



Oslavia White Wine or Shoud It Be: O Soulvia?

We've all know about "soul food" but few international wine and gourmet culinary lovers have discovered the "soul wine" of northeastern Italy. These days world-class white wines are slipping under the radar of serious wine connoisseurs who haven't experienced premium wine from the Collio region of Italy. Located about 25 miles north of Trieste and near Gorizia, along the Slovenian border, lies mineral rich soils in golden vineyards of native grapes of Friulano, Malvesia and Ribolla. The Collio DOC does allow for the use of twelve white grapes (native and recent introductions) but one varietal that captured my attention and conquered my palate was the native Ribolla or Ribolla Guilla. And, it was the amazing wine made from these grapes, as well as the "soulful" individuals from the Oslavia region that really impressed me. Having an Austrian-Hungarian heritage, I almost felt it was a family reunion with the Oslavia crew, especially when they poured their "bottled treasures of delight" within the ancient chapel of Saint Valentine, on the Italian-Slovenian border, under the purple haze of the Giulie Alps.

Venica and Venica Winery: Tradition, Passion and Respect

I recently toured The Collio wine country of northeastern Italy located in Friuli Venezia Giulia, one of the country's twenty main regions. The Collio is home to the majority of Italy's "world class" whites wines made from indigenous and non-native varietals of grapes. This compact grape growing region contains less than 4,000 acres of vineyards, with about eighty percent dedicated to growing white varietals. The range of habitats and ecosystems in The Collio are diverse, the soils are mineral rich, with elevations ranging from about 250 feet to 600 feet above sea level. The flagship wines here are called Collio Bianco, many of which are traditionally made from natives species of Ribolla Gialla, Tocai (now Friulano) and Malvasia, although Collio D.O.C. rules now allow for the addition of French varietals as well. My greatest discovery while traveling in this region was how well these amazing white wines tasted and paired harmoniously with the wide range of culinary delights handcrafted in northeastern Italy. Few culinary lovers, outside of Italy, know that this region is just as rich in an abundance of gourmet cuisine. For example, the world's finest cured (prosciutti) hams are popular in the Collio, but are made in nearby at San Daniele del Friuli.

Amazing White Wines from Italy

I've just returned from north-eastern Italy where we filmed our newest documentary: A White Christmas in Italy. Over the next several weeks we'll expose you to the secrets about the stunning white wines coming from this area, introduce the winemakers, explore the cuisine, experience the lodging and more. In this reflective photo, you can see our group of wine writers and winemakers along the Slovenian border.

New wave of Italian white wines

Italian White Wines Gain Global Attention

Serious international wine lovers are discovering the phenomenal wines coming from the Collio region of northeastern Italy. Despite a long history (14th century) of wine production in this beautiful region near the Slovenian border and the charming city of Trieste, it has only been in the last seven years that wines from these family-owned, artisan and boutique wineries have caught the attention of dedicated wine drinkers with an open mind and palate. White wines from this remote section of Italy were the last “closely held secret” among local Italian wine lovers until recently. So, the next time you are seeking a palate pleasing white wine with reasonable pricing for the quality, try wines from the Collio region. These wines have a distinct taste and style, pairing well with a diverse selection of culinary delights.

Gorizia, Italy is Loaded with Gold in Their Hills

Massive amounts of pure gold are being unearthed in the province of Gorizia in northeastern Italy along the Slovenian border. Within this “magical-like kingdom” of Austrian-Hungarian and Italian descent lies the wine region of Collio which produces distinct white wines with 14K gold color. Not only are these wines beautiful in color, but the flavors drawn from the rich mineral soils, are interpreted by the vines and fruit varieties into stunning white wines of elegance, finesse and distinction.

