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# A Wine Family In Sicily, Italy Continues Their Father's Dream Of Volcanic Vineyards

**Cathrine Todd** Contributor ⓘ

Spirits

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When dreaming of escaping to a remote island, images of white sandy beaches and pockets of lush tropical plants often spring to mind yet that is not always the case for everyone; as Giacomo Rallo, founder of the famous Sicilian wine producer [Donnafugata](#), dreamt of Pantelleria, the largest volcanic satellite island of Sicily - a desolate place where very few things could grow. In the late 1980s, the Rallo family, who owns Donnafugata,

built a winery on this unique place that was covered with rugged rocks and crumbling ancient stone walls that only slightly impede the unrelenting fierce wind and hence it is an inhospitable place that makes anything outside of vines, that are grown low to the ground like tiny bushes, and the famous Pantelleria capers, that grow wild between the rocks, impossible to grow. In the wine world, the Donnafugata commitment, that has lasted over 20 years, to the Pantelleria extreme viticulture is well-known and from it they make an extraordinary sweet wine, Ben Ryé - from the Arabic word meaning the “Son of the Wind”. Ben Ryé is certainly not the wine that keeps their winery financially sustainable but it was an important dream of the patriarch of the family.



Ondine Pond in Pantelleria, Sicily  
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In the 1970s, Giacomo Rallo, a fourth generation family winemaker, was looking into buying vineyard land on Mount Etna but once he and his wife Gabriella, a pioneering viticulturist in her own right, started their own

winery, Donnafugata in 1983, they were faced with choosing between investing in Pantelleria or Etna, as doing both would be financial suicide, so they choose to invest in Pantelleria and those investments still continue today with maintaining the ancient stone walls, keeping the highly labor intensive traditional alberello pantesco training system for the vines and establishing an experimental vineyard containing 33 biotypes of Zibibbo (Muscat of Alexandria) – the grape variety that makes their crown jewel Ben Ryé.

Although Donnafugata has certainly become one of the most successful wineries in Sicily, showcasing various wine areas and native grapes within this Italian wine region, there was always Giacomo Rallo’s unrealized dream - making wine from the vineyards located on the volcano of Mount Etna; and since



Antonio Rallo in Their Etna Vineyards  
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the passing of Giacomo in 2016, that unfulfilled dream has become more important to achieve for his wife as well as his son Antonio and his daughter José who both run Donnafugata today.

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## Mount Etna



Mount Etna Volcano Eruption GETTY

The wines of Mount Etna have certainly captured the hearts of many U.S. sommeliers and Italian wine aficionados who are equally as taken by the compelling aromatics and overall elegance of many of the wines as they are by the idea that such wines

come from one of the world's most active volcanoes. There are many vineyard areas in the world that can certainly make a case for growing wine grapes under extreme conditions and Pantelleria makes the top of the list but considering Etna has had a [series of eruptive episodes](#) just this year alone it takes the idea of extreme conditions to a new level.

Mt. Etna has some similarities to Pantelleria as there are many terraces with dry lava walls that are recognized by UNESCO as is Pantelleria with its dry stone walls and unique trellising system is likewise recognized; in Pantelleria there were old vines, some over 100 years old, that Donnafugata has not only protected but they have brought back the traditional practices of growing them similarly to another project they have with converting all their old vineyards on Etna to their original form of



Etna Dry Stone Wall in the Donnafugata Vineyards GAMBINA

cultivation which is the etnean alberello, another bush training system for vines that is specific to Etna, taking two to three years to accomplish this conversion for each section of a vineyard.

Donnafugata bought vineyards on the northern side of Etna that are around and above 2,400 feet in altitude in the municipality of Castiglione di Sicilia within the Randazzo area where Donnafugata has their Etna winery, Marchesa area and Verzella area that are then divided up among six districts; all in the Etna DOC designated areas for quality wine. When it comes to the fear of having these vineyards destroyed by future lava flows, Antonio Rallo, who oversees the vineyards and winemaking for Donnafugata, said that the recent lava flows haven't happened where most of the vineyards are planted on Etna and he can only think of recent incidences, a couple times in the 1980s, where vineyards were destroyed and the section of the volcano where Donnafugata bought vineyards hasn't had any issues in modern times, so for the most part they think they are safe.



