



NIGHT FEVER

Sicily's Donnafugata has the right idea: harvest at night and have a big party. **GUY WOODWARD** takes up his secateurs

AT HARVEST TIME in the vineyard, there are a number of uncertainties. For the vineyard manager, an imponderable equation awaits, requiring him to balance the vagaries of the weather with the optimum levels of sugar, acidity or phenolics. But for his workforce, there is a single, indisputable constant: this is gonna be hard work.

At one estate in Sicily, however, in the words of Ira Gershwin, it ain't necessarily so. Here, the harvest is a cause for celebration, a time to rejoice in the glory of nature. Every year, the Donnafugata winery marks the first harvest with a party lasting well into the night. And everyone is invited.

The event revolves around the estate's

practice of picking its grapes by night. While there are valid viticultural reasons behind the now-established habit, the picking of the first cluster has – in recent years – become a reason to celebrate the local identity, drawing local dignitaries, politicians and celebrities, as well as friends, relatives and well-wishers all taking pride in their heritage.

The heritage is deep-rooted. When Donnafugata started harvesting by night in 1998, it marked a return to an ancient tradition of the Elimi – the original inhabitants of the island – in the 4th century BC. In just six years, the festivity has reached a level described by the winery as bacchanalian in its riotous, celebratory tone.

Yet the reasons behind the midnight

harvest were initially motivated wholly by practical concerns. In Sicily August temperatures can reach upwards of 35°C, which is not good for the health of the workers, and even worse for the wellbeing of the grapes, as they were at risk of premature fermentation before they had reached the winery.

Temperatures halve after dusk, typically to 16–18°C, enabling a more manageable transfer from vineyard to presser. Donnafugata's white grapes require chilling before being pressed at an optimum temperature of 10°C, so as to preserve their aromatic character. The winery claims to have cut energy consumption (and cost) by 70% through reduced refrigeration demands.

Mercenary motives, though, do not



provide the spur for the associated revelry. Nor, despite the estate's proud boast of being admitted to the Kyoto Club for its reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, do its achievements in environmental vigilance. Rather this is a display of cultural pride both in the winery and the region. Donnafugata is invariably among the first in the northern hemisphere to harvest its Chardonnay, and claims to be the only major European winery to pick at night.

FEAST UNDER THE STARS

'For us, Sicily is not just a geographical reference point,' says Giacomo Rollo, owner of the estate. 'It is a state of mind, a foundation for thought and a promise of enchantment that can seduce the heart.'

Most of the seduction that occurs at the *Calici sotto le stelle* is, in fact, of the palate, through a lavish feast of local dishes and wines. The event – which translates as 'goblets under the stars' – takes place in the open air at the estate's Contessa Entellina vineyards 60km north of Palermo. It features tours of

the vineyards and winery, tastings, a seminar and discussion forum (title in 2003: 'The parallel logic of winemaking and preserving cultural inheritance'), a banquet, music, and the night-long harvest (though most volunteers hand over to the 15-strong professional team after around 20 minutes). All is presented in seemingly unorchestrated, typically Sicilian style.

The vehicle is in fact part of a concerted tourism drive. Around 800 people attend the midnight harvest, a figure which is doubled during the *Cantine Aperte* event in May, when Donnafugata opens the doors of its historic Marsala cellars to treat visitors to a gastronomic gala.

Music, as well as wine, has been an essential part of the estate's bond with the local community and the public. The sponsoring – and hosting – of the Marsala jazz festival has seen Donnafugata team up with the Sicilian Ministry of Culture to host concerts in its Marsala cellars every summer.

Giacomo Rollo's daughter José, an accomplished singer, has spearheaded a further drive, touring top restaurants and jazz clubs with Donnafugata's 'Music and Wine Sessions'.

Against such activity, it is easy to overlook the *raison d'être* of the winery – its wines. Sicily has for too long (roughly 3,000 years) been cast as a mass producer of mainly mediocre wines. Bizarrely, given its climate, it continues to devote around 70% of its production to whites. Donnafugata also contributes to this imbalance, through a bias towards Chardonnay, but it is in part responsible for a marked upturn in the quality of Sicilian reds, notably via its complex, plummy Nero d'Avola.

It seems inappropriate, however, to over-analyse the qualities of the wines here. For Donnafugata, wine is more art than science, to be celebrated and serenaded. Even in the dark. **D**

See www.donnafugata.it for details on visiting the estate, or email info@donnafugata.it