We’ve come to this beautiful wine producing region located between the Giulian Alps and the Adriatic Sea as two wine prospectors searching for bottled treasures of delight. Little did we know that we’d find gold in the vineyards, wines, and souls of the local artisan people: the chefs and winemakers. In fact, I was so taken aback with the region that I raced into Trieste to stake a claim, so I can return and explore this region for a seemingly endless amount of gems and jewels in the wine and culinary cultures blended together here over many centuries. We’re here with our newest project: Vino Mundo Productions, a collaboration between myself as a wine, culinary and travel writer and the talented filmmaker, Adrián Enrique Ruiz.

In addition, I’m here to trace my Austrian-Hungarian roots as a member of the Haider clan that moved to America from Vienna in the late 1890’s. My great grandfather, Michael Haider grew grapes and made wine near the famous Farmer’s Market in Los Angeles, California. As a vineyard manager and winemaker in Mexico, I’ve always wondered about my natural tendencies to indulge in farming, winemaking, along with the consumption of gourmet culinary delights, and an incurable urge for all things Italian. It only took a few minutes of exploration at my first stop in Trieste to fully understand the meaning of my Austrian-Hungarian heritage. The churches, the architecture, the promenades, the cuisine, the coffee, and of course, the great white wines from the Collio region.

Trieste is about an hour train ride from the province of Gorizia and the Collio wine region, and makes a great departure locale, especially if you’re looking for gold in the hills of northeastern Italy. Trieste is a gem in itself, a very charming and classic city, very much “off” the tourist maps, a real “dynamic destination” in my opinion. It’s no wonder that James Joyce lived and worked here for twenty years without ever mentioning what a “hidden treasure” he had discovered in the city, the people and the lifestyle. Sigmund Freud lived and wrote here too, but he was somehow able to avoid a “Freudian slip” and reveal the magical world he discovered here as well. Sometimes good things are better kept to yourself, but the secret about Italy’s emerging white wines is already being discovered around the world by serious wine lovers and connoisseurs.

The Collio wine region lies in the province of Gorizia and is within the area of Friull Venezia Giulia or Friuli. There are six distinct regions within Collio: Gorizia to San Floriano del Collio, Mossa to Capriva del Friuli and Preval, Cormons, Dolegna del Collio and Farra d'Isonzo. These unique regions are blessed with high mineral content in the soils, many diverse habitats, hilly exposures and soulful, creative winemakers. This dynamic combination allows for wines of distinct flavor and richness. The white varietals that excel here are: Ribolla Gialla, Malvasia Istriana, Tocai Friulano, Picolit, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Grigio, and Pinot Bianco. Some reds do great here as well: Merlot, Cabernet Franc and a few local varietals such as Pignolo and Refosco. For the most part, this is premium white wine growing country, blessed with an abundance of creative and innovation winemakers with a long history of winemaking traditions.

Four names you should know in the Collio DOG are Marco Felluga, his son Roberto Felluga and daughters Patrizia and Alessandra Felluga. In fact, the entire family is made up of "rock stars" in the wine and hospitality business in this region. Roberto is the fifth generation of Felluga winemakers and manager of Russiz Superiore, while sister Alessandra oversees the operations at Gradisca d'Isonzo. These are two of Italy's top wine producers of about 200,000 bottles annually from 60 hectares at Russiz Superiore and 650,000 bottles from 120 hectares at the Marco Felluga group. Roberto's diverse wine portfolio contains excellent examples of wine from Collio Bianco, Tocai Friulano, Sauvignon, Pinot Bianco, Pinot Grigio, Cabernet Franc and Merlot. I particularly enjoyed the rich flavors and deep structure of his Rosso Riserva, but in fact, all of his wines are of superior quality on a global scale.

Marco Felluga is a dynamic leader in the Collio wine region. He is and was the visionary and patriarch of this region, the one who first understood the unique significance and magic of the mineral rich terroir and the local grape varietals. His daughter Patrizia has now stepped in and inherited her father's spirit of leadership, passion, determination, and vision. Her winery estate, Zuani, produces 40,000 bottles of superior wine from 14 hectares annually. She focuses her talent on growing limited yields of high quality fruit and making two specific wines: Zuani, a cask conditioned wine, released in the second year, and Zuani Vigne, processed in steel tanks. Both are O Collio Bianco wines of excellent quality. Her son Antonio and beautiful daughter, Caterina are well on the road to being the next generation of "super stars" from the Felluga family.

