



PANTELLERIA

Desertus et asperrimus locus: the austere but increasingly popular island is home to some of Italy's most sensuous wines. **Stephen Brook** explores its rugged vineyards and identifies the best producers in a range of styles

Photography by Enrica Figieris, courtesy of Donnalugata

Although it's become a fashionable resort for the super-rich, the island of Pantelleria does not, at first glance, make the heart soar. An austere place, its shores and slopes are scattered with volcanic rubble. Rambling stone walls form terraces where a few crops, such as vines, capers, and vegetables, can be cultivated, but those walls are dark, rugged, and forbidding. The traditional Pantellerian garden, or *jardinu*, is a small area encircled by high stone walls, built to protect the interior from harsh and constant winds. In the center of the garden there usually stands a citrus tree that provides shade, as well as fruit. Seneca described the island as *desertus et asperimus locus*.

Yet from Pantelleria comes one of Italy's most sensuous wines; the rich yet delectable Passito di Pantelleria. The grape variety is Muscat of Alexandria, known here as Zibibbo, a word of Arabic origin. This should come as no surprise, given the proximity of the island to the Tunisian coast. The soils are mostly volcanic pumice. Given the climate, a grower's first concern is to protect the bunches from both sun and wind. The plants are cultivated as bush vines (*albarello*), as in many other scorchingly hot places. But before planting, the farmer digs a small pit. Like the stone walls of the *jardinu*, this protects the plant from strong winds. The branches then sprawl, spiderweb-like, across the soil. Costs of production are very high—partly for obvious reasons, such as the age of the vines, the necessity for hand labor, and naturally low yields, but also because rabbits munch about one tenth of the crop each year.

From planting to production

In the 1920s, almost 6,000ha (15,000 acres) of vineyards grew on the island. Today, there are around 560ha (1,384 acres), farmed by 400 growers. Most vineyard plots are small and scattered, making economies of scale difficult. However, some larger producers, such as Donnafugata and Pellegrino, have planted larger vineyards or consolidated existing ones.

Much of the crop is made into dry white wine, mostly consumed by tourists visiting the island. Drunk cold, it's pleasant enough, but the palate soon yearns for other aromas and flavors. In the 1960s and 1970s, the cooperative that then dominated production also made sparkling Zibibbo. Its best-known *passito* was called Tanit, but this was in fact *liquoroso*, which means that it was fortified. Today, the majority of *passito* wines from here are unfortified. It's unlikely that there was a golden age for Passito di Pantelleria. Munzio Gorgone, who manages the Carole Bouquet property, recalls that in the not-so-distant past it was difficult to control the fermentation, and inexperienced winemakers usually ended up with undrinkable wines.

No rain falls between March and September at the earliest, so the vines rely on dew as their source of moisture. This humidity descends during the night from the mountains, and cavities within the pumice soils absorb the dew and nourish the vines. Pantelleria, being volcanic and quite mountainous, has many elevations and expositions, all of which affect the character of the grapes from each site. The veteran producer Salvatore Murana believes that soil is more important than vine age.

As with all *passito* wines, the fundamental stage is the *appassimento*, the drying of the grapes, which are picked as ripe, healthy bunches from late August. The traditional—and some say only—way to dry the grapes is to lay them on straw or wooden trays for around two weeks, turning the bunches to

ensure even drying on all sides. Vines planted close to the sea ripen first and can attain very high sugar levels; some growers prize these grapes especially. Fruit from higher sites may produce more nuanced wines with higher acidity, and larger producers often seek to blend wines from different locations. For smaller growers, that is not possible.

Monitoring the drying process takes skill, since there are various stages of *appassimento*. Full raisining can take three or even four weeks. That may bring higher sugar levels, but it also reduces the volume substantially, which has an economic impact on production. An intermediate stage is known as *passolata*, which after ten days or two weeks results in semi-dried grapes, clearly concentrated by the drying process but still containing a reasonable volume of juice. Murana argues that *passolata* grapes maintain freshness in the final wine. It is simply a matter of individual choice, depending on the style of wine each producer is seeking. Another variable is the quantity of dried grapes added to the Zibibbo base wine during fermentation.

Traditional producers dry the grapes directly under the heat of the sun. There is no need to shelter the bunches, since rain is extremely unlikely to fall during the *appassimento*. Nonetheless, many growers place the bunches close to a stone wall, which also reflects heat, and rig up a simple shelter from plastic sheets just in case the clouds open.

However, some leading wineries such as Donnafugata and De Bartoli use a combination of open-air drying and drying within long tunnels composed of plastic sheeting. As well as protecting the bunches from the rain that isn't likely to fall, it also has a greenhouse effect that accelerates the drying process. The rules allow such tunnels to be used when there is a threat of bad weather. Since a threat is perceived rather than announced, that allows growers considerable leeway. But few tasters complain about the quality of the wines from Donnafugata or De Bartoli.

Drying machines, however, are not permitted. Nonetheless, I saw one in action at the Pellegrino winery. The explanation seems to be that most of their production is of *liquoroso*, and different rules apply to fortified *passito*. *Passito liquoroso* is also, in my experience, an inferior product, often showing a coarseness not present in a fine Passito di Pantelleria. Pellegrino's best wine is not the *Liquoroso* but the scarcer *Passito Nes*.

