18 months in bottle before being released.



Nerello mascalese grapes on Mount Etna, Sicily, Italy, copyright BKWine Photography BKWINE PHOTOGRAPHY

The grapes grown on Etna are local. The main red variety is Nerello Mascalese which is often blended with a small percentage of Nerello Cappuccio. A Nerello Mascalese wine is often exquisite and sometimes it makes me think of Pinot Noir. You can find it in other regions, but it is rare. “Nerello Mascalese loves the Etna soil, the Etna climate, the cold nights; these conditions are not easily found in the rest of Sicily”, says Antonio.

Fragore 2018, Etna DOC Rosso Contrada Montelaguardia, Donnafugata

Quite full-bodied and very elegant with a long and persistent taste. Spicy, complex aromas and hints of medicinal herbs. It’s tasty and delicious. It spends time in oak barrels, but as they are 2-3 years old, the oak flavours stay in the background. The production is small, with only 3,076 bottles and 51 magnums. (84,99 USD)

“The soil here in Montelaguardia comes from a lava eruption in 1614-24, it was an eruption that lasted ten years, and the soil has a particular mineral composition”, says Pietro Russo. “It is also slightly warmer here, which means early ripening.”

More Etna wines from Donnafugata:

Sul Vulcano 2018, Etna Bianco DOC, Donnafugata, Sicily

Etna also has a local white grape variety, Carricante. It is a grape that is more or less unique for Etna. Sul Vulcano shows a pleasant, fresh nose of green apples, white fruit, citrus, melon, peaches and fresh herbs. It is long on the palate, with a good body. The wine spends ten months in French oak barrels and another ten months in bottle before release. (29,99 USD)

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Sul Vulcano 2018, Etna Bianco DOC, Donnafugata, Sicily, copyright BKWine Photography BKWINE PHOTOGRAPHY

Dea Vulcano 2018, Etna Rosso DOC, Donnafugata, Sicily

Here the vines are young (as opposed to the 70-year-old vines used for the contrada wines), enhancing the fresh and fruity character. It is light in style but, as always, with Nerello Mascalese, elegant, with red berry aromas, tobacco, and also a bit floral and peppery. A refreshing, juicy finish. It has aged for 14 months, partly in stainless steel tank and partly in oak.


Sul Vulcano 2017, Etna Rosso DOC, Donnafugata, Sicily

An attractive combination of dark cherries, violets and a good structure with tannins and freshness. The colour is light, but don't be misled, the aromas are intense. And it is definitely a food wine; to be enjoyed with Mediterranean specialities. (29,99 USD)

Donnafugata means escaping woman. The name appears in the novel The Leopard (*Il Gattopardo*) by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa that takes place in Sicily in the 19th century. Luchino Visconti made it into an equally famous film starring Burt Lancaster and Claudia Cardinale. In that same part of Sicily the Donnafugata company now has some of its vineyards. “For us”, says José, “it symbolizes a winery looking forward, towards the future” reflecting one of the themes of the film.

The wines with prices in USD are available in the US through Folio Fine Wine Partners.

—**Britt Karlsson**



Per and Britt Karlsson

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