The only problem I encountered in the scenic wine regions northeastern Italy was that all the wines were of premium quality, and all the winemakers are unique individuals with an amazing diversity of talent and vino. Another important element in this equation is that this remote section of Italy isn't ALL about wine, it's also about Italian-Austrian-Hungarian culinary delights, a wonderful blend of people, classic traditions and beautiful scenery. Having said that, I'll be writing many more articles during 2011 to help you understand and discover one of Italy's best kept secrets: their phenomenal white wines. Be looking for our documentary from Vino Mundo Productions: A White Christmas in Northeastern Italy, coming soon on a DVD near you.

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Written by Steve Dryden



Wine Harlots Love Collio!

Wine Harlots love Collio! We spent a few enchanting days in the Collio in Italy, and we are forever changed. The people were lovely, the places and sights were extraordinary, the wine was amazing, and the food was indescribably wonderful. The first meal was the best of my life, and every meal thereafter was better than the next. We've been struggling with how to express the experiences we had, and how to do justice to the kindness and hospitality that was extended during our stay. Over the next few weeks we will be attempting to put into words the sights, sounds and emotions of the trip.

Collio is in the northeast corner of Italy in the region of Friuli Venezia Giulia, 60 miles north of Venice, between the Giulian Alps and the Adriatic Sea is the crescent shaped area known as Collio. On a map, it looks like a smile, and Wine Harlots spent a lot of time smiling. Our hosts' tagline is: "Fall in Love with Collio." Wine Harlots did, and we will endeavor for you to fall in love too.

Collio in Vespa

"The trail is the thing, not the end of the trail. Travel too fast and you miss all you are traveling for."
– Louis L'Amour

Wine Harlots are a marketer's dream. If you're a regular reader, you are already fully aware of how much we love promotional items, but this item has the Wine Harlots in full obsession mode. We can't stop thinking about it. Every time we do, we smile (Note to non-regular readers, in yesterday's tidbit we mentioned the Collio region is shaped like a smile, so it's a callback. Now that you're caught up with the lesson, let's move on).

Collio in Vespa is a program where visitors can rent or borrow scooters to assist in the exploration of the Collio. But not just any scooters, bright yellow Vespa's emblazoned with the Collio brand. Sunny yellow is the color of the white wines of the region; Collio has adopted the color as part of their marketing campaign.

Collio in Vespa was created by restaurateur Josko Sirk and wine maker Edi Keber (both will be profiled in future articles, suffice to say, no trip to Collio is complete without meeting this dynamic duo). To celebrate of the removal of the border checkpoint between Italy and Slovenia, which occurred on December 20, 2007, Edi and Josko road their jauntily yellow Vespa's all night back and forth across the former boundary to symbolize the reunification between the Italian Collio and the Slovenian Collio and to commemorate a Europe without borders.

After realizing how much fun they were having, an idea was born. A high visibility project to raise the profile of the Collio while providing a useful and fun way for visitors to explore the area. And Wine Harlots can't think of a better way to discover Collio, zipping around the rural hills of the area on a sassy yellow scooter. And sassy, it is. Emblazoned on some of the Vespa's are a nude black woman raising a glass of Collio wine with the caption "L'unico bianco che amo." ("The only white I love.") Maybe it doesn't appeal to everyone's sensibilities, the Wine Harlots love it, but then again, we are harlots!

On the Wine Harlots to-do list: Collio in Vespa in the Springtime. Anyone else in to tool around the Collio?

Written by Nannette Eaton



Grand Cru Grapevine: Think Yellow, Drink Yellow

We hope you have enjoyed a wonderful holiday season and have started off 2011 with a bang... or perhaps a bottle or two.

