

# DISCOVERING SICILY: A MEDITERRANEAN JEWEL IN ITALY'S CROWN

By Tracy Ellen Kamens, Ed.D., DWS, CWE

I stood in line at the Palermo airport, crying. Not loud wails, just silent tears rolling down my face. But, as it was my seventh visit to Italy, the intense emotion was as surprising to me as it was to anyone else who might have noticed. I felt a deep loss as I prepared to leave Sicily. In less than a week this region had somehow wrapped itself around my heart and refused to let go. I wanted to attribute this visit's difference to my slightly improved Italian language skills, but I knew that this didn't do it justice. There was something else – something that permitted conversations to by-pass small talk and dive right in to what really mattered; getting to know one another and feeling safe to share. I had become attached to the spirit of the island, with its fusion of Arabic, Spanish, Norse and Italian heritage, and to the spirit of the people who inhabit it. I took a deep breath, blinked back the tears and boarded my plane knowing that I had been given a wonderful gift...



Sicily – a part of Italy and yet it stands apart both literally and figuratively. As an island situated off the coast of Italy's toe (Calabria), the region is physically separate, requiring a flight or ferry to get to or from there. But, beyond geography, Sicily remains steadfast to its traditions and culture. My new friend, Federico Mammoli, of Firriato winery's export department and originally from Rome, told me that when he first arrived on the island, he only understood about thirty percent of what people said to him, despite the fact that, of course, they all speak the same language.

As far as wine is concerned, agriculture is a big component of the economy and grapes have been cultivated here for centuries. Nearly everywhere one looks, there are vines and Sicily is responsible for an immense amount of Italian wines. Like the rest of

southern Italy, the key word here was quantity, with quality a mere afterthought for many producers.

But that, to a large extent, is ancient history. Sure, Sicily still produces cheap and cheerful wines, most regions these days do, but while my formal exploration of Sicilian wine was admittedly confined to a handful of wineries, I was extremely impressed with what I found. There was complexity, depth and structure that I didn't expect, revealing the significant quality and continued potential of Sicilian wines. And, throughout each winery visit, I was enamored not only by the wines, but also by the people and their passion and warmth. I felt so welcomed in a way that felt much differently than any other press trip that I didn't want to leave... Hence, the tears at the airport.

## *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish...*

Earlier in the week, it was a beach scene like any other as the smell of fresh fish and salt water permeated. The sky had clouded over, the not-quite-summer air had turned cool and towel-wrapped children waited with their parents for the ferry back to the mainland. Only, this wasn't Sag Harbor or Block Island; instead, we were on Favignana in the Egadi Islands, 45 minutes from Trapani, Sicily – an island off the coast of an island.



The island's history dates to prehistoric times, but the only visible historic remnants date to medieval times when Swabians constructed the Castle of Santa Caterina at the top of the island's only hill, from a pre-existing tower originally built by the Saracens.

Alternately called La Farfalla (the butterfly) due its shape, Favignana is named for the Favonio, a local westerly wind, which made its presence known, as I was shown around Firriato's latest project. The Trapani-based winery was first established in the 1980s by Salvatore Di Gaetano, who is now joined by his wife, Vinzia, in running the family business, but while Firriato's 320 hectares of vineyards are spread out over six Sicilian estates, it was the five hectares planted six years ago on Favignana that they were most excited about sharing with me. This selection of vines is the first and only vineyard to be planted on the island in 50 years.

Although Favignana is known for its twin industries of tuna and tufa, today's islanders rely on tourism to make their livelihood. Yet, while the island is hospitable to tourists, it is less so to vines. The tufa-sand soils provide their own challenges, while the namesake wind necessitates that vines are bush trained using the alberello (little tree) method. At only several inches off the ground, the obvious need for hand-harvesting prompted me to commiserate with the vineyard crew, sensing the back-breaking work required (I certainly wasn't inspired to volunteer).

Similarly, bamboo fencing tempers the wind and reduces the effect of salt water, which would otherwise burn the vines' tender leaves. Their agronomist, Giovanni Manzo, advised that Zibibbo – a local clone of Moscato d'Alessandria (Muscat d'Alexandria) – is among the more resistant plants, which explains why these were planted closest to the sea.

But, despite these obstacles, the island's climate also



has a favorable impact. A high diurnal shift helps grapes develop good acidity and perfume. Meanwhile, the wind minimizes humidity, and subsequently, mildew, so much so that the operation is almost entirely organic.

