

The Friuli

The Friuli-Venezia Giulia region in the far northeast corner of Italy, between the Adriatic coast and the Alps, covers 18,300 hectares, produces just 2% of Italy's DOC wines, but some of the most delicious whites and refreshingly individual reds. Heading up a small group of friends, who I have taken to most other wine regions over the years, in late May, this was my first ever visit.

From a late-morning arrival at Venice airport our bus took us to Eugenio Collavini Viticoltori to be received by Manlio Collavini, Anna Spangaro and the house's short-haired dachshund, whose ancestors adorn the labels of their super-premium range. An aperitif of a creamy 2008 sparkler from the elegant Ribolla Gialla grape, tank-fermented but staying on the lees for 20 months, led to Sauvignon Blanc Fumat 2012 like a ripe Sancerre, then two vintages of their famous Broy, made from 50% Friulano (aka Tocai, but also Sauvignonasse), 30% Chardonnay and 20% Sauvignon: a lively 2011 and a superbly textured 2009. Then on to the reds with a blackcurrant, spicy and still grippy Merlot dal Pic 2006 and Forresco 2006, from two different Refosco clones and 20% Pignolo, robust with a good future to end on a superb 2009 Verduzzo Ice Wine (grapes picked and frozen, not picked frozen), marvellously rich but not cloying.

Our first two nights were at Castello di Buttrio, a fortified castle outside Udine purchased by Friuli grandee Marco Felluga and restored into the most beautiful eight-bedroom hotel by his daughter Alessandra. The Buttrio style of Friulano from steep vineyards is richer than many, but a tasting back to 2007 showed capacity to age, my favourite being the white

peach, stony but rounded 2009. Alessandra Felluga's top duo—Torre Buttrio Chardonnay Riserva 2009 and Uve Carate Merlot Riserva 2009—showed both impeccable ripeness and tension. Our cheerful dinner in the charmingly rustic Taverna was washed down with her house blends Mon Blanc (Ribolla Gialla, Pinot Grigio, Chardonnay and Sauvignon) and Mon Rouge (Refosco, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon) to end of a honeyed Mille e Una Botte Verduzzo, all 2010 vintage.

A short drive the following morning took us to Dott. Giorgio Colutta's cellars, the first in the region to obtain the ISO 9001 certification for quality, to taste five 2012 whites, my preferred being Ribolla Gialla and Friulano (which I found often to be the case) and five reds which included a very well-made Cabernet Sauvignon 2009, but once again I was seduced by the fresh crunchy vigour of his 2011 Refosco and the warmth of the rare 2007 Pignolo, still firm from three years in oak. Finally, a 2007 Verduzzo from grapes dried on mats for two months was a dessert in itself only to be surpassed by one of the only 600 50cl bottles made of 2008 Picolit, a beautifully floral sweet wine.

For lunch we were met by Elda Felluga, daughter of Livio Felluga, whose 155 hectare estate she promotes at her own Terre&Vini restaurant and around the world. In this tasting of 2012 whites, my vote went to their smooth and spicy Pinot Grigio, then we moved up to an Alsace style Friulano/Sauvignon/Pinot Blanc Terre Alta 2011 and a lemony complex Abazzia di Rosazzo 2011 which has just gained its own DOCG. The classy red Sosso 2009, a Merlot/Refosco blend with 5% Pignolo, went well with the cheese.

The next day we visited



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Zorzetting, a big producer near Spessa in the north, where Anna Zorzettig a fine range of single varieties under the MYO label. Here my choice went for the 2011 Malvasia from 80 year old vines, and for the reds a Cabernet Franc style Schioppettino 2010 and a more briary Pignolo 2009. These are wines to watch. Dinner that night at the reknown Castello di Spessa was preceded by a tasting of six wines presented by Richard Baudains, *Decanter's* Regional Chair for Italy, of which the Borgo San Daniele IGT 2010 Arbis Blanc was the best white of the day.

Our last day began with a fascinating visit to Lis Neris, where the fifth and sixth generations of the Pecorari family run an estate that now covers 60 hectares in the prime Isonzo wine zone. A tasting of Alvaro Pecorari's Gris—Pinot Grigio from a single vineyard—from 2010, 2008, 2003 and 1999 was a revelation, as was his Lis—a changing blend of Pinot Grigio, Chardonnay and Sauvignon—from 2008, 2006 and 2001. His Tal Luc from dried Verduzzo grapes quite superb. Finally, it was on to the vast 800 hectare Ca' Bolani estate owned by the Zonin family, whose Superiore range of 2012 Pinot Bianco, Pinot Grigio and Sauvignon and 2011 Refosco proved that big can also be beautiful. All in all, a totally enjoyable and totally convincing first visit to Friuli. ■■