The New Year holds much promise and we look forward to continuing to lead wonderful lives in the year ahead. In the near future, we will be traveling to New Zealand, visiting both the North and South Islands of this amazing country. Of course, wine will be among our chief pursuits with stops in the Hawkes Bay, Martinborough, Marlborough, and Central Otago wine regions. In March, Tracy will participate as a judge in the Finger Lakes International Wine Competition, while April finds her serving on a panel for Roanoke Winery's Winemakers' Smackdown blind tasting event. She is also confirmed to present at both the Society of Wine Educators and American Wine Society's conferences in August and November, respectively.

And, if learning more about wine is among your New Year's resolutions, you might wish to plan ahead and sign up to take one of Tracy's classes at New York University or the International Wine Center (Intermediate Certificate: Thursday evenings beginning March 31).

Among our resolutions, we continue to hold fast to the mantra that "Life is too short to drink bad wine." We hope you agree. In this regard, we turn your attention to a grape that will not likely be familiar, but one that has great potential to please your palate. And, so we introduce to you... Ribolla Gialla.

February 2011

What a winter this is shaping up to be. With snow, snow and more snow piling up (at least for us Eastcoasters), it's enough to make one wish they were hibernating for the season. Fortunately, grapevines go dormant for the winter season, so they are slumbering through all of the storms.

Tracy is lucky enough to have a brief respite early this month as she heads to Miami for the Simply Italian: Great Wines South Florida Tour. Once there, she will be presenting to the trade and press on the U.S. Wine Market and on the Friuli Grave DOC.

Upon her return, we'll be packing for our trip to New Zealand for which we depart on February 12th. Our itinerary includes visits to numerous wine regions on both the North and South Islands, so we'll have a lot to share with you when we get back.

Drink wisely and well

Promoting Prosecco

The twinkling lights of the holidays are all but a dim memory (or at least they should be – if you still have your Christmas lights up, it's more than time to take them down). But, sparkling wines can continue to take their place at the table this month.

In fact, much like the aptly named dessert, Tira Misu, which is traditional to the Treviso province, Prosecco can be the perfect "pick me up" during these dreary winter days. An Italian sparkler from the Veneto region (not far from Collio which we visited in last month's newsletter), this wine has recently been promoted to DOCG status – Italy's highest quality tier.

While previously produced from a grape known as Prosecco, the proliferation of “Prosecco” wines diluted the quality within the market, with bottles from Brazil taking up space on the shelf next to the true Prosecco. Not surprisingly, there was much confusion for the consumer.

Accordingly, the restrictions on what is (and isn't) Prosecco were tightened in 2009, taking effect with the 2010 vintage. Among the changes instituted, Prosecco itself now refers to a territory and the grape is now called Glera, of which a minimum of 85% must be used. If not produced with 100% Glera, the remaining 15% can be made up of Verdis, Perera, Bianchetta, Glera Lugna, Pinot Nero, Pinot Grigio, Pinot Bianco and/or Chardonnay.

Moreover, there are now two levels of Prosecco – Prosecco DOC and Conegliano-Valdobbiadene Prosecco Superiore DOCG. The former comprises nine provinces spread out among two regions (Veneto and Friuli), while the latter is confined to 15 communes within the Veneto's Treviso province. The delimited area for the DOCG includes 4,500 planted hectares, 166 wineries and 3,000 growers.

In general, Proseccos are fresh and fruity, exhibiting the aromatic characteristics of the Glera grape. Produced via the Italian (aka Charmat) method of sparkling wine production, the floral and fruit aromas and flavors are retained, rather than masked through the use of stainless steel and minimal contact with yeast/lees (unlike the Traditional method). Refermentation is typically limited to 25-60 days, with an additional 30 days of bottle age, before release. Meant to be drunk young, the wines are increasingly being vintage-dated (most were previously non-vintaged) to provide the consumer with more information.

