

Donnafugata looks to export markets for growth

By Josephine McKenna

Donnafugata is a Sicilian success story – a wine producer that has created an international profile and exports that account for a growing share of its business.

‘We have succeeded to link the local with the global market,’ says Jose Rallo, who runs the company with her parents Giacomo and Gabriella and brother Antonio.

The company generated an annual turnover of more than 14 million euros in 2011.

While around 21 percent of the company’s wine sales were in the Sicilian market, 79 percent of Donnafugata’s wine was sold in the rest of Italy and abroad.

Donnafugata is rooted in Sicilian history since the company began producing marsala since 1851.

The company name , which literally means ‘woman in flight’, refers to Queen Maria Carolina, wife of King Ferdinand IV, who fled to Sicily from Naples after Napoleon’s troops invaded the city in the early 1800s.

The queen apparently sought refuge in the area of the southern island where the company’s vineyards are found today and inspired the winery’s logo, the image of a woman with windswept hair, now found on every bottle.

Rallo, the company’s spokesman, said when Donnafugata experienced a decline in the 1980s her father, Giacomo, was looking for a way to regenerate the business.

He and his wife travelled to the US and looked at how wine was produced in California.

When he returned to Sicily he began to rebuild his business based on what he learned.

From the company’s historic wine cellars in Marsala, the family added the sweet wines produced on the island of Pantelleria and slowly built a business that spans different regions of Sicily today.

Donnafugata ‘s international focus has started to pay off. The company has 328 hectares of vineyards including 260 at Contessa Entellina near Marsala and 68 on Pantelleria.

The company grows grapes in seven different locations to maximise the value and character of the grape varieties and now has 80 employees involved in both wine cultivation, promotion and marketing.

Donnafugata is known for its diverse range of wines, made with native varietals such as Ansonica (also known as Inzolia), Catarratto, Zibbibo and Nero d'Avola as well as Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon.

Rallo stresses that Donnafugata is committed to further expansion as well as ecological sustainability.

The company is also expanding its enotourism. The wine cellar at Marsala is open year round while visitors can see the vineyards and the cellars at Contessa Entellina and on Pantelleria in the summer months.

Donnafugata says its famous night harvest which takes place in August every year has developed a cult following and the company also stages concerts at the Marsala winery.

Rallo and her husband Vincenzo Favara both share a love of music and singing.

Over the years Donnafugata has held concerts starring Pat Metheny, Manhattan Transfer and John Scofield at the Marsala winery and has inspired Journey to Donnafugata, the jazz arrangement of the music from the Italian movie classic, *Il Gattopardo*.

In 2002 Donnafugata Music & Wine Live was created in collaboration with a group of friends with a passion for music and concerts have been held at the Blue Note in Milan, the Blue Note in New York and in Beijing and Shanghai.

LA FAUCI CHANGING THE TASTE OF SICILIAN WINE

By Josephine McKenna

When Enza La Fauci began producing wine on a picturesque hill overlooking the Straits of Messina, she chose a mermaid to decorate her label.

The winemaker wanted to recall the mermaids or ‘sirens’ in Homer’s legendary poem, the Odyssey, who sang to Ulysses in an attempt to lure his sailors to the rocks as they travelled through the historic straits.

La Fauci established Tenuta Enza La Fauci in 2004 and the label has become one of the most recognised in northern Sicily.

‘I had a huge desire to be a winemaker,’ La Fauci told ANSA as she looked across at her vineyards.

‘I went to my father and asked him for six hectares of land and he said ‘What do you think you are doing?’ At first he said no.’

La Fauci said her father, who had built a successful construction business, bought the land on the northernmost point of the island more than 50 years ago and she was glad when he finally relented and gave her a portion of it.

‘We have a small piece of land 350 metres above sea level in an area exposed to winds and salinity’.

She is one of the dynamic young winemakers changing the face of Sicily’s industry which is now producing a range of red and white wines that are being exported around the world.