Focused on indigenous varieties, the vineyard is planted to Cataratto, Grillo, Zibibbo, Perricone, and Nero d'Avola, with grapes shipped back to Trapani for production since its size doesn't warrant the construction of a winery on Favignana. But, while these wines are currently labeled as IGP Sicilia, Firriato hopes to create a new Favignana-based DOC for them and will submit an application after the third vintage (2013) in keeping with legal restrictions.

After my vineyard orientation, Federico and Giovanni took me to lunch. But, before I had my fill of locally-caught, tonno rosso (blue fin tuna), swordfish and other wonderful seafood, all of which was simply prepared and delicious, we tasted through the Firriato wines, including two produced from the vines I had just seen.

In typical Sicilian style, we capped off the meal with a cannoli dessert and then indulged in some coffee to keep us awake. Post-lunch, the taxi driver did double



duty as both driver and tour guide, having lived on the island his entire life. He showed us around, noting various points of interest and historical buildings. We stopped at an abandoned quarry that now functions as makeshift seaside cabanas and plays host to beach bathers. I was struck at the brilliance and clarity of the blue water below. Then, we climbed back in the car and headed to the port, the bright sun fading just as we arrived and joined the families as we all waited in earnest for the next boat.

### *Island Capers*

The next day, fighting off jetlag and a general lack of sleep, I struggled out of bed early (5:30 AM) to meet Laura Ellwanger from Donnafugata's Public Relations department. That morning, Laura and I flew further afield (closer to Africa than to Italy) to another Sicilian island – Pantelleria, joined on our early morning flight by the daily newspapers. But, while the news may arrive a bit late, this sybaritic slice of paradise has long attracted the well-heeled with their well-endowed pocketbooks – including Armani who arrives each summer via private yacht – in stark contrast to Favignana's laid-back tourists.

Also unlike Favignana, Pantelleria has a more continuous vinous history. Here, vines commonly average 40-50 years old, with a few remaining ungrafted vines thought to be over 100 years old as I saw at Donnafugata's vineyards. Initially arriving on Pantelleria in 1989, Donnafugata now owns vineyards in 12 districts on the island, totaling close to 70 hectares (170 acres).

In addition to vines, the island is also known for its capers and, since I had never seen a caper bush, Laura made sure to take me to a caper garden, which



was a treat to see. Interestingly, in terms of cuisine, this is not an island of fisherman, as Pantelleria's rocky coastline makes it challenging to easily put boats in and out of the water. Consequently, fresh fish is less abundant here. However, rabbits are quite plentiful and often find their way onto the menu.

Home to even fiercer winds, Pantelleria's Arabic-derived name means "Daughter of the Wind," and its vines are also alberello trained. This practice has been adapted to olive and citrus trees on the island, with dwarf-like orchards dotting the landscape.

Another feature of the landscape are walls made from dark, volcanic stones that line the narrow roadways, define property borders and undoubtedly gave rise to the island's nickname as the Black Pearl of the Mediterranean. The stacked stones revealed a patchwork of plots, stemming from very fragmented land ownership, and some seemed to have been abandoned given the overgrown vegetation, possibly due to their exceedingly small size.

But beyond their proprietary function, these walls protect the grapes from the whipping winds and reduce erosion while their composition of pumice





and lava release much-needed humidity during the heat of the day. These same stones were used to build a Pantellerian Garden, the oldest evidence of which date to 3000 B.C.E. As they do in the vineyard, the stones of these circular enclosures give off sufficient moisture to sustain a centrally-planted orange tree despite the limited rainfall and lack of irrigation. Such gardens are a mark of wealth and prestige, but also hold the promise as to how such technology might be adapted in other rain-starved climates, which is why the winery has donated its garden to the National Trust for Italy (F.A.I.) and collaborated on a study with the University of Milan.

The garden is situated in Khamma where Donnafugata maintains a winery, necessary since production of its Ben Ryé, with its prestigious Passito di Pantelleria DOP, must be completed entirely on the island. The labor-intensive harvest is quite protracted spanning six weeks from beginning to end as different plots become ripe and ready for harvest in turn. Selected grapes are dried on mats in the sun and wind for three to four weeks, during which time they lose moisture and increase intensity and sugar levels. Others are picked a month later and pressed immediately, with the dried grapes destemmed by hand and then added to the this fermenting must in batches, resulting in a luscious dessert wine with sufficient freshness. Yields are extremely low at 1.6-2.4 tons per acre (4.0-6.0 tons per hectare).

The winery's other prized Zibibbo grapes are vinified on the island to produce Kabir, a Moscato di Pantelleria DOP, while the younger grapes are sent to Marsala to make Lighea, a dry and refreshing wine

that carries the IGP Terre Siciliane designation.