Wines may be labeled as being from Conegliano, Valdobbiadene or both, with Conegliano wines emphasizing fruit over floral notes and being slightly more structured. Conversely, Valdobbiadene wines show very developed floral aromas and more delicacy. Similarly to other sparkling wines, Proseccos will be labeled with a sweetness indication – Brut, Extra Dry, Dry or Demi-Sec – with the drier Brut style wines being more modern and the Extra Dry wines (which are only slightly sweet) among the most traditional.

Within the DOCG classification, look for wines labels as Cartizze, the “Grand Cru” of Prosecco Superiore, produced from a mere 106 hectares of vineyard located at the top of Valdobbiadene's steep hills. In addition, Rive, a new classification introduced with the new regulations, indicates a wine that was hand-harvested from a single vineyard, with lower yields and produced in one of Prosecco Superiore's subzones.

With a wealth of Prosecco wines from which to choose, nearly all of which will be quite pocket-friendly, it is easy to add some sparkle to your snow day and celebrate Prosecco's promotion.

Written by Tracy Ellen Kamens

Collio: Wine Springs Eternal

Collio is one of several wine-growing zones in northeastern Italy, a cluster of about 3,500 vineyard acres and 200 wineries producing some seven million bottles a year, nestled into the hills along the Slovenian border where the Alps meet the Adriatic. The soil is all marl and sandstone, and the wines, mostly white, have amazing depth of mineral flavor.

We'll tell the stories of some of the wine growers over the next few days. Today, on our visit to the castle at San Florian del Collio, with its panoramic view over the vineyards, our hosts inaugurated their new fontana del vino, a wine fountain to celebrate the 2010 vintage. The wine that gushed forth was once called Tokaj Friulano (or tokay or tokaj, depending), now known simply as Friulano, a variety that resembles sauvignon blanc and has been in these hills for generations. The Hungarians sued (and won) to keep Tokay for themselves, but theirs isn't remotely related to the Friulano.

There's a lot of talk that Collio should produce a signature "Collio Bianco," a white blend that would showcase the region's unique profile. First, though, they would need to agree on which of the region's grapes should be included (or excluded): friulano, ribolla gialla, pinot grigio, chardonnay, picolit, malvasia, sauvignon blanc? They've all been cultivated here for over 100 years, even the chardonnay and sauv blanc, brought in during the mid-1800s by a French nobleman.

The results so far are promising: regardless of the varieties that go into the blends, it seems that terror--that bracing minerality--trumps varietal differences. That's the hope, they say, that "Collio Bianco" will become synonymous with "fabulous white wine."

Many thanks to our hosts, the Collio growers' association, for getting the wine to come out of the wall, a true Fountain of Youth!

Thinking Yellow

We've been visiting wineries and vineyards in Collio these past few days, an appellation in the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region of northeastern Italy, on the border with Slovenia. Our little band of wine writers was invited by the local consorzio, the association of Collio wine producers. Their numbers are relatively modest a mere 100 or so wine-producing members, another 80 growers, a production zone of only 3,500 acres (one tenth the Napa Valley). Still, they produce seven million bottles a year, and the first thing you learn about marketing is that it isn't the number of acres you harvest or cases you ship but bottles you have to sell, one by one.

Seven million times a year, someone in the world has to forsake all others and drink a wine from Collio.

So Collio has done what many others have: hired advisers to supplement their own marketing efforts. On the domestic side, the campaign for one indigenous variety, ribolla gialla, was simple: "Think Yellow." The yellow Porsche belongs to Marco Primosic, vice-president of the Consorzio. Big success.

What can else we do, they wondered, to make the vineyards themselves a more enticing destination for Italian and nearby European visitors? Germans, Austrians, Slovenians, Swiss. Once they're here, they'll drink our wines and become ambassadors for the region, the thinking goes. One suggestion, championed by chef Josko Sirk of La Subida (the region's best restaurant) and winemaker Edi Keber (a bluff gent with fabulous wine and a taste for avant-garde art, but no website): "self-drive" scooters that would allow tourists to zip around these picturesque hills.