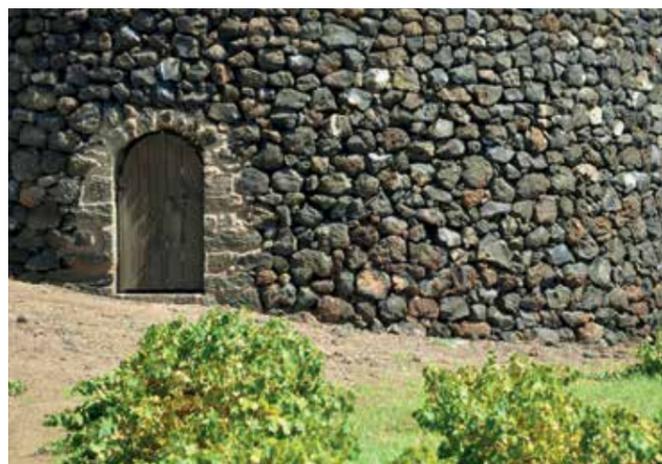
Passion for passito

Much *passito* is bottled young, but there are exceptions: De Bartoli's celebrated Bukkuram comes from 5ha (12 acres), and after the *appassimento*, the must is fermented for about six

Photography by Fabio Gambino / Anna Palusa / P. Scaldi; courtesy of Donnafugata



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months and aged for two years in older barriques. The first vintage I tasted was the 1986, and the wine has altered little in style or quality since then. It is always among the richest *passito* wines, yet it never lacks zest.

Just as celebrated as Bukkuram is Ben Ryé from Donnafugata. Based in Marsala, the company produces a wide range of dry wines from its vineyards in western Sicily. But its wines from Pantelleria are more than a sideline. The Rallo family own 68ha (168 acres) on the island in 12 locations, and 7 of those hectares (17 acres) are planted with ungrafted centenarian vines. The soils are mostly sandy and volcanic, but elevation varies from 65ft to 1,300ft (20–400m).

Antonio Rallo says they vinify their sites separately but always find blends best. Kabir is the Moscato di Pantelleria, which is distinct from the Moscato Passito; made simply from very ripe grapes, Kabir is relatively light and unoaked. For Ben Ryé, the *appassimento* lasts some 25 days, most in greenhouses, the sides lifted during the day; the bunches

extraordinary wine that resembles an old Rutherglen Muscat in its viscosity, its fig and caramel flavors, and its extreme pungency and length.

A growing industry

Murana is deeply embedded in the island. Other wineries are more recent ventures, reflecting growing demand for *passito*. Calogero Mannino founded Abraxas as a hobby winery, but since 2000 it has operated commercially. Like Antonio Rallo, he has employed the services of Professor Attilio Scienza from Milan to select the best clones of Zibibbo. Mannino is a former agriculture minister, and on my visit to Abraxas he talked about his winery while minions dashed around the cellar extracting tank samples for the visitors to taste. But the wines, from air-dried grapes, are excellent, at the more elegant end of the *passito* spectrum.

Dietro l'Isola has also been producing wine since 2000, and owner Salvino Gorgone is unusual in that his winery only makes *passito*. His vines are in various sites and aged from 10 to 40 years old. The renowned Italian enologist Donato Lanati is his consultant. After a 20-day *appassimento*, the must is fermented for 30 days, with the addition of 88lb (40kg) of dried grapes to each 26.4 US gallons (100 liters). The wine is unoaked.

Coste Ghirlanda was founded as recently as 2009 by Giulia Pazienza Gelmetti, a financier from Milan. She, too, has a celebrated consultant, Lorenzo Landi. Her *passito* is from air-dried grapes, fermented with the must for three months, then aged two years in steel tanks. Production is fairly limited, and the *passito* is made in a rich caramel and date style.

are more enclosed during the night so that nocturnal humidity doesn't provoke rot. In September, overripe Zibibbo grapes are picked, and during their fermentation, batches of dried grapes are added in various stages. About 150lb (70kg) of dried grapes are added for each 26.4 US gallons (100 liters) of must, and when the wine appears to need more acidity, they select dried grapes grown at higher altitudes. The fermentation, using selected yeasts, takes about 45 days, and temperatures are kept low so as to prevent the alcohol racing upward. Ben Ryé is unoaked.

For Fabrizio Basile, *passito* is a real passion. "I was making this wine when I was a schoolboy of 14, and I sold it in plastic water bottles to my teachers. As an adult, I became an administrator but then gave it up to return to winemaking on a professional basis." His method is to add dried grapes to the must when it begins fermenting; for each 26.4 US gallons, Basile adds 44–66lb (20–30kg) of dried grapes. He monitors the vinification to end up with around 140g of residual sugar. The wine is very good, but production is only 4,000 bottles.

