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 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. 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. The Molinara vine tends to produce thin, 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 70 per cent Corvina, the seriously good producer Allegrini withdrew its wines from the Valpolicella DOC, threatening just as much anarchy 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 *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. There is now sufficient confidence in the green terraces of Soave that producers of this calibre bottle all sorts of different vineyards' 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 barrique 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 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**. Gambellara is made just east of Soave and is also difficult to distinguish from it. The varied wines, red and white, made around Vicenza and Padua with their handsome Palladian villas are known as Colli Berici and Colli Euganei respectively. These wines are based on a mixture of local grapes and 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, Maculan, 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 wasps attracted to its particularly sweet grapes, which Maculan has proved can make great sweet white wine. Torcolato is made from semi-dried grapes and manages that Italian sweet white wine trick of being very sweet but also very tangy and refreshing.

East of here, across Piave river above the plains stretching towards the lagoons and Venice, is the source of north east Italy's favourite sparkling wine, **Prosecco,** based on the grape of the same name. Many a traveller has fallen in love with this at Harry's Bar where it was first blended with peach juice to make a Bellini, or at the Locanda Cipriani on the spookily 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 Adami, Bisol and Carpenè-Malvolti strike my palate as just slightly too sweet and frothy but it is probably my fault that I expect it to be too much like champagne. Conegliano-Valdobbiadene is the best zone.

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