‘My company is a total commitment that I really wanted to make and I feel a huge responsibility to my customers,’ she says.

‘A project like this takes time. My company is small we only have 2.5 hectares. My goal is to produce a great vineyard of 20 hectares and great wine.’

La Fauci is also committed to reviving the wine industry that was once strong in the area and her wines are part of the Faro denomination or DOC.

‘This area around Messina used to be focused on viticulture. Unfortunately in the early 1900s it was abandoned but it was resurrected in the 1970s,’ she said.

La Fauci is committed to strict biological practices and natural processes in the wine’s production.

‘We never use chemicals or fertilizers or yeasts in the cellar,’ she said. ‘We have four harvests a year – the Nero D’Avola, the Nocera, Cappuccio and Nerello Mascalese’.

One of the La Fauci’s prominent wines is the Obli’ which is produced with 60% Nerello Mascalese, and includes other three varieties.

The company now produces 10,000 bottles of wine a year and exports to the US, Germany and Belgium.

La Fauci said she has created a strong team of seven working with her and they inspire her with their passion and enthusiasm.

‘When they harvest the grapes they sing the traditional songs of our grandparents, it is marvellous and a great tribute to our past,’ she said. ‘The big winemakers never get to have these experiences’.

Last year La Fauci was named “Donna del Vino” in Sicily, the industry’s leading female winemaker, and has won a string of other awards.

While she appreciates the accolades, her work is more than a business.

‘All the stages from the implantation to the glass are about passion and love,’ she said. ‘This business is not an investment but a passion’.

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Sicilian wine makes a splash thanks to IRVOS.

By Josephine McKenna

Sicilian winemakers and oil producers have made a name for themselves in recent years and helping to drive their success is a local organisation that offers valuable support and promotion.

IRVOS, the Regional Institute for Wine and Oil, was established more than 60 years ago and now works with more than 200 wine makers and oil producers to develop top products and export them around the world.

“Our goal is to develop the full potential of Sicilian wine and broaden their distribution to ensure they are known at an international level,” IRVOS’ technical director, Lucio Monte, told ANSA.

“For a long time French wines have been the point of reference abroad in places like California. Now Sicilian wines like Nero D’Avola and Nerello Mascalese are becoming well-known.

“Since the 1980s the institute has conducted research on how to blend the best French grapes like Shiraz and Merlot with local grapes to produce unique Sicilian wines.”

IRVOS adopts a high profile at major fairs and festivals. It recently represented Sicilian winemakers at Italy’s biggest international wine fair, Vinitaly, in Verona.

“Vinitaly is one of the main ways for the organisation to communicate, and gives us plenty of opportunities to present oenological research, workshops and meetings,” Monte said.

Vinitaly also gave the organisation a chance to showcase the results of an international research project called ‘ProMed’ which brings together Sicilian and Maltese wine producers.

Nine wines – four white and five red wines - produced from grapes grown on the islands of Malta and Gozo were presented at the fair.

ProMed is designed to not only produce top quality wines but also create new ways to attract tourists to the islands of the Mediterranean where they can enjoy wine tastings and stunning scenery.

The Barone di Villagrande is one of around 80 companies that are creating a name for the wines in the Mount Etna region with support from IRVOS.

The Barone vineyards were established on the family’s land in 1727 and cover 26 hectares on gentle slopes near Milo, 35 kms from Etna. The company produces around 100,000 bottles of wine a year.

Gambino Wines, established by the family of the same name, is located 900 metres in nearby Fiumefreddo and is developing a high profile with enotourism and direct sales to customers in the US, Germany, Poland and Rumania.

“Many companies collaborate on international presentations and research,” said Monte. “We also do oenological research and conduct analysis for certification.”

IRVOS represents 24 officially certified denominations or DOCS and is planning major promotions in Germany and Poland in October.

Monte says the US, Japan, Germany and Brazil have become major export markets for Sicilian wines, producers will be looking to China for further expansion in the future.