Harvest in Contrada Montelaguardia  
GAMBINA

If growing old vines in traditional ways on a consistently active volcano was not already an enormous challenge for the Rallo family, trying to understand and study the idea of the various recognized single vineyard cru, called contrada in Etna (meaning 'subdivision' in Italian),

offers an exciting new challenge. Contrade not only have varying micro-climates as many times producers can have vineyards at very different levels of altitude but the same producer could be dealing with soils from different plots that have **up to 30,000 years difference** when it comes to determining when the soils were formed. Each of these contrada, single vineyards, were formed by a particular lava flow and has been determined to give a distinctive sense of place, and that sense of place in the soil is traced back to that one event making it a very unique plot unlike many of

the other cru distinctions made between vineyards within the same appellation.

## Fulfilling the Dream of One Who Inspired Others to Live Their Dream

Antonio said that when a friend of his heard about them investing into Etna, after all the money they have continually placed into their Pantelleria project, the friend told him that he and his sister José should just get bought out by a larger company as they may be taking on too much and Antonio



José Rallo in Their Etna Vineyards

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completely understood his friend's point but some things in life cannot be explained by the mind but can only be expressed by the heart.

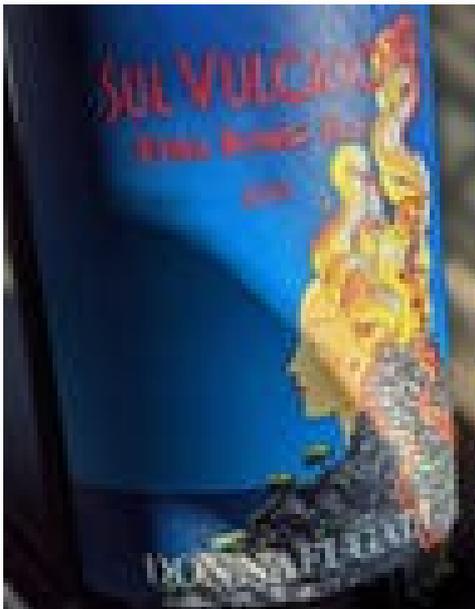
And Antonio's father, Giacomo Rallo, was an unconventional man for his time with first believing in his wife as a viticulturalist when others in Sicily thought it was madness to allow a woman to run the vineyards and then telling his daughter José when she was young to work in marketing for bigger companies, as she had a gift for storytelling like her father, so she could come back and teach them how to market their wines better outside of Sicily. Giacomo seemed like a true visionary that went beyond what conventions dictated and as Antonio spoke about the realities of taking on such a project, especially considering they already do extreme viticulture in Pantelleria, there was a sparkle in his eyes and a knowing smile that conveyed that sometimes one just needs to take that irrational leap. And the man who was part of putting Sicilian wines on the map by believing in his wife and kids is honored by them finally fulfilling that other dream to take on Etna and preserve its winemaking heritage.





2018 Donnafugata 'Sul Vulcano' Etna Bianco DOC CATHRINE TODD

2018 Donnafugata 'Sul Vulcano' Etna Bianco DOC: 100% Carricante. An enchanting white Etna wine with apricots and fresh mineral aromas highlighted with an aromatic lemon blossom note that was energetic on the palate with lots of acidity that has a smoky minerality that lingers on the finish. Antonio said that 2018 was a colder and rainier year than average that enhanced the aromatic quality.



2017 Donnafugata 'Sul Vulcano' Etna Rosso DOC CATHRINE TODD

2017 Donnafugata 'Sul Vulcano' Etna Rosso DOC: Mostly Nerello Mascalese with some Nerello Cappuccio.

Medium ruby color of the core of this Etna red with light garnet edges that had a complex nose of forest floor, dark cherries, fresh thyme and violets that had a rich concentration of fruit in the mid-palate with plenty of juiciness yet still had that overall finesse that one expects on the body of an Etna Rosso. Antonio said that 2017 was a warmer and drier year

than average and he thought it was ideal for phenolic (skins and seeds) ripeness.

2017 Donnafugata 'Fragore' Etna Rosso DOC: 100% Nerello Mascalese. This is a single vineyard site called Contrada Montelaguardia and José said the name



of this wine 'Fragore' means energy so it represents the moment the volcano

2017 Donnafugata 'Fragore' Etna Rosso  
DOC CATHRINE TODD

erupts. This vineyard is at 2,400 feet in altitude and the soil dates back to a volcanic eruption that ranges between 1614-1624 and it consists of vines that are over 70 years old and some of the vines have already been converted back to the traditional etnean alberello training system; the vineyard is surrounded by a forest so it tends to have a milder micro-climate. Aromas of smoldering earth right off the bat with nutmeg spice and red currants and the wine really evolved in the glass getting even more complex with dried porcini and hints of tar with a palate that has precisely chiseled fine tannins that give focus and drive to the finish.

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**Cathrine Todd**

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