
Lugana: the lure of the lake

Lake Garda has long been a tourist draw, and now the wines made near its southern shoreline are also receiving the attention they deserve. Carla Capalbo pays a visit to the Lugana region and recommends her top wines



THERE'S A LOT of buzz in the UK at the moment about the white wines from a small denomination called Lugana, near Lake Garda in northern Italy. 'The great thing about these wines is that they go so well with food,' a London restaurateur told me at a recent tasting. At their best, Lugana wines offer terrific minerality with good structure, so they stand up well to classic Italian antipasti, vegetable or seafood dishes, and go equally well with raw fish and oysters. Plus they're good value for money.

The Lugana area sits like a diamond at the southern end of Italy's largest lake, between the shore towns of Sirmione and Desenzano del Garda. The tallest building in Lugana is a large stone tower, 74m high, at San Martino della Battaglia. It was completed in 1893 to commemorate one of history's bloodiest battles, won here in 1859 against the Austrians by Piedmont's king, Vittorio Emanuele II, with the help of Napoleon III. The victory allowed for the unification of Italy. The frescoed interior tells a tragic story: more than 30,000 were killed or wounded. (The local people's non-partisan rescue operation was the forerunner of today's Red Cross).

It's a 10-minute climb to the tower's top via a steep, circular staircase that coils its way up like a helix, but once you're on the roof the views are breathtaking. And surprising. In all directions – west towards Brescia, north to the lake, or east to Verona – the land around the tower is mainly flat.

'Most great terroirs for white wines are on hillsides, but Lugana is a special case,' says Carlo Veronese, the director of Lugana DOC's consortium, which consists of about 1,000ha (hectares) of vineyards. 'This area was created millions of years ago when the glaciers that formed Lake Garda retreated: they left a shallow amphitheatre lined ➤

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This page: the incredible blues of Lake Garda are a stone's throw from Lugana

Photographs: Giovanni Simeone/SIME/4Corners; Carla Capalbo(2)



Above and left: the monumental tower of San Martino della Battaglia, and the view of Lugana's vineyards from the top



Photographs: Carla Capalbo(2), Map: Maggie Nelson



Left: the harvest gets underway

Above: Luca Formentini of Selva Capuzza

with faint ridges of moraine – glacial debris – that can still be seen today.’ The soil structure is key: if the top layers are primarily of clay and limestone with some chalk, the subsoils are sometimes underpinned with peat and tend to be gravelly and rich in lime and mineral salts. ‘That’s why many Lugana wines have the saline character you often get with sea-coastal wines,’ he continues. It’s confirmation that what goes on below ground is just as important as what’s above.

The lake also plays a part in this unique microclimate. One of Europe’s largest bodies of water, Garda helps temper the temperature, even this far north. Lemon, almond and olive trees flourish on its banks. Two winds also feature here. (In Italy, winds have distinct personalities and names.) ‘Il Pelèr’ is a cool morning wind that blows down from Riva del Garda in the north, while ‘l’Ora’ is a warming southerly afternoon wind. They give the vines the critical day-to-night temperature variation that helps maintain the grapes’ perfume.

Family affair

Wine has been made here since Roman times, but it’s today’s producers I’m keen to meet, particularly those whose wines are found in the UK. One of the lovely things about Lugana is that, despite being just a stone’s throw from the romantic but busy lake shore, many of its best estates are family-run and seem quite removed from the bustle of tour buses and wedding parties.

Luca Formentini is the consortium’s recently appointed president. He’s a fourth-generation winemaker at Selva Capuzza, a 50-hectare estate situated near the tower. At its heart is an ivy-covered, 14th-century farmhouse that doubles as a restaurant featuring locally sourced ingredients. He explains more about the native grape: ‘Lugana wines are made exclusively from Turbiana, a Trebbiano variety that was thought to have links to Verdicchio and that is quite distinct from Tuscan Trebbiano. New research has left its exact provenance in doubt, but we do know that this grape has been planted here for centuries. It has high levels of acidity and



needs to be worked carefully at controlled temperatures to keep it balanced.’ The Selva Capuzza estate wines have an admirable purity about them as proof that, when it’s well made, Turbiana can produce elegant, mineral wines with length and verve.

The harvest was underway at many of the 10 estates I visited, so I could see Turbiana up close. It’s easily recognisable by what the Italians call its ‘ears’: additional small clusters of grapes near the stem that widen the bunch into a distinctive ‘T’ shape. ‘The grapes retain lively acidity even when fully ripe,’ says Valerio Zenato, of Le Morette, a winery that also works as the area’s primary vine ➤



Above: the classic T-shape Turbiana grape on the vine. Left: a bottle from Le Morette, the winery that acts as Lugana's primary vine nursery

Photographs: Carla Capalbo (2)

Capalbo's top Lugana whites to try



Cà dei Frati, Brolettino
2011 19/20 pts (96/100pts)
 £19.99–£22.99 widely available via Liberty Wines
 Fine fruit nose of peaches and apples with good structure and mineral depth, this wine impresses with its tension and exciting length. **Drink** 2014–2025 **Alcohol** 14%



Provenza, Cà Maiol Prestige 2012 18 (93)
 £10.50 Di Vine Importers
 Expressive on the nose, a crisp, refreshing wine with creamy elegance and fine texture. **Drink** 2014–2016 **Alc** 12.5%