Tasting this latter wine at Khamma, I fantasized about enjoying it on the deck of a dammuso, a Pantellerian traditional white-domed house, while on holiday, but alas, it was once again time to return to the mainland.

But, the Rallo family, which owns Donnafugata, is known for much more than its

award winning Ben Ryé Passito di Pantelleria and has been in the wine industry for much longer than their time on Pantelleria. As early as 1851, the family first produced the Italian fortified wine, Marsala, where their winery is located. But, as the reputation of Marsala waned (as did much of its quality), Giacomo and Gabriella Rallo looked for other ways to better show off the potential of the Sicilian island. Taking a new approach, they chose to plant international grape varieties on the family's estate in Contessa Entellina and launched the Donnafugata wine brand, borrowing the name from Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's book, *Il Gattopardo* (The Leopard), which takes place on Sicily.

During my visit, I had the pleasure of dining with both of Giacomo and Gabriella's children — Josè and Antonio. One night, Antonio shared some of the family history with me, noting that one of the initial challenges was to teach the vineyard workers how to grow vines for the production of quality wine when they had been conditioned to grow solely for quantity. To solve this problem, the workers were given an opportunity to taste the wines side by side so that they would see what the impact of quality vineyard practices would have on the finished wine.

Once Donnafugata's reputation with international varieties was established, the family turned its attention to local grapes. Today, the company grows 49 different varieties and is working on another project with the University of Milan to identify the best clones among the indigenous Sicilian varieties such as Cataratto.

The concerted effort and continued emphasis on quality is significant in its impact. In 1994, only 20% of all wine produced in Sicily was bottled in the region – the rest left in bulk. Today, 70% of wine produced within the region is bottled as Sicilian wine. But, Antonio was quick to point out that such progress is the result of many small families working together. Recognizing their shared interest and common goals, a formal group was created in 1998 with an eye toward crafting quality and changing the image of Sicilian wine.



split the business duties among them and have brought in a winemaker to assist with production.

While many wineries boast stunning views, Gorghi Tondi has a particularly lovely one given its location within a natural preserve. Situated approximately 30 minutes south of Marsala in the Mazara del

Vallo area, the 130 hectares of land were purchased by Annamaria and Clara Sala's great-grandfather and were originally part of Prince Saporito's hunting reserve. Thankfully, the land (along with its two karstic lakes, Lake Preola and Gorghi Tondi) was recognized in 1998 as a WWF Natural Reserve. Home to such vegetation as olive trees, dwarf palms and wild orchids, the reserve is equally attractive to herons, swamp hawks, mallards and other species, adding to the uniqueness of the place.

### *Reserve in a reserve*

Another such family is the Sala family, whose winery, Tenuta Gorghi Tondi, is headed by sisters Annamaria and Clara. The two young women are relatively new to the wine industry, but can draw on the knowledge and experience of their father and grandfather, both of whom devoted their careers to wine. They sisters



The winery itself was built in 2000 in the center of this agricultural area, with the first vintage produced in 2005. Now, nearly a decade later, Gorgi Tondi has a diverse portfolio, drawing inspiration from the Arabic culture (Rajah), general location (Meridiano 12) and proximity to the reserve (Coste a Preola as well as Sorante, which means a bird about to take flight) in naming its wines.

The range and quality of the wines was impressive, especially with the top wines, which they refer to as their Cru-level wines. However, it was their embrace of the Grillo grape variety in all its glory and many guises that really caught my attention. This cousin to Sauvignon Blanc makes its first Gorgi Tondi appearance in their Palmarès Spumante Brut; a second in the winery's entry-level wine (not tasted); a third in the Coste a Preola Bianco, its premium label; and then again in Kheirè, among its Cru-level wines. A final appearance is the Grillo d'Oro, a botrytis-affected dessert wine. All whites (not just those produced with Grillo), with the exception of the Grillo d'Oro, are produced solely in stainless steel.

After a comprehensive tour and tasting, my hosts, Annamaria and Sal Romano (Export Manager) treated me to a snack. It was light by Italian standards, but quite a spread nonetheless. According to my agenda, I was due to have lunch at my next visit, so I tried to hold back on what I piled onto my plate, but with the tempting breads, olives, tapenades and pastas, it was difficult to resist. Plus, I welcomed the opportunity to sop up some of the alcohol I had just ingested. I was suitably rewarded as everything was as tasty as it looked, but was saved from going back for seconds, when my ride appeared, ready to whisk me away to Menfi.



