

## Veneto

5 Sep 2008 by Jancis Robinson

**In a nutshell:** Lots of commercial Soave and Valpolicella, centre of dried- grape wine production.

**Main grapes:** Corvina, Molinara, Rondinella (red); Garganega, Trebbiano di Soave, Chardonnay (white).

The Veneto, centred on Verona in the hinterland of Venice, is Italy's wine factory. Here lakes of pale red Valpolicella and Bardolino and watery Soave and Pinot Grigio are drained into bottles by the million for shipment to Italian and Italianate restaurants around the globe. Vineyards that are typically flat and fertile have been allowed to spew forth over- generous yields of characterless wine with as little cachet and interest as, say, Liebfraumilch.

The difference, however, is that whereas no one would even try to make truly serious Liebfraumilch, more and more ambitious winemakers within these three wine zones are making extremely good wines. As their influence, fortunately, increases, the real challenge for the consumer (and the wine retailer) is to distinguish the goodies from the baddies.

One easy (although not infallible - this is Italy, after all) starting point is to look for wines described as **Classico**, produced within the original central zone rather than the current much larger regions cynically expanded to make the most of the names' currency on international markets. **Valpolicella** described as Superiore must be at least 12 per cent alcohol and aged at least a year before bottling (whereas basic Valpolicella may be just 11 per cent alcohol and as much of a rush job as Beaujolais Nouveau). Another indicator of quality, it must be said, is a premium price. Valpolicella that is lively crimson rather than sludge pink, and tastes of bitter, juicy cherries rather than just tasting bitter cannot be produced cheaply. Yields must necessarily be much lower than on the flatter, more easily mechanised vineyards. Reliably superior Valpolicella producers include Allegrini, Boscaini, Dal Forno, Masi, Quintarelli, Santi, Trabucchi and Tedeschi.

Something has gone wrong with the Valpolicella recipe too. Corvina is by far the most characterful of the three grape varieties from which it may be made, and all- Corvina wines are outlawed by the Valpolicella regulations so that they, like so many good Italian wines, must be sold simply as a *Vino da Tavola*. The Molinara vine tends to produce thin, acidic wine, while it can be difficult to squeeze much flavour out of Rondinella.

The classic way of adding depth and bite to Valpolicella (which should be a refreshing, tangy wine rather than one to age years and years) is to add additional grape skins, ideally those whose sugar content has been concentrated by drying, a technique known as *ripasso* or 'repassed', which increases the final alcohol and phenolic content in wines described as *passito*.

The Veneto's true distinction in the world of wine is that it is the only region where any serious quantity of wine is still made using grapes dried to concentrate their sugar content. This was the only way the Greeks and Romans had of increasing the resulting wines' alcohol content, because distillation and therefore alcoholic spirit was still unknown. Such wines are described as **Recioto**, and may be red or white, dry or sweet. If all the grape sugar is fermented out to alcohol, such wines are also described as **Amarone**, or 'bitter', for Valpolicella grapes dried to yield a wine of perhaps 16 per cent alcohol can certainly taste extremely intense (and should be sipped with care, ideally like port after a meal rather than swigged throughout a meal). The quality of Amarone di Valpolicella has soared in recent years and there are now a host of good producers to choose from.

The white wine version, a refreshingly sweet **Recioto di Soave**, is much less common but it too concentrates the inherent qualities of the local grapes, in this case the appley Garganega, and can be a delightfully tangy alternative to heavier sweet wines such as Sauternes.

**Soave**, the Veneto's most famous white wine ambassador, is every bit as unpredictable in quality as Valpolicella, with the added variable that a wider range of grape varieties may be used: not just the local Garganega and Trebbiano di Soave (Trebbianos of various sorts abound in Italy) but also Chardonnay, Pinot Bianco (Pinot Blanc) and the neutral Trebbiano Toscano. Good Soave is straw coloured and has a distinctive flavour reminiscent of almonds and apples.

Anselmi and Pieropan have for years shown that Soave can be so much more than a vapid, aroma- free mouthwash, but other producers now giving them a run for their money include Bertani, Cantina di Castello, La Cappuccina, Fattori & Graney, Gini, Inama, Prà and Tamellini.

**Bardolino**, made on the shores of Lake Garda, is basically a lightweight Valpolicella and good examples from producers of the calibre of Corte Gardoni, Guerrieri Rizzardi and San Pietro can make delicious summer drinking. The rosé version is called **Chiaretto** and local, potentially pretty Soave- like whites include **Lugana** (just over the border in Lombardia) and **Bianco di Custoza**. **Prosecco** is the region's sparkling wine, generally more treasured by locals than abroad but increasing in popularity.

One of the most distinguished Veneto producers outside the DOCs cited above is Maculan of Breganze, who makes some of Italy's finest sweet white wines.