“While the US is an established channel for US, we see great potential in China and we will be looking for new opportunities there,” he said.

“We really need to support growers and producers during the crisis so they do not collapse and give up winegrowing. We are proud of Sicilian wines and oil and have undertaken many policies so they can really reach their full potential in the market.”

MALVASIA ADDS SWEETNESS TO ISLAND OF SALINA

By Josephine McKenna

Winemaker Corrado Maurigi presses his hands into the rich volcanic soil on the island of Salina before gently touching the vine leaves above him.

'I am lucky to have a passion for wine that began when I was a child,' Maurigi tells Ansa.

The 34-year-old vigneron is now pouring his enthusiasm into the production of the sweet but seductive wine known as the Malvasia delle Lipari, a speciality of the second largest island in the Aeolian archipelago off the north coast of Sicily.

Malvasia was introduced by the Greeks in the 4th century BC and it has become an essential ingredient in the gastronomic history of Salina, which has been a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1981.

'Malvasia is one of the most elegant wines,' Maurigi says. 'It is like a ballerina doing a pirouette'.

Maurigi is developing six hectares of land acquired by the large Sicilian winemaker Tasca d'Almerita at Capo Faro, on the north-east tip of Salina where the company has also created a five-star hotel resort.

He has cleared old vines and replanted others to create a new vineyard with grapes that are exposed to strong northerly winds and later dried in the shade using traditional methods to preserve and enhance their fragrance.

Tasca d'Almerita is one of Sicily's best-known winemakers and was recently named Sicilian producer of the year in the 2012 edition of the Italian Sommelier's Guide.

But the Malvasia delle Lipari is produced by a dozen winemakers on the island and was given a DOC, official denomination control, in 1973.

Antonino Caravaglio, another producer, says winemakers have welcomed the growing popularity of sweet wines which have become a new trend.

'We have such an advantage with this appreciation of sweet wines, thanks to women who drink less but drink better,' Caravaglio jokes.

Caravaglio founded his wine company in 1992 and is working with other local producers to promote their products internationally.

The Malvasia is made from 95 percent Malvasia grapes and 5 percent Corinto Nero and around 7,000 bottles are produced a year.

'The land area is small and each grower has their own method of cultivation,' Caravaglio says.

Virgona is another small winemaker on the island and produces red and white wine as well as the Malvasia delle Lipari and a grappa on the hills near Malfa.

John Portelli from Virgona says the company's focus is concentrated on quality rather than quantity and it produces only 12,000 bottles of wine across the spectrum a year.

Portelli says the grape harvest and processing is crucial for the production of Malvasia.

When the grapes are picked, they are exposed to sunlight on traditional racks of reeds, known as 'canizzi', for around two weeks.

When the stalks are removed from the grapes, they are gently pressed and after eight months are ready to be bottled.

Virgona is already exporting its wines to the US, Brazil and Switzerland.

He says the reason behind the company's success is simple: 'Passion'.

While some wine lovers think the Malvasia is a dessert wine, producers are encouraging consumers to taste it with Sicilian cheeses and olives.

Many of the winegrowers also produce olive oil and capers which are another popular export.

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MT ETNA WINES FLOURISH IN THE SHADOWS OF VOLCANO

By Josephine McKenna

Marco Nicolosi Asmondo is an unlikely looking aristocrat. But the young winegrower is the tenth generation of a long line of barons who have produced wine for 300 years from their picturesque vineyards on the slopes of Mount Etna in Sicily.

The Barone di Villagrande estate lies 700 metres above sea level and has survived the many volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and unpredictable weather that bedevil the region around Europe's largest active volcano.

'Our company is the oldest and one of the largest in the area,' Nicolosi Asmondo, a qualified oenologist, tells ANSA. "The earth here has many great advantages and is very rich in minerals which only exist in volcanic soil'.

The Barone di Villagrande is one of around 80 companies that are creating a name for the wines in the Mount Etna region.