### *True Cooperation*

If Sicilian wines are still being incorrectly identified as emphasizing quantity over quality, another anachronism is that production by cooperatives automatically means poorly made wines. But, with MandraRossa's intensive adaptation of technology and careful attention to every last detail, it's clear that striving for quality isn't restricted to family-owned wineries.

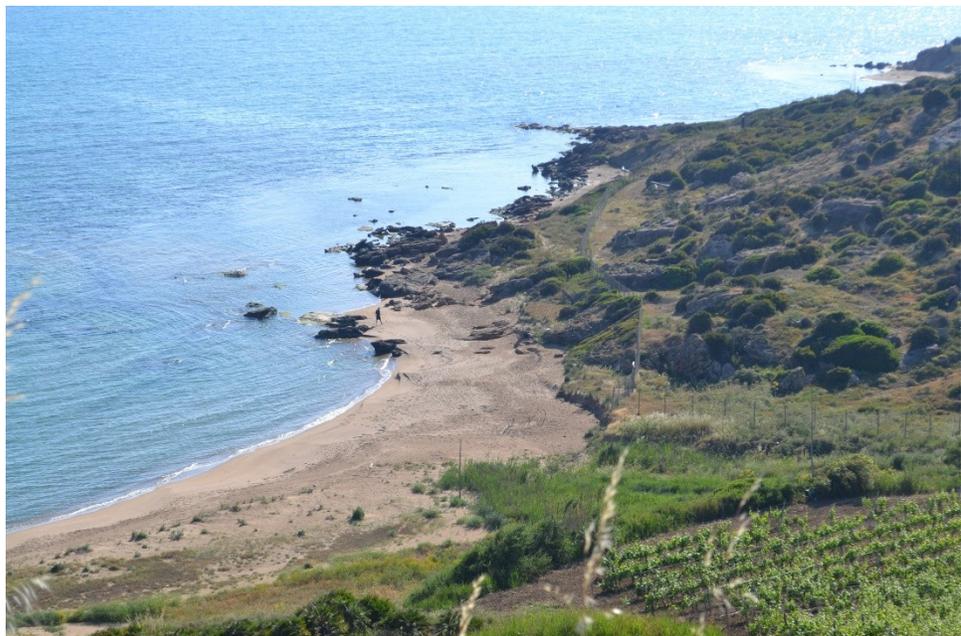
When I arrived at MandraRossa's Casa Natoli, it was bustling with activity and after the relative quiet of being on my own since Monday morning, I was a bit flustered. But, after introductions were made by MandraRossa's Brand Ambassador, Maria Isolina Catanese, I soon discovered how much I had actually been craving a full conversation in English. And, as my fellow guests were a group of restaurant managers from London, it wasn't just English, it was English-English.

Built in 1830, Casa Natoli features the architecture of a typical country house and serves as home to MandraRossa's cooking school. Ensnared in the Slow Food movement, the Kitchen Brigade at Casa Natoli prepared a multi-course meal featuring not just one, but several dishes comprising different varieties of artichokes (there's more than one type of



artichoke, who knew?), an especially bold move given that artichokes are often considered to be among the most challenging to pair with wine. Fortunately, the Fiano poured with lunch was indeed an excellent match.

After lunch, I was treated to a more formal presentation of the MandraRossa wines with a tasting out in the garden with the winemaker. The wines were quite lovely and the setting was simply heavenly. Then, the agronomist showed me their territory and provided additional details about their operations. Suddenly, we were back to speaking Italian, with the occasional



translation from his more English-savvy colleague, when my requests for slower speech or repeated sentences proved insufficient to follow his meaning.

Named for the local district, MandraRossa was founded in 1958 and is part of Cantine Settesoli, which manages the largest single vineyard area in the whole of Europe. However, only the top 10% of Settesoli's production goes into MandraRossa wines. Today, the cooperative has 88 members, who farm a total of 7,000 hectares. Among the most planted varieties are Chardonnay and Syrah, followed by Nero d'Avola.

The agronomist was keen to let me know how important it was to understand one's terroir, explaining that they have spent significant time and effort to determine which varieties grows best where and then planting accordingly. In a further focus on quality, growers are advised by the agronomist when to harvest their vines and with which parameters to select their grapes. Moreover, harvesters are monitored by GPS, keeping careful tabs on what is going on within the region. Upon arrival at the winery (the cooperative maintains three), grapes are classified as A, B or C, depending on the quality of the crop, which consequently impacts the price paid to the grower.

