

Taking the long view

Friuli's whites face testing times, with Tocai Friulano renamed, and a global dilution in the appeal of Pinot Grigio. But there's plenty of quality under the surface, says **Carla Capalbo** – if you know where to look

'Pinot Grigio is popular the world over, yet it's like a man without a passport. No one seems to know or care where its wines come from.'

Mauro Mauri

ON A MILD November day, I'm driving up a curvy road in the Carso hills through a blaze of autumn colour. Alvaro Pecorari, owner of Lis Neris winery, is taking me to a high vantage point that was strategic in both world wars. The city of Gorizia is to the right, with the Slovenian mountains behind. In the centre are the Collio hills, with the Colli Orientali beyond them. To the left, the land stretches as far as the eye can see to the Adriatic. The entire foreground of this picture is occupied by the Isonzo river valley, with the river below us as it winds from the Julian Alps in Slovenia to the sea near Monfalcone. The valley is vast, flat and agricultural. Below, the vineyards are turning from green to gold.

I'm in Friuli to concentrate on two grapes, Pinot Grigio and Friulano (known, until recently, as Tocai), and on two production areas, Isonzo and the Colli Orientali. They are less well known than the Collio hills, which are celebrated for their characterful wines, but I've been impressed by the quality of the Isonzo wines I've tasted from a few of its producers. Pecorari is one of them. But how can flat land like this yield wines of such minerality and character?

We'll return to this question. First, the grape varieties. Both come with baggage. 'Pinot Grigio is popular the world over, yet it's like a man without a passport,' says Mauro Mauri, whose winery is in Cormòns. 'No one seems to know or care where its wines come from.' Since the 1980s, when it became a household name, Pinot Grigio has been mass produced in Italy and beyond, often at the expense

of quality. That makes it hard for producers who work it carefully to be understood. Giorgio Badin describes the surprised reaction of a group of Asian importers to his Pinot Grigio price list. 'I had to explain that ours are hand-made, premium wines. When they tasted them, the importers recognised the difference and saw why they cost three times more than the nondescript wines they had previously encountered.'

Pinot Grigio with character

When well made and grown in favourable conditions, Pinot Grigio can result in great wines of character, complexity and longevity that are a far cry from wishy-washy supermarket plonk. With low yields and gentle treatment in the cellar, including a long stay on the lees in wooden barrels, Pinot Grigio can produce fine, aromatic wines. 'On this side of the Isonzo valley, known sometimes as Rive Alte, the terroir can add a salty, mineral quality to the wines that enhances warmth and structure,' says Pecorari.

'Pinot Grigio is a clone of Pinot Nero, with paler violet grapes selected over the centuries by monks,' says Gianfranco Gallo. 'Here we coax out its nobler aromatic side, with notes of wisteria, pastry cream and Poiré William, fine structure and a long finish.'

Friulano appears to be undergoing a different sort of identity crisis. Known in Friuli as Tocai since at least 1900 (the variety is actually Sauvignonasse), the grape was recently renamed after a tussle with the Hungarians, keen to protect their Tokaji.

Opinions vary as to whether 'Friulano' is a good substitute. 'We lost a valuable chance to create a place-specific name reflecting the historical significance of Tocai in this area,' says Gallo.

'Nebbiolo is called Barolo or Barbaresco depending on where in Piedmont it's grown. We could have established something similar as Tocai has been produced here for centuries. Instead we face the prospect of Friulano grapes being grown abroad, so even the geographical connection to Friuli may be lost.' Andrea Felluga, of Livio Felluga in the Colli

Orientali, disagrees. 'Friulano may be virtually unknown, but it's a great opportunity for us to put Friuli on the map through brand building, which so far has not happened.' Alessio Dorigo, also in the Colli Orientali, feels pessimistic about Friulano's chances. 'Pinot Grigio is successful because of its Pinot pedigree. Not so Friulano. Before, its name was recognised even if the grape was not, but now both name and wine are unknown. It's doomed!'

Giorgio Badin adds: 'Tocai was very popular in Friuli as a trattoria wine, but until recently it wasn't treated with much respect. Even after we all began making it well, it was hard to convey that it's not a sweet wine [as the name could imply] and that its characteristic flavours suggest nuts – hazelnuts, sweet and bitter almonds – rather than the sweet, fruity notes of apples, peaches or pears you find in Sauvignon or Chardonnay. Friulano's bitter finish is part of its genetic make-up and gives it unique character. The secret is to keep it bone dry, when it becomes almost salty in its intensity.'

'The Isonzo valley was created 40,000 years ago by a melting glacier that left soil filled with pebbles over a limestone base. It's just like the Left Bank in Bordeaux' **Alvaro Pecorari**

Above: The Isonzo river winds through the valley floor from the Julian Alps in Slovenia





Some producers are committed to investing in Friulano. Lorenzo Mocchiutti, of Vignai da Duline, has replanted Tocai Giallo, a rare biotype, in his historic Ronco Pitotti vineyard and is making wines of beautiful balance from this intriguing variety. If more wine lovers are able to sample wines from such producers, they will find Pinot Grigio and Friulano – in the right locations – are capable of yielding seductive, world-class wines.

Prime territory

But what are the right locations? Back to Pecorari, high up in the Carso Hills. Pecorari delineates the Isonzo DOC wine appellation: ‘The most important area for growing premium grapes is shaped like a triangle, fanning out from Gorizia along the base of the Collio hills on one side, and near the Isonzo river on the other,’ he says, pointing down to the plain. ‘That part is a plateau, just 25 metres above sea level,



Above: Alessandra and Mauro Mauri of Borgo San Daniele are concerned about Pinot Grigio’s future

Top left: Alvaro Pecorari of Lis Neris winery is one of Friuli’s pioneers

but with a unique soil structure. The larger area on the other side of the river is also in the DOC but has a different terroir and is used by industrialised farms focusing on quantity rather than quality.’