While Sicily has a reputation for its Nero d'Avola grapes, the Nerello Mascalese and the Carricante are now becoming part of the wine lovers' vocabulary.

The Barone vineyards were established on the family's land in 1727 and cover 26 hectares on gentle slopes near Milo, 35 kms from Etna. The company produces around 100,000 bottles of wine a year.

Nicolosi Asmondo says neither he nor his family are too worried about the volcano even though there are frequent eruptions.

'The eruptions present no serious danger,' he says. 'The problem is not the lava from Etna but earthquakes that can destroy everything'.

Gambino Wines, established by the family of the same name, is located 900 metres above sea level near Fiumefreddo, 50 kms from Etna.

Francesco Raciti, son of the owners, says his parents overcame many challenges to build their vineyard which has grown into an international business.

'It was their dream,' Raciti says with a smile. 'When they came here there was nothing, no light, no electricity, no water. Everyone said they were mad'.

The company not only produces 100,000 bottles of wine a year, but offers wine tastings that bring 11,000 visitors to the vineyard a year.

Gambino exports up to 80 percent of its wine and hosts corporate events. Many wines are sold directly to customers who visit the vineyard.

'We have tourists from Europe and the US and in the last three years we have seen more tourists from Poland and Rumania,' Raciti says. 'Etna is one of the most visited places in the world'.

Salvo Giuffrida, from Sicily's Regional Institute of Wine and Oil, says the wines of Mount Etna have come of age and are better known around the world.

'They are better known and more widely available. We have made it to a higher level and the Sicilian brands are now very strong'.

A few kilometres away, Giovanni Valenti talks about the passion for wine that led him to grow his own grapes.

Cantine Valenti was established by Valenti, his wife Francesca and son Alessandro, in 2004. He laughs as he recalls his first vintage. 'It was disgusting,'.

Valenti now has around 20 hectares of vineyards and showcases his wines in a stunning cellar that was once a distillery.

The company produces red and white wines and a peach-coloured rose called Poesia, inspired by the poetry of Nobel Prize-winning Sicilian poet, Salvatore Quasimodo.

Valenti wines are sold in Germany, Sweden, Denmark, the UK, US, Canada, and Hong Kong and he says interest is growing.

'In Germany you don't find anyone who wants to imitate a Fiat Punto car, but there are plenty of Germans who want to imitate Italian wine,' Valenti says.

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SALINA – Island of beauty and charm

By Josephine McKenna

When Academy Award winning actress Penelope Cruz recently named the island of Salina as one of her favourite holiday destinations, it was no secret to the many tourists who have discovered this jewel for themselves.

The island, which is the second largest in the Aeolian Islands off the north coast of Sicily, was inhabited as far back as the Bronze Age and was a Greek colony in the 4th century BC before being invaded by the Romans.

Salina consists of six volcanoes and although there hasn't been an eruption here for thousands of years, it was named a World Heritage site for its volcanology with neighbouring islands in 2000.

It has almost 30 square kilometres of rugged countryside as well as several quaint villages including Rinella, Valdichiesa and Capo Faro.

Apart from stunning scenery and pretty beaches, Salina is also known for its rich volcanic soil and an array of agricultural products ranging from capers to olive oil as well as the renowned Malvasia delle Lipari sweet wine and local grappa.

Salvatore D'Amico, who runs an agricultural business under the family name, says visitors from Paris or Stockholm are often surprised when he tells them about the lamb, wild rabbits and fish that are produced on the island.

But he tells Ansa that the island also produces wild asparagus, pumpkin flowers, mulberries, apricots, peaches and oranges.

'Many people don't realise the island is really self-sufficient,' Salvatore D'Amico says.

The island is covered with 400 different kinds of plants, including ferns, trees, caper bushes and prickly pear cactus, as well as fruit orchards, vineyards and olive groves.

'We have around 1500 olive trees and we grow our olives on terraces,' D'Amico says.