Once the tour was over and I checked into the hotel, it was time for dinner. The Brits and I all climbed into



proceeded to regale us with stories of her battle with Nutella addiction (she was joking, at least I hoped she was joking). And, when sorbet was served at the end of the meal, they were all anxious to convert them to sgroppinos (a slushy cocktail). The waiter was only too happy to oblige, bringing the entire bottle of vodka to the table

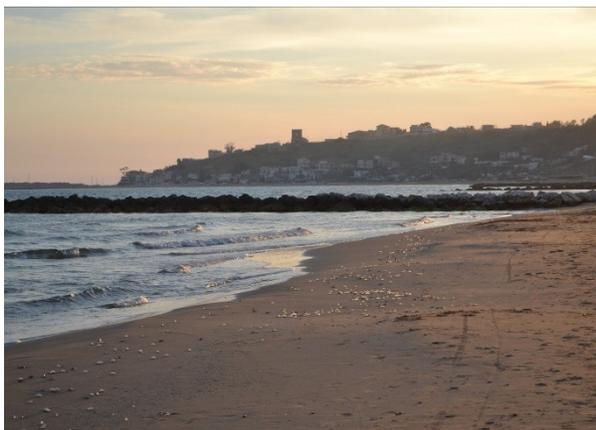
a van and were taken to a seaside restaurant where we kicked off the evening with an aperitif on the beach, just as the sun began to set. We were joined by a local dog (who likely belonged to the restaurant) and I somehow managed to step (barefoot) on a bumblebee (yes, ouch!), but the view was too stunning to worry about the pain for long.

and letting us pour at will. I declined the first round, but gave in on the second (if you can't beat 'em...and all that).



Dinner itself was an exquisite array of fresh seafood, including raw gamberi (shrimp) that were so sweet, it was like eating candy. The Brits

were a rowdy bunch to put it mildly, freely admitting to having been literally under the table the night before at Planeta's La Foresteria. Thankfully, they were more subdued that night (perhaps too tired out from the night before?), although one woman



### *Valley of the Temples and Nectar of the Gods*

I encountered a similarly positive experience with another cooperative the following morning. Established in 1969, Viticoltori Associati Canicatti, alternately referred to as CVA or simply Canicatti, is now home to 480 vinerons and 1,000 hectares. The vineyards are situated in the sunniest and driest part of Sicily, stretching out to the coast of Agrigento and comprising a wide range of altitudes from sea level to 600 m above the water.

As with MandraRossa, each vine is constantly monitored so as to identify the optimal moment for harvest. The vineyards are planted to both indigenous and international varieties, including: Catarratto, Inzolia, Grillo, Nero d'Avola, Nerello Mascalese, Nerello Cappuccio, as well as Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Merlot.



Given the cooperative's proximity to the Valle dei Templi (Valley of the Temples), the winery has a unique relationship with the park. Consequently, I was blessed with the opportunity to taste through their extensive portfolio just steps away from Greek and Roman ruins. Led by Technical Director, Angelo Molito, we started with a lovely, slightly sparkling wine, Satari Frizzante 2012, before we tasted through a selection of still whites. We then shifted to a Nero d'Avola-Nerello Mascalese rosato blend. Next up were the lighter-bodied reds, including the Aquilae Nero d'Avola, their most sold wine.

Finally, we turned our attention to a mini-vertical of Aynat, the winery's flagship wine produced in very limited quantities from low yielding, 25-30 year old Nero d'Avola vines and aged in barrique and bottle before release. I was astounded by the beauty, depth, elegance and age-worthiness of this wine, particularly when tasting the 2006.

Just outside the Park Authority's boundaries, Canicatti has recently taken possession of 3 hectares of 20-25 year old vines, situated in the shadow of the Temple of Giunone. The fruit from these vines will make their debut at VinItaly 2014 in the guise of Diodoros 2012 – Nectar of the Gods. A blend of Nero d'Avola, Nerello Cappuccio and Nerello Mascalese, the wine was first vinified in stainless steel in November 2012 and then, in May 2013, was transferred to barriques. Since the wine still has a full year of oak aging ahead, my preview tasting of a tank

sample was an honor, but not a real assessment of what this wine will be upon release.

As we walked through the Diodoros vineyard, Angelo told me that the almond trees are strikingly beautiful when in bloom. I joked that I would be back in January to see them and, given the warm welcome I received that day, I'm almost convinced that if I were to show up on his door next year, he wouldn't miss a beat before inviting me into his home and then taking me to see the trees.

Then, all too soon, it was time to head off to my final destination, Tasca d'Almerita.