Salvatore Murana trumps Basile in the infant winemaking contest, claiming to have snuck off from kindergarten at the age of four to help his grandfather make wine. Today he makes a range of *passito* wines from different sites. He owns 15ha (37 acres) of vines, many planted in 1932. All ferment very slowly, for as long as a year. That's about as much information as one can safely give about the wines, since Murana loves to hold forth but airily ignores anything resembling a technical question. Mueggen is his lightest wine and includes some purchased grapes; it is not aged as long as his single-vineyard wines, Khamma and Martingana. Occasionally there are one-offs, such as his 1976 Creato, a *passito* aged in wood until 2005 when the remaining liquid filled 1,500 bottles. It's an

It's easy to see the appeal of wine estates to showbiz celebrities, but few of those properties seem to make wines of interest. Carole Bouquet, however, is more serious than most. Once linked, enologically, to Gérard Depardieu, they have now gone their separate ways. In the 2000s, she bought vineyards belonging to Munzio Gorgone, brother of Salvino Gorgone of Dietra l'Isola; Munzio stays on as the manager of the property, and Donato Lanati is their consultant. The vineyards are high, at close to 1,300ft (400m), and the soils are 70/30 volcanic and clay. She only produces *passito*, and not every vintage.

Although Carole Bouquet was absent the morning I visited her property, it was soon clear that with Munzio Gorgone at the helm, it is in safe hands. Ask him a straight question, and you get a straight answer—which in Italy is not as common as one might think or hope. Here the grapes are air-dried for about 20 days and turned just once. The bunches lie on a layer of tuff stone that can absorb any humidity. As for the winemaking, Gorgone adds about 88lb of dried and *passolata* grapes to each 26.4 US gallons of must. The result is one of the finest, and probably the most elegant, of all *passito* wines from Pantelleria.

Pantelleria is not the only *passito* wine from Sicily. Moscato di Noto and Moscato di Siracusa are enjoying a revival, and the islands off the north coast of Sicily produce the variable but, at its best, superb Malvasia delle Lipari. However, for consistency and complexity, it's hard to beat Pantelleria. Only a few wines are disappointing—with signs of oxidation, heaviness, or excessive alcohol—and the general standard of winemaking is high. It is clear that the former standard-bearers such as Donnafugata and De Bartoli are now facing keen competition, and the growing market for these marvelous wines is the beneficiary. ■

TASTING NOTES

2009 Abraxas

Full gold. Very rich orange-and-fig nose, but not caramelly. Creamy and full-bodied, spicy and pungent, with good acidity, a forceful structure, and a very long orangey finish. | 18.5

2000 D'Ancona Cimilya

Bronze-gold. Apricot jam nose. Good attack, lean and bright, apricot fruit; rather simple, though concentrated. Moderate acidity and length. | 16.5

2008 De Bartoli Bukkuram

Full gold. Rich, heady nose, with aromas of peaches, dates, and honey. Very sweet and intense but with good acidity, and it has a brightness on the palate despite the richness. Marmalade and barley-sugar flavors, but still youthful, limpid, and long. | 18

2011 Basile Shamira

Medium gold. Opulent honeyed nose, peaches and barley sugar, quite evolved. Concentrated and almost raisiny, peaches and honey. Only moderate acidity, so it lacks some freshness and vigor. | 16.5

2012 Carole Bouquet

Gold. Lush orangey nose, quite floral. Medium-bodied, but sleek and intense; very concentrated, with fine acidity that favors finesse over opulence. Very long, peppery, persistent finish. | 18.5

2012 Coste Ghirlanda Alcova

Medium gold. Hefty caramel nose, dates and peaches. Quite full-bodied, suave and creamy, with moderate acidity. Flavors of apricot jam and dates, and a Seville orange finish. | 16.5

2010 Dietro l'Isola

Medium gold. Rich, honeyed, opulent nose. Distinctly sweet, concentrated, oranges and cream, bright and intense, with a very long, vigorous finish. | 18

2012 Donnafugata Ben Ryé

Medium gold. Vibrant nose, honey and peaches. Fine attack, lean and elegant, with fine acidity; mandarin and dried-apricot fruit. Has drive and purity, but still very youthful. Long. | 18

2009 Miceli Nun

Gold. Dusty apricot nose, quite honeyed. Lean and tight, concentrated, tangy flavors of dried apricot. Stylish if not showing much depth or weight. Quite long. | 17

2009 Minardi Karuscia

Medium gold. Opulent nose of honey and peach. Lean, fresh attack; stone-fruit flavors; quite good acidity. There's a hint of caramel, but it's not tiring. Quite long. | 16.5

2006 Murana Khamma

Bronze-gold. Caramel and figs on the nose. Rich and suave, concentrated and caramelly. High acidity gives tension, pungency, and intensity. Very long. | 18.5

2012 Pellegrino Nes

Medium gold. Lush marmalade and barley sugar on the nose. Very sweet on the palate but balanced by high acidity; a bit sharp, intense but not very subtle, with more barley sugar on the finish. Good length. | 16.5

Clockwise from top left: harvest-time in September; steep terraced vineyards; grapes during *appassimento*; (next two) Donnafugata cellars and vineyards.

Photography by Fabio Gambino / Anna Pakula, courtesy of Donnafugata