‘This valley was created 40,000 years ago by a melting glacier that left soil filled with pebbles and stones over a limestone rock base,’ he says. ‘It’s just like the Left Bank in Bordeaux.’ What better proof is needed that great wines can, occasionally, be produced from flat land? When we return to San Lorenzo and walk through the vineyards, that stoniness is apparent, even through the grass growing underfoot. This part of the plateau has very poor soil and excellent drainage. It would seem to lend itself to great reds (and some people do make them here). ‘As we know, terroir is a combination of three elements: soil, climate and human intervention,’ Pecorari continues. ‘We make 80% whites here because of the winds. The cool east wind from Slovenia is funnelled into the Isonzo valley, giving us wide day-to-night temperature differences in summer that help us to produce whites that are fragrant and well structured.’

Pecorari is one of the zone’s pioneers. He and other forward-thinking producers – including Gianfranco Gallo of Vie di Romans, Giorgio Badin of Ronco del Gelso, Alessandra and Mauro Mauri of Borgo San Daniele, and the Bressan family – have all contributed to raising standards. Now they just need to do the same with the wines’ profile – however the grape variety is referred to on the label. **D**

Carla Capalbo is a food, wine and travel writer and photographer based in Italy. Her book Collio: Fine Wines And Foods From Italy’s North-East, won the André Simon Award for Best Wine Book 2009

Andrea Briccarello picks out a selection of Friuli whites: Friulano,

Ferruccio Sgubin, Petrus Sauvignon Blanc, Collio 2010 ★★★★★ 18pts/20
£12.93 **Prestige Food & Wine**
A majestic example of Sauvignon Blanc. Intense herb notes on the nose, with layers of mango and pineapple. Made from vines over 35 years old, it shows great expression and length, with a hint of saltiness.
Drink: 2012–2015. **Alcohol:** 14%



Vie di Romans, Flors di Uis, Friuli Isonzo 2009 ★★★★★ 18
£25–£29 **Liberty, Slurp, Wholefoods, Winedirect**
This is a classic blend of Friuli’s grapes – Malvasia, Riesling Renano and Friulano all feature in this well-made wine. The

aromatics explode on the nose with notes of pineapple and grapefruit. Complex yet light and elegant with good acidity.
Drink: 2012–2014. **Alc:** 14.5%



Blason, Malvasia Istriana, Venezia Giulia 2010 ★★★★★ 17.5
£11.10 **Thorman Hunt**
This aromatic variety shows great freshness and typicity. Fragrant and mineral, it has a delicate palate of nectarines and granny smith apples. Shows great elegance. **Drink:** 2012. **Alc:** 13%

Petrussa, Chardonnay, Colli Orientali del Friuli 2009 ★★★★★ 17.5
£17.50 **Champagnes & Châteaux**
After spending a year in a mix of

new and old oak, this almost Burgundian Chardonnay has a delicate, elegant nose with notes of flowers, butterscotch, cinnamon and whiffs of white pepper. Vibrant acidity and minerality will help it last.
Drink: 2012–2017. **Alc:** 13.5%

Blason, Friulano, Gorizia 2010 ★★★★★ 17
£10 **Thorman Hunt**
A very ripe and honeyed example of Friulano, showing lots of lime, peaches and apricots. Round and juicy with strong mineral notes. Dry, with citrusy acidity and white peaches on the finish.
Drink: 2012–2014. **Alc:** 13%

Ferruccio Sgubin, Ribolla Gialla, Collio 2010 ★★★★★ 17
£14 **Prestige Food & Wine**



Ribolla is one the most iconic grapes from Friuli. This example is aged in small oak barrels and has an intense nose of ripe tropical fruits, with light notes of vanilla pods and dry nuts. Complex and mineral.
Drink: 2012–2013. **Alc:** 13%

Livio Felluga, Sharis, Colli Orientali del Friuli 2010 ★★★★★ 17
£19.99 **widely available via agent Liberty Wines**
A blend of Chardonnay and Ribolla, this is an exclusive marriage between Burgundy and Friuli, where the creamy texture of Chardonnay meets the tropical fruits of the Ribolla. This fresh, elegant, generous white is a true

Pinot Grigio and beyond...

expression of modern winemaking.
Drink: 2012. **Alc:** 12.5%

Tenuta Luisa, Pinot Grigio, Friuli Isonzo 2010 ★★★★★ 17
£15 **Tria Wines**
A crisp wine from flat, gravelly vineyards near Gorizia. Stone-fruit nose with notes of acacia flowers. Tropical, mineral and elegant, with good salinity from the limestone in the soil.
Drink: 2012. **Alc:** 13.5%



Collavini, Broy Bianco, Collio 2009 ★★★★★ 16.5
£27.75–£28.99
Hallgarten, Slurp
A blend of 40% Friulano, 40% Chardonnay and 20% Sauvignon Blanc. Packed with tangerine

notes, it shows great complexity and vibrancy on the palate with a fresh, citrusy finish.
Drink: 2012–2013. **Alc:** 13.5%.

Tercic, Chardonnay, Collio 2009 ★★★★★ 16.5
£14 **Mille Gusti**
A clean expression of Chardonnay. Lots of fresh white peaches with a strong saltiness on the palate. Crisp and elegant, this is an excellent alternative to a Chablis.
Drink: 2012–2014. **Alc:** 14%

For full details of UK stockists, see p89

Andrea Briccarello is head sommelier for The Galvin Group. These wines were the best of those sampled, non blind, at Decanter’s Friuli Venezia Giulia tasting in London in October 2011



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