### *Crazy with a fox (and Germans)*

If a wine region can claim to have a first family in its midst, then no doubt the Tasca d'Almerita family would find itself among the top of Sicily's list. In the 1830s, the two Tasca d'Almerita brothers bought the Regaleali estate, turned it into their home and launched the family business. But, it wasn't until the 1950s that things began to really change. Choosing to become a pioneer in shifting the conversation about Sicilian wine from quantity to quality, it was Count Giuseppe Tasca d'Almerita who focused on improving Sicilian wine through experimentation in the winery and the vineyard.

Among Giuseppe's first successes was Bianco Regaleali, a white blend of Inzolia, Cataratto, Grecanico and Chardonnay, which sports an unusual bottle shape – similar to a flute d'Alsace – immediately becoming well recognized for its quality and establishing the Tasca d'Almerita's reputation as producers of fine wine. This was joined by the Rosso del Conte – a special reserve of Regaleali Rosso, produced from 40 year old Nero d'Avola vines. His Nozze d'Oro was first crafted as a gift to his wife in honor of their 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary – a true labor of love – blending Inzolia and Sauvignon Blanc. When the wine was met with such critical acclaim, he decided to continue to produce the wine beyond the anniversary celebration and it remains a company flagship.



Giuseppe's son, Count Lucio, followed his lead, looking to plant vines at different and higher altitudes, where it was much cooler. Lucio was also the first to plant international varieties, namely Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon, during the 1980s, a choice he initially hid from his dad. It wasn't until the wines were crafted and bottled that he gave Giuseppe a taste, still not revealing their origin until after Giuseppe had offered his seal of approval. The Chardonnay made its debut in the family's portfolio in 1985 and continues to garner high praise as does the Cabernet Sauvignon.

Today, while Count Lucio remains president of the family-run winery, his two sons, Giuseppe and Alberto, serve as vice president and managing director, respectively. When Giuseppe and

Alberto joined the family business, Lucio made it clear that if they began to fight, he would immediately step in and tell them what to do. The threat seems to have worked since they continue to work in harmony to this day.

Regaleali now stretches over 500 hectares in the heart of Sicily and I reached the historic estate in the late afternoon, with time to rest before dinner. But, if I thought that the remote location would mean peace and quiet, I was sadly mistaken. A German restaurateur who is a client of Tasca d'Almerita had brought his all male group of friends to visit the winery, coincident with my stay. While I was warned that the group was there, it didn't prepare me in the least.

The light teasing, which I could easily handle, began with the appetizers, eaten in the courtyard, while enjoying the Tasca d'Almerita Brut sparkler. Later, we moved indoors to escape the evening chill and bawdy jokes were told. But, like the appetizers, this, too, was only a taste of what was to come.

The next incident involved a fox (no, really!). At some point, during the meal, Regaleali's Hospitality Manager, Sasha Stancampiano, asked me if I wished to see a fox. A bit perplexed by the question, I followed him outside, where, to my surprise, a fox was hanging out in the courtyard. It turned out that the fox visits regularly and, given that they've taken to feeding her, I am sure she will return.



After dinner (and many glasses of wine), the Germans began to sing. An impromptu game of Name That Tune was scrapped when the internet connection proved to be too slow to stream music on Yoni Annet Westerdorp (Brand Manager Europe)'s iPad, but the Germans continued to sing. Suddenly, there were four middle-aged German men belting out *Bye, Bye Miss American Pie* and dancing around the table. I wasn't sure which was more surprising – their eagerness to sing or the fact that they even knew that particular song. Other songs and similar renditions followed (as did several more glasses of wine). I tried to decline at least a few glasses, but eventually gave up trying and simply took fewer and smaller sips. As midnight approached, it appeared that the dancing was about to shift from AROUND the table to ON the table, at which point Yoni, Rossella Marino Abate (an intern at Tasca d'Almerita) and I said goodnight to the gentlemen, half expecting to find them still there at breakfast, and headed off to our respective rooms.

After breakfast, which was blissfully song-free (save for the iPhone video of last night's antics), winemaker Laura Orsi, who has been with Tasca d'Almerita since 2004, led me through a formal

tasting. She shared that careful attention is paid to replanting the vineyards, with 15 hectares removed and replanted annually. However, she further emphasized the need to work well in the winery to maintain quality and included an analogy regarding zucchini. Unfortunately, as my notes simply read "zucchini example," this wisdom is now lost to me.