The consorzio sponsored the project, and over the past year five dozen Vespas, painted bright yellow, have been parked at wineries and agriturismos (farmhouse B&Bs) around the Collio production zone. "Collio on a Vespa" has its own website and multilingual maps, collioinvespa.it. It's a terrific site, by the way.

The scooters have been a big hit, and the concept has been imitated in other wine regions. The consorzio's agency hired a famous photographer and art director, Oliviero Toscani, who'd done the (controversial but successful) Bennetton campaign to create an ad for Collio. The image would also be used to brand the new Vespas.

Toscani didn't disappoint: his ad is simultaneously witty and whimsical, sexy and scandalous. What the headline says is: "The only white I love."

To puritanical, politically correct American eyes, the campaign might appear both awkwardly racist and clumsily sexist, not to mention the whole drinking and driving thing. Although the US is the number one export market for the winegrowers here, the campaign is for domestic consumption only, so it probably doesn't matter. What was it that Bill Murray whispered to Scarlett Johansson at the end of *Lost in Translation*? Doesn't matter.

The Commoner-King of Collio

Let's be clear: Edi Keber is not a "gentleman farmer" like some of his fellow wine makers in the Collio region of Friuli, on northeast Italy's border with Slovenia. He's a rough and ready working man, proud of his wines, full of good humor, and with a surprisingly good eye for modern art. He's also the genius behind those yellow Vespas that tourists rent to scoot around the Collio hills. But no website. Email, yes. One suspects this will change before long; Edi has children. On the other hand, he says, "In this winery, I command." And only one wine, period. A white blend called, simply Edi Keber "Collio." He won't tell you what's in it; that's beside the point, he insists. (For the record, it's mostly friulano, with malvasia, ribolla gialla and pinot grigio thrown in.) Twelve hectares on the marl and limestone soil called flysch, 50,000 bottles, and not a stainless steel tank in sight. He ferments in glass-lined concrete tanks.

"Steel has no soul," Edi says, and who's to contradict him?

Far from being a hidebound traditionalist, though, Edi is forward-thinking. He's designed a new bottle for Collio's signature whites, with the name Collio stamped into the neck of the bottle, made by a "green" manufacturer located in Milano (because it's important to keep as much business as possible local). His wife made a lush bean and barley soup for our visiting delegation, and his neighbor, winemaker Roberto Picech, brought some homemade salami. Picech, by the way, currently serves as president of the Collio DOC, the quasi-governmental organization responsible for administering the discipline, or production protocol.

Picech's 2004 white blend was remarkably complex, but Keber's Collio from 2007, served in magnum, was simply stunning, odds-on favorite wine of the trip. A trip, we hasten to remind readers, that was sponsored by the Collio winegrowers to acquaint American audiences with these remarkable wines.

Written by Ron Holden



Viva Collio Italy

On December 8th, I embarked on a new wine journey – one to a part of the world I had never been to - a country which is so revered amongst gastronomes that for many, it's a food and wine mecca.

The Collio region in Italy is not that well-known amongst many American wine drinkers – it's certainly new to me as well so I'm having a blast soaking it all in. This little region in the most northeastern part of the country has a unique positioning of being between a warm sea and very cool Alp mountains. The overall benefit is that aromatic white wines and some red varieties do extremely well here.

The culture here, so far, is one that celebrates life in such a way that puts both the land and the people working the land as the focal points. They're much more about their passion for good wine than simply terroir, even though that plays a huge part of it.

We're talking about generations of families working together, producing world-class wines that can compete with some of the best whites I've had from the likes of Alsace, Germany, Washington State, New York and New Zealand.

My flight had me go from Seattle to Chicago, from Chicago to Munich Germany and then to Trieste Italy – the largest city in the Collio region.

The first day was a whirlwind of getting over a touch of jet-lag and meeting quite a number of great people who live, work and breathe collio wines.

Written by Duane Pemberton