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1 Wine Dude

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for the not-so-serious drinker



JOE ROBERTS



Wine In the Time of Coronavirus, Part 47: Volcanizing (Donnafugata Mt. Etna Recent Releases) 5 min read

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in *crowd pleaser wines, elegant wines, wine review*



Antonio & Jose Rallo (image: Donnafugata)

At this point, it might feel as though I've written *too* often about the irrepressible Sicilian producer Donnafugata. Seriously, just check the archives... it's getting a bit ridiculous...

Not that they don't deserve it, mind you. After all, they've hosted me a handful of times both in Marsala and Pantelleria, and without a doubt are one of the most prodigious quality producers in Sicily (if not all of Italy), and a tireless promoting machine for the wines of Italy's largest island. For the 47th (whoa!) remote Zoom-type tasting that I've attended during pandemic sheltering-in-place, the host was (you saw this coming) Donnafugata (specifically, the brother and sister family team of Antonio & Jose Rallo), who this time turned their promotional high-beams on their releases from Mt. Etna (at almost 11,000 feet above sea level, the highest active volcano in all of Europe).



The Etna DOC was established in 1968, and covers only about 2,700 acres (or roughly 1% of Sicilian wine country). Ample sunlight and a continental climate match with soils come from *sciare* lava flows (which I've "surfed" before, glass in hand – see inset pic) that decompose into a sandy, porous mixture that's great for stressing vines into producing premium fruit. Combined with traditional terracing, all of this makes viticulture on Etna

both high-payoff and labor-intensive. And, as you've probably experienced if you've been to a restaurant in a major city before (or even during) lockdown, Etna is capable of producing wines that get hipster sommeliers worked into an almost orgasmic frenzy.



The author, surfin' *sciare* on Mt. Etna

Donnafugata's vines are planted about 2,500 feet in elevation on Etna, but are relegated only to the northern slope. As Rallo explained, "in this area, we get much less rain, which is very important. We've got the most dry place in Mt. Etna," located within just a three mile span between Randazzo and Solicchiata.

Will Donnafugata's Etna explorations get sommeliers into rapture territory? based on what we tasted, and as the Magic 8-Ball would tell you, "signs point to YES"...



2018 Donnafugata 'Sul Vulcano' Etna Bianco (Sicily, \$35)

According to the Rallos, 2018 was a colder, wetter vintage for Etna, producing aromatic grapes that were protected from too much moisture by the position of their plantings on the mountainside. Lower yields resulted, which “is something we’ve come to expect, especially on Etna” Antonio told us. This Carricante (my personal fave Sicilian variety, not that you needed to know that) spends 10 months in 2nd & 3rd pass oak barriques. Green herbs, fresh citrus, wet stone, fennel, dried flower petal... I just loved the nose on this, which comes off as perfumed with great lime notes. Golden and yellow apples and grapefruit flavors all make appearances. Speakign of love, I also fell for the tinges of smoke and roasted almond on the super-fresh and mineral palate. It’s a great combo of roundness, refreshing acidity, and understated elegance.



2018 Donnafugata 'Sul Vulcano' Etna Rosso (Sicily, \$40)

This crowd-pleasing red is a blend of Nerello Mascalese and a bit of Nerello Cappuccio, sitting 12 months in 2nd & 3rd pass French oak. Wild red berries, earth, baking spices, and dried violets mark an immediately likeable nose. In the mouth, it’s bouncy with acidity, and juicy with red berry fruit action. The spices and wild herb notes linger in a lovely finish. Delicious, and very difficult to put down.



2017 Donnafugata 'Fragore' Contrada Montelaguardia Etna Rosso (Sicily, \$85)

This 100% Nerello Mascalese is named after the sound of a Mt. Etna eruption. From a warm and dry vintage, with a snowy January providing plenty of water, this single district “contrade” release comes from plantings in which Donnafugata is bringing back original *alberello* training systems. Each parcel is hand-harvested and vinified separately. The vineyard sits at 2,400 feet elevation, and is only about 10 acres large in Randazzo, with lava soils dating back to the early 1600s – all protected by surrounding forests, creating a milder climate (and thus promoting earlier ripening).

Wild red berries abound once again, and are augmented by some lovely florals. Dried herbs, baking spice, dried rose petals and violets, earthy notes, some leather and smoke follow up the main berry performance. Mineral and fresh in the mouth, those red berry fruits get JUICY one this hits your tongue. Structure is very good here, with a nice tension against the more supple edges of the wine. “The goal is harmony” according to Jose. With a finish like this, they are scoring on goal, indeed. It’s a unique – and food-friendly – representation of a very unique place. Jose’s recommended pairing – “a passionate, energetic dance; the Tango!” (just try that before imbibing too many glasses...).

Cheers!



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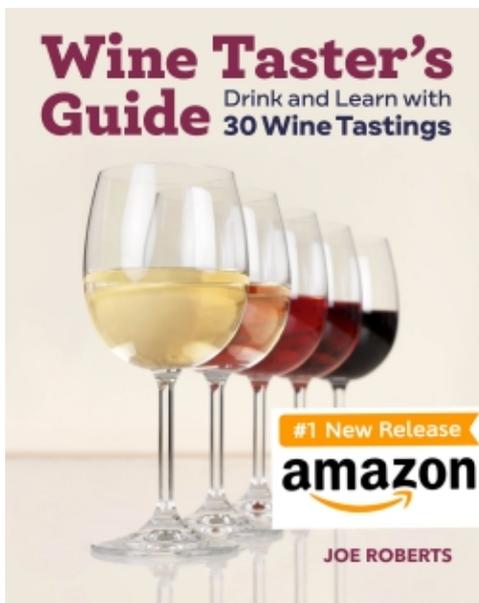


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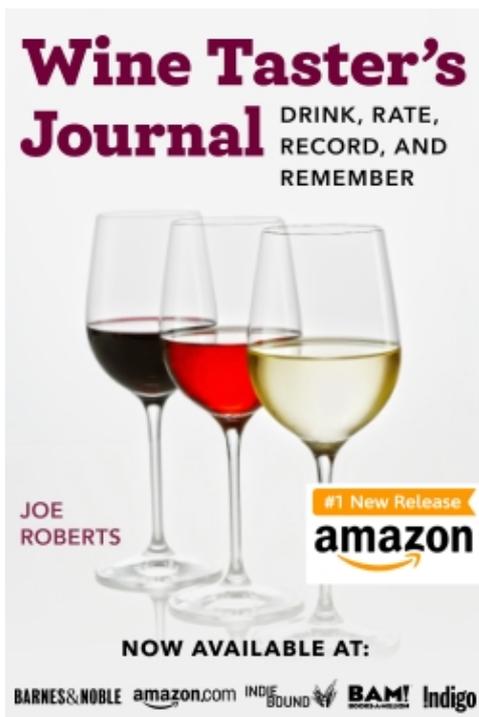
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