

Elin McCoy

'Will Passito di Pantelleria survive today's anti-sweet-wine fashion?'

THE FANTASY-LIKE SETTING of the 2015 film *A Bigger Splash* is a real place, the small sun-bleached, windswept island of Pantelleria, closer to Tunisia than Sicily. The movie features plenty of rock music and near-nude sunbathing, but what really got my attention was the wine backdrop – a stark landscape of terraced vines buttressed by black volcanic rock walls overlooking the Mediterranean.

Add in the seductive lure of an esoteric grape with an Arabic name, Zibibbo, made into one of Italy's finest naturally sweet wines, and an ancient bush-vine growing tradition that earned UNESCO cultural heritage status in 2014, and I was happy to climb on a plane. My big question, though, is hardly romantic. Will the island's great Passito di Pantelleria survive today's anti-sweet-wine fashion?

During several days of exploring, I heard the familiar story of newcomers revitalising abandoned vineyards and putting new spins on tradition. As in many sweet wine regions, that's meant adding dry whites from Zibibbo to their offer. Luxury oenotourism has arrived. Giulia Pazienza Gelmetti, a finance whizz from Rome, founded the Coste Ghirlanda winery in 2009 with a pop-up restaurant, then added a boutique hotel featuring *dammusi*, the island's unique thick-walled, domed dwellings.

Still, a surprising fact: there are hundreds of grape-growers, but only about 15 make outstanding passito and export it.

Several of the latter, such as Cantine Pellegrino, Donnafugata and Marco De Bartoli, are pioneers from Sicily's Marsala region. The late De Bartoli, famous for revitalising high-quality Marsala, arrived in 1984. He refined and improved basic passito in his Bukkuram bottlings, and in 1990 became the first to commercialise a fresh, dry Zibibbo. Later, he added the fascinating, intense, skin-fermented version Integer, the best dry white I tried.

Also known as Muscat of Alexandria, the grape spread around the

What I've been drinking this month

The Naples Winter Wine Festival, held in Florida each January, features a charity auction that pulls in millions and also hosts a stellar tasting.

This year Veronique Drouhin presented five vintages of **Joseph Drouhin, Beaune 1er Cru Clos des Mouches Blanc**, going back to 1986. The golden-coloured **2000**, with its crème brûlée nose and intense creamy, spicy richness, was the star for me, showing why white Burgundy is the ultimate Chardonnay.

Mediterranean centuries ago. In the 1970s, 50% of Pantelleria was covered in vines. Most Zibibbo sold as table grapes; only one-third became sweet wines – summer sipper Moscato di Pantelleria and the sensuous Passito di Pantelleria, with its notes of minerality from volcanic soil. In 1971, the Italian government granted DOC status to both.

Then the table grape market collapsed, workers left for the mainland and vineyards were abandoned. Some new producers, such as Fabrizio Basile, are natives who returned to revive their family properties. Basile is even experimenting with reds; his Frate Sole Cabernet Franc 2015 pairs fabulously with chocolate and almonds. But he's also trying to find ways to serve his passitos throughout a meal and plans tastings to educate tourists.

At Coste Ghirlanda, the two dry Zibibbos include brilliant, mineral-tinged Silenzio and I also sampled the first vintage of a deliciously spicy red Grenache. But none of these has the uniqueness of Pantelleria's sweet passitos.

'Dry whites are important so we can use all our Zibibbo grapes,' explained Antonio Rallo of Donnafugata, whose lush, apricoty Ben Ryé Passito is justly famous. 'But without passito, there is no wine business here. It's the only wine that we can sell at a price to justify the cost of growing grapes.'

That's difficult. Sebastiano De Bartoli, who now runs the estate, showed me vines trained in the traditional alberello system, planted in hollows dug in the soil to protect them from fierce winds. For passito he dries grapes on the ground in the vineyard, then moves them to a greenhouse, turning them daily by hand. It takes 4kg of grapes to make one bottle.

Like other top passitos, De Bartoli's Padre della Vigna Bukkuram gets better with age and the dark, rich 2000, which tastes like fruit cake laced with lemon zest, is pretty perfect.

During a lazy lunch watching boats bob in a tiny harbour, producer Salvatore Murana reminded me once again why I hope the island's passitos survive. 'Every sip tells a story about Pantelleria terroir,' he said as he poured examples going back to 1983. 'When you drink it you have to reflect on your life. It's a meditation wine.' **D**

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