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23 Feb 2008

Farewell Tocai Friulano



This is a longer version of an article also published in the Financial Times.

Wine label printers have much to thank the Hungarians for.

From the beginning of this year the name Tocai Friulano is officially banned from wine labels exported from Italy, requiring an entirely new name for wines made from this popular grape variety in the north east Italian region of Friuli. The Hungarians have successfully argued that there is a danger of confusion of the tangy pale dry whites made from the vine variety previously known as Tocai Friulano with Tokaji, long spelt Tokay, the legendary golden dessert wine of north east Hungary.

The Hungarians have also succeeded in banning the wine producers of Alsace from using their historic term Tokay d'Alsace for Pinot Gris, and in Australia have managed to ban the word Tokay that was used for decades for the dark, treacly essences made from the Muscadelle grape there.

But if these Tokays and Tocais are to be banned, what to use in their place? In Alsace they are gradually getting used to the fact that Pinot Gris must replace Tokay d'Alsace – and even the interim Tokay Pinot Gris is banned from April. In Rutherglen and Glenrowan in north east Victoria, Australia's capital of stickie wine making, wines are called Muscadelle (Tokay) as an interim measure. But what about those in the hinterland of Trieste who have been used to selling really quite considerable volumes of dry white table wine labelled Tocai Friulano in Friuli and Tocaj across the border in Slovenia?

It has long been established that the vine variety known as Tocai (Friulano) is in fact a relative of Sauvignon Blanc known both as Sauvignon Vert and Sauvignonasse. The wine it produces is fuller-bodied and less aromatic than Sauvignon Blanc but can produce perfectly serviceable wine with vigorous acidity and fresh, sappy fruit, sometimes with a sort of 'green', leafy streak. In fact it was this variety that until quite recently constituted the great majority of plantings in

Chile that were known as 'Sauvignon'. It was only in the late 1980s that growers started to plant true Sauvignon Blanc there.

In response to the ban the Slovenians have decided to plump for Sauvignonasse as their new name, although I could see a logic to the term Sauvignon Vert or, perhaps better still, Sauvignon Verde, now that there is an increase in rather deliciously smoky varietal wines made from another relative of Sauvignon Blanc, Sauvignon Gris - from the Loire, Bordeaux, Switzerland, Uruguay and Chile for starters. If Gris, or grey, is successful, might not Verde, or green, be seen as even more attractively refreshing? (Although it is true that in some markets, especially North America, even a hint of greenness or leafiness in a wine is associated with unripeness, currently viewed as a besetting sin.)

The Italians have been less decisive even though they have known since a European Court of Justice ruling in 1995 that they were to be deprived of the traditional term Tocai Friulano for the variety that was, until recently when it was overtaken by Pinot Grigio, the most planted in Friuli. According to EU law the term Tocai Friulano was set to become illegal last April, but there is still considerable reluctance within Friuli to accept the ban and there has been no official agreement on what name to use instead. "It's very difficult for us wine producers to know what is happening with the name", complains Elda Felluga whose father Livio Felluga is widely regarded as the father of modern Friuli viticulture. The Friuli producers have reluctantly shuffled towards the possibility of calling the wine simply Friulano, the least disliked alternative name. "We've printed labels saying Friulano but we're not absolutely sure of the situation," I was told last November at the spectacular Canus winery overlooking the snowy peaks of western Slovenia. While appeals are heard, and as an interim measure, the authorities have suggested that wines destined for export should be labelled Friulano while wines for sale in Italy may continue to be sold as Tocai Friulano, for the moment only. Some producers are even indignant about this and refuse to drop the word Tocai.

I think Friulano is a rather good name for this variety when sold on export markets. The great majority of it is grown in Friuli (although some can be found in such neighbouring regions as the Veneto), it is the quintessential grape of the region and the name Friulano reinforces the region's identity. Friulano is also easy to pronounce, spell and remember.

On my short visit to Friuli I was particularly impressed by **Canus Friulano 2006 Colli Orientali Del Friuli** that perhaps owed its hint of smokiness to a tenth of the wine's having been fermented in barrique, although it was easy to see the innate weight of the varietal. Friulans are convinced that it can age four to five years in bottle but the only really mature example I tried, Schiopetto's 1996, already seemed well over the hill to me. Locally it is drunk with risotto, minestra and thick soups such potato and onion. **Livio Felluga 2006 Colli Orientali del Friuli** is another superior example with a nose reminiscent of Sauvignon Blanc, a beautifully satiny texture and great persistence. Perhaps the finest example of all I tasted was **Schiopetto Tocai Friulano 2006 Collio** which, although creamy and flattering in texture, has wonderfully explosive fruit. About seven per cent was fermented in large oak tonneaux.

The Patrusa family of Vigna Patrusa are proud of fermenting all their Friulano in large (30 hectolitre) oak casks but the resulting wine seemed a bit heavy on the palate to me, a bit out of kilter with the variety's trademark green streak, although admittedly the 2006 vintage was the ripest and most successful for many a year.

Friulano may not be one of the world's finest grape varieties but with its body and acidity, it makes a good blending partner. **Collavini, Broy Bianco 2006 Collio** is a seriously interesting,

tangy dry white made from 40% each part-dried Friulano and Chardonnay with 20% Sauvignon Blanc and a bit of barrique ageing. Right on the border with Slovenia the Slovenian-speaking family Primosic also make a fine blend using 20% Friulano with Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, their darling Ribolla Gialla (a bright yellow Porsche in the yard testifies to their love of the yellow Ribolla) and the local speciality Picolit in their complex, sturdy **Klin Riserva 2004 Collio**. La Tunella make two wines from equal blends of Friulano and Ribolla Gialla. More complex than Biancosesto is **La Tunella, Campo Marzio 2005 Colli Orientali del Friuli**, an impressively bright, lively wine made from the two varieties vinified separately and aged for 16 months in second and third year barriques.

Meanwhile, incidentally, the Australians have just announced the creation of a new wine region in one of the cooler corners of New South Wales called New England, if you please. Should English wine producers, I wonder, take a leaf out of the Hungarians' book and protest at possible future confusions?