'They are picked by hand and are pressed within 24 hours of the harvest. Our oil has a very delicate flavour, a little bit fruity but delicate'.

D'Amico, a passionate viticulturist, decided to cultivate his family's land in 1972. He now has 13 hectares with a combination of vineyards and olives and he is the only olive crusher on the island.

'The climate of the area, the volcanic soils of the Aeolian islands and the centuries-old plants together with a strict organic approach guarantees an authentic product of great nutritional value,' D'Amico said.

Capers are harvested on the island between May and August and are one of Salina's most famous exports.

Fenech, an a family-owned company based in the town of Malfa, produces a range of red and white wine and bottles capers with salt or vinegar.

For Francesco Fenech production of the Malvasia delle Lipari wine has been a family tradition since the 19th century.

He has been bottling his own with his father Antonio since 1996 and now has seven hectares under cultivation.

But the company also produces a range of capers and recommends serving them alone with a glass of wine or as a condiment with pasta, fish or mussels.

While famous for its agricultural produce, Salina is also well-known for its scenery.

Near Pollara on the northwest side of the island, visitors can explore the dramatic coast where Italian film director Massimo Troisi filmed his Academy Award winning film, *Il Postino* (The Postman) and there are plenty of scenic spots for scuba diving.

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EVENTS: SICILIAN FOOD AND WINE FESTIVAL DRAWS THOUSANDS OF FANS

By Josephine McKenna, Rome

Thousands of people have turned out to enjoy the best of Sicilian wine, food and entertainment at this year's Circuito di Bacco festival. Promoted by the region's tourism department and Sicily's Regional Institute for Wine and Oil (IRVOS), the fourth annual festival included wine and food tastings and cultural events at 22 vineyards.

'The Circuito di Bacco is a project that is perfectly aligned with the extraordinary leap in forward in wine tourism that we have made in the past few years,' said the festival's artistic director Orlando Biglieri.

'What has not been fully understood is that wine is not just a product, but the medium of a region, a culture and the values linked to the land.

'When you consider all of that, the wine cellars and the wine should represent a kind of 'liquid postcard', to send around the world as away of promoting tourism and the local region. Our festival has offered a number of opportunities, from shows, to cultural events and wine tastings'.

From Marsala in the west to Mount Etna in the island's east, Sicily's wine industry has evolved into a major sector featuring popular reds like Nero D'Avola and Primitivo as well as distinctive white wines like Grecanico and Grillo, grappas and muscats.

'We selected the cellars that are considered the best for not only for the quality of their wine but also for their warm hospitality,' Biglieri said.

'We also chose regions that have unique landscape with beautiful views and the possibility of offering visits to participants. For next year's festival we want to include the islands'.

Daniele Tranchida, regional minister for tourism, also said the wine sector has experienced strong growth in Sicily in recent years.

'Today more than ever quality wine tasting tours are linked to travel, cultural and environmental packages and are a way to add value to the region and its products,' Tranchida said.

'The extra value of an initiative of this kind is knowing that all this is responding to those needs'.

IRVOS works with more than 200 wine makers and oil producers to develop top products and export their products around the world.

Dario Cartabellotta, director of IRVOS, said Sicily was a laboratory unlike any other where local and imported products mix with each other to create a unique range of products drawn from the island's culture and history.

'The value of a festival like this is that it features the cellars as the central characters as well as their work, commitment, culture and passion,' he said.

IRVOS represents 24 officially certified denominations or DOCS and is planning major promotions for Sicilian wine in Germany and Poland in October.

Apart from Italy, the organisation says the US, Japan, Germany and Brazil have become the major export markets for Sicilian wines, while producers are looking to China for further expansion in the future.

For the first time this year's 'Circuito di Bacco' invited guests to get a first hand taste of Sicilian cuisine and become cooks for a day. Fifteen guest chefs donned aprons and chefs' hats and tried their hand at local recipes and typical Sicilian dishes.