

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 Veronese, Molinara, Rondinella (red); Garganega, Trebbiano di Soave, Chardonnay (white).

The Veneti, centred on Verona in the heartland of Veneto, is Italy's wine factory. Here lakes of pale red Valpolicella and Bardolino and waxy Soave and Pinot Grigio are drained into bottles by the million for shipment to Italian and overseas restaurants around the globe. Vinayards that are typically flat and fertile have been allowed to grow 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 name's 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 truly common rather than stodge grub, and tastes of bitter juicy character rather than just being bitter cannot be produced cheaply. Value must necessarily be much lower than on the label, more easily mechanised vineyards. Reliably superior Valpolicella producers include Allegri, Boscari, Del Forno, Mei, Catinacci, Sani, Trabucchi and Tedeschi.

Something has gone wrong with the Valpolicella badge. Corvina is by far the most characteristic of the three grape varieties from which it may be made, and all Corvina wines are outlawed by the Valpolicella regulations. The Molinara vine tends to produce this acidic wine, while it can be difficult to squeeze much flavour out of Rondinella (in fact largely because the regulations allow a maximum of only 7% per cent Corvina, the seriously good producer Allegri withers to wines from the Valpolicella DOC, producing just as much acidity in the Veneto as has been common in Tuscany.)

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 *passito* or *passerol*, 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 wine's 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 **Sfava**, 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 the port after a meal rather than sipped 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 aptly Garganega, and can be a delightfully simple 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 (Trebbiano 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.

Amarone and Pinotage have for years abated that Soave can be so much more than a rapid, so-so-to-be mouthwash, but other producers now giving them a run for their money include Barolo, Cortina di Castello, La Cappuccina, Fattori & Grany, Gini, Inama, Pini and Tanello. There is now sufficient confidence in the green terraces of Soave that producers of this culture bottle all sorts of different vineyard produce separately, so much character does each imprint on the wines produced there. Some of the wines have so much flavour and concentration that they can stand up to baroque ageing. Such characterful wines are a world away in quality (and price) from commodity mouthwash called Soave produced in such quantity mainly by the co-operatives that dominate this region.

Bardolino, made on the shores of Lake Garda, is basically a lightweight Valpolicella and good examples from producers of the calibre of Corte Gervasi, Guerrieri Riccardi and San Pietro can make delicious summer drinking. The most version is called **Chiaretto** and local, potentially pretty Soave-like whites include **Lugana** (just over the border in Lombardy) and **Bianco di Custoza**. Gambellari is made just east of Soave and is also difficult to distinguish from it. The vatted wines, red and white, made around Vicenza and Padua with their hardy home Palafina vitas are known as **Colla Berici** and **Colla Euganea** respectively. These wines are based on a mixture of local grapes that such international travellers as Merlot, Cabernet and Pinot Bianco (Pinot Blanc). A similar range of grapes is grown around the town of Breganze just north of Vicenza where one hard-working producer, Maccato, and one local grape, Vespaiolo, have been responsible for putting Breganze on the world's wine map. Vespaiolo is thought to get its name from the waxy attached to its particularly seed grapes, which Maccato has proved can make great sweet white wine. Torcolato is made from semi-dried grapes and manages that Italian sweet wine which is of being very sweet but also very long and stimulating.

East of here, across Pavesi from above the plains stretching towards the regions of Veneto, is the source of north east Italy's favourite sparkling wine, **Prosecco**, based on the grape of the same name. Many a traveller has taken in love with this as Harry's Bar where it was first blended with peach juice to make a Bellini, or at the Locanda Cipriani on the spidily silent island of Torcello where it is served in glass jugs. I have to confess that I am relatively immune to its charms. Even the best examples such as those from Adamo, Badi and Cappelletti-Milotti make my palate as just slightly too sweet and frothy but it is probably my fault that I expect it to be so much like champagne. Cuvée de Prestige is the best one.

Most of the still wines made on this fertile plain go under the name Pavesi or Lison-Proseggione. They tend to be decent, light (though generally unimpressive) Cabernets, Merlots or the local white grape Verduzzo. More interesting (if uncompromisingly dry) are reds from Raboso and Refosco grapes.