Once the tasting was over, Yoni and Rossella provided me with a comprehensive tour of Regaleali, visiting a number of vineyards including the vines planted back in the 1950s. The self-sufficient estate also boasts one of Italy's best culinary schools established by Count Lucio's sister, Marchesa Anna Tasca Lanza and, during our brief visit to the school, we had the opportunity to sample some tuna sashimi.



Beyond Regaleali, the Tasca d'Almerita family owns Tenuta Capofaro on the Aeolian island of Salina, which is focused on Malvasia; the Tascante estate on Mount Etna, home to Nerello Mascalese and Nerello Cappuccio; and has expanded its production through joint ventures with the Whitaker Foundation in Mozia (close to Marsala) where they grow Grillo, and with Sallier de la Tour at Monreale, which is situated near Palermo and particularly suitable for Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon and Petit Verdot.

The Tasca d'Almeritas also maintain the 15<sup>th</sup> century Villa Tasca in Palermo, where Giuseppe and Alberto grew up. Here, former owner, the Duke of Camastra (then governor of Sicily), built a beautiful Italian garden on the estate. Later, the garden was reconstructed in the French style, with irregular



paths and scenery designed to inspire artists and composers such as Wagner who composed the third act of "Parsifal" there in 1881. While vines were previously planted near the estate, they were removed during Palermo's urban expansion of the early 1900s.

I met with Giuseppe Tasca d'Almerita at Villa Tasca that afternoon. Taking me on a behind-the-scenes tour, Giuseppe led me around the stunning garden, stopping to show off the manmade grotto where he used to bring girls when he was a teenager thinking that they would snuggle closer to him due to fear of the dark. Then, we headed inside so I could see the beautiful architecture and furniture of the villa.

Although the Tasca d'Almeritas still live at Villa Tasca, an area within the villa, which sleeps up to 8, is available for rent. A quick internet search reveals a rental price of \$19,000-\$25,000 per week, depending upon the season, which is not only completely out of my budget (ever!), but is even more laughable given that my own selection of accommodations in Palermo cost only \$60.00 per night, inclusive of breakfast.

I departed Villa Tasca and prepared for my final night in Palermo, where I had the pleasure of dining with Simona Governati and Salvatore Spatafora from Gran Via Società & Comunicazione. They had been encouraging my use of Italian, but offered their assistance with the menu if I needed it. I spotted an interesting menu item and could translate all, but one, word in the dish description - fasolari -

choosing to order it anyway. Once I was served, Salvatore pointed out the fasolari on my plate, which, at least to me, resembled a large clam. Since my dish already had small clams known as vongole in it, I borrowed the skills learned regarding suffixes ("-one" makes things bigger) to invent the word "vongolone," which Simona and Salvatore found to be hilarious. Either way, dinner was delicious and I had a lot of fun before we walked back to my hotel and said goodbye. The next morning, I was off to the airport, where it was tears in place of last night's laughter as I bid arrivederci to Sicily. ✨



## RECOMMENDED WINES

### **Casa Vinicola Firriato**

#### ***Quater 2012, IGPSicilia***

This blend of Grillo, Catarratto, Carricante and Zibibbo has pronounced aromas of floral, blossom, and citrus. The dry palate is fresh with full body.

#### ***Favinia La Muciara 2012, IGP Sicilia***

A blend of Zibibbo, Grillo and Catarratto, the nose offers wet stone and citrus aromas along with some white flowers. On the medium-bodied palate, ripe citrus flavors stand out, accompanied by minerality and a hint of salinity, reminiscent of a Fino sherry.

#### ***Favinia Le Sciabiche 2011, IGP Sicilia***

Bringing together Perricone and Nero d'Avola, notes of red flowers and fresh berries greet the nose. The dry, medium+ bodied palate has good acidity and shows flavors of berries, wood, herbs and minerality.

#### ***Quater 2009, IGP Sicilia***

A blend of Nero d'Avola, Perricone, Frapatto and Nerello Cappuccio, this wine spends several months in barrique. It has cocoa, woody and balsamic notes with velvet texture, dark fruit flavors and nice depth.

#### ***Ribeca 2010, IGP Sicilia***

Produced from 100% Perricone, this wine offers bramble fruit on the nose with rich raspberry fruit, spice and medium tannins on the palate.



### **Donnafugata *Lighea 2012, IGP Terre Siciliane***

This dry Zibibbo offers up heady floral and citrus aromas on the nose. The medium-bodied palate has floral, tangerine and pineapple with high acidity and long length.



#### ***Chiarandà 2009, Contessa Entellina DOP***

A partially oak-aged Chardonnay, this wine has aging potential. Apple, butter and nuts dominate the nose, with a creamy, full-bodied palate and long length.

#### ***Sedàra 2010, IGP Sicilia***

With Nero d'Avola, Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Merlot, this wine has cherry and herbal aromas that persist on the palate, with firm tannins.

#### ***Mille e una Notte 2007, Contessa Entellina DOP***

Primarily from Nero d'Avola, this wine offers wood, black cherry and spice aromas with an elegant, rich and layered palate, culminating in very long length.

#### ***Ben Ryé 2010, Passito di Pantelleria DOP***

An intense nose with notes of marmalade, orange peel, spice, caramel and apricot repeated on the equally intense, full-bodied palate. This wine has richness, depth and long length.

### **Gorgi Tondi**

#### ***"Meridiano 12" Bianco 2012, Sicilia DOP***

A blend of 70% Catarratto and 30% Chardonnay, this wine has notes of apple with vibrant acidity, medium+ body and a slight grip on the palate.

#### ***Kheirè 2012, Sicilia DOP***

This 100% Grillo wine displays notes of floral, dried, herbs, pear and melon, with depth and complexity on the full-bodied palate.

#### ***Coste a Preola Rosso 2011, IGP Sicilia***

This is an easy-drinking Nero d'Avola with fresh black cherry, floral and herbs on the nose and palate.

**Segreante, IGP Sicilia**

With 100% Syrah, this wine is very earthy and spicy with bright red fruit, medium+ body and nice length.

**Grillo d'Oro Passito 2010, IGP Sicilia**

Produced from botrytis-affected Grillo grapes and aged in oak for 12 months, this wine has honey, apricot and fresh grape aromas with spice, licorice and beautiful acidity on the medium-sweet palate.

**MandraRossa****Fiano 2012, Sicilia DOP**

Fresh floral, peach, nectarine and almond aromas greet the nose and persist on the palate.

**Santannella 2011, IGP Terre Siciliane**

A blend of Fiano and Chenin Blanc, this dry, white wine is rich and complex with beautifully balanced oak and depth.

**Nero d'Avola 2012, Sicilia DOP**

Displaying fresh fruit aromas of cherry and strawberry on the nose, tar, herbs and tannins pervade the rich palate.

**Syrah 2012, Sicilia DOP**

This wine offers blackberry, earthy and mineral notes, which are repeated on the full-bodied palate.

**Cartagho 2009, IGP Sicilia**

Another 100% Nero d'Avola, this wine offers up rich, intense cherry, plum, and floral aromas with herbal, tar, oak and wet leaves joining on the palate.

**Canicatti****Satàri Frizzante 2010, IGP Sicilia**

Made from 100% Cataratto, this sparker has an expressive nose of floral and pear aromas with a soft mousse, excellent acidity and ripe citrus on the palate.

**La Ferla Rosato 2012, IGP Sicilia**

This Nero d'Avola -Nerello Mascalese blend has a deep pink hue with notes of melon, berries

and a slight grip on the palate.

**Centuno Nero d'Avola 2010, IGP Sicilia**

This wine offers up firm tannins, intense cherry aromas and flavors, along with tar and herbs. It needs time to evolve.

**Scialo 2008, IGP Sicilia**

This Nero d'Avola-Syrah blend has lovely spice, earth, herbs and red fruit aromas and flavors, with nice length.

**Canicatti Aynat 2006, IGP Sicilia**

This wine displays concentrated, rich cherry and cranberry fruit with woody, spice, tar and herbs on all of which linger on the full-bodied palate.

**Tasca d'Almerita****Tascante Buonora 2012, IGP Terre Siciliane**

This Carricante wine from Mt. Etna displays citrus and minerality on both the nose and palate. Fresh and structured with long length.

**Didyme 2012, IGP Salina**

Produced from Malvasia at Tenuta Capofara, with floral and peach aromas, this dry white has full body, with fresh fruit and vibrant acidity.

**Chardonnay 2010, IGP Sicilia**

Fermented in 350L French barrels (70% new and 30% 2nd and 3rd year), this wine has aromas and flavors of bruised apple, rich caramel, candied lemon and a slight toothpick character.

**La Monaca Syrah 2009, IGP Sicilia**

Hailing from the Sallier de la Tour estate in Monreale this wine shows red fruit, spice and earth, with silky tannins on the palate.

**Rosso del Conte 2007, Contea di Sclafani DOP**

This wine is rich and intense with both red and black fruit aromas and flavors. The French oak is beautifully integrated, making for an elegant, yet powerful, wine that offers very long length.