Cà Lojera 2012 18.5 (95)
 £17 **Passione Vini**
 Expressive, citrus nose, with white fruits and pure, mineral palate that goes on and on. Lugana with soul. **Drink** 2014–2016 **Alc** 13%

Tenuta Roveglia, Lugana Limne 2012 16.5 (88)
 £12.20 **Jascots**
 Delicately leafy nose with almonds and honey, medium body, nice energy and fair length. **Drink** 2014–2016 **Alc** 13%



Selva Capuzza, Lugana Selva 2012 18.5 (95)
 £18–£20 **AG Wines, Astrum**
 From the estate's oldest vines, a crisp, mineral, elegant wine with complexity and verve. **Drink** 2014–2018 **Alc** 13%



Famiglia Olivini, Demesse Vecchie 2010 16.5 (88)
 £20 **Sardinian Wines**
 Exotic fruits on the nose, complexity and depth; long finish. **Drink** 2014–2018 **Alc** 13.5%



Ottella, Le Creete 2012 18 (93)
 £15.25 **Enotria**
 Lively, long, with good structure and a mineral finish. **Drink** 2014–2018 **Alc** 13%

Perla del Garda, Perla 2012 16 (86)
 £15 **Vini Italiani**
 Refreshing and mineral, with floral notes and clean, delicate finish. **Drink** 2014 **Alc** 13%

For full details of UK stockists, see p88

nursery. 'Like many native grape varieties, the berries are hard to pick from the bunch; that's why most harvesting in Lugana is done by hand.

'This land is difficult to work in both hot and wet conditions,' he says about the clay terrain. 'In dry weather the almost pure clay hardens to a rock-like, impenetrable mass, but in the rain it gets so gummy that even tractors get stuck.' One way to avoid this is to plant grass between at least every other row for tractors to drive on. Underground drainage systems have also been installed in many vineyards.

Another unusual aspect of growing Turbiana is that the vines are often trained high, unlike the majority of Italian vineyards. 'In the lake's damp climate, the grapes are subject to mould and rot if they are not kept high enough off the ground,' says Paolo Fabiani, managing director of Tenuta Roveglia, as we walk through a Turbiana vineyard. 'We've been able to lower the vines from 2.5m to 2m in the past 10 years due to global warming. The rows are kept wide too to allow for drying breezes.'

This historic estate is one of the few that also produces a late-harvest wine from Trebbiano di Lugana. 'When the grapes are extra-ripe it helps give the wines more body, structure and minerality,'

he says. 'It takes Turbiana to another dimension, closer to Riesling or ice wine.'

Toasting Turbiana

Lugana's DOC was granted in 1967, one of Italy's first, just ahead of nearby Franciacorta's. The DOC straddles two regions (Lombardy and the Veneto) and two provinces (Brescia and Verona). Its rules for producing Lugana allow for five types of wine: 'basic' or current vintage; superiore (at least one year of ageing); riserva; spumante (sparkling); and vendemmia tardiva (late harvest). 'The rules state that Lugana DOC wines must be made with at least 90% Turbiana, and the other 10% cannot be drawn from aromatic varieties; but most people now work with pure Turbiana,' says Veronese. 'The alcohol content is usually between 12% and 13.5% and can't be lower than 10.5%.' (Any red wines made in the area go into one of the other Garda DOCs).

A recent trend is showing positive results: if, a few years ago, some producers of Lugana tended to bolster their Turbiana with too much oak from new barriques, the tendency now is to reduce or eliminate the wood presence and let the grape speak for itself. This year, for the first time, the Gambero Rosso >

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Photographs: Carla Capalbo (3)



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annual guide to Italian wines has awarded one of its top Tre Bicchieri awards to a non-oaked Lugana, Provenza’s Cà Maiol Molin 2012, made with the help of Bordeaux consultant, Michel Rolland. ‘The results obtained by this “normal” style of wine will send an important signal to the other producers that Turbiana can stand alone and be highly considered,’ says Veronese.

Well-made Turbiana can also age well. ‘Structure, acidity and minerality are all attributes that can help a wine’s longevity,’ says winemaker Igino Dal Cero of Cà dei Frati, one of Lugana’s most established estates. ‘The terroir and personality of a grape variety really shows in the secondary and tertiary perfumes that only appear after the wine has been cellared for a few years.’ In good vintages, Cà dei Frati puts away a percentage of its wines for release five years later. ‘Turbiana is all extract and acidity, so it’s well suited for ageing. It was often used to boost Soave before it gained its current reputation, and Turbiana grapes are more expensive to buy than Soave’s.’

Export success

Lugana’s is a modern success story despite occasional criticism over some of the wines’ high residual sugar levels. (This is due to halting the fermentation before the yeasts have consumed all the natural sugar in the grapes, so as to balance their high acidity levels – as is common in some parts of Germany). Veronese explains: ‘In the old days, before vinification temperatures could be controlled and the advent of microfilters, Lugana’s wines were often too acidic. But nowadays, if due care is taken in the vineyards and cellars, the wines are balanced and pleasurable to drink.’ Indeed, in the current slowed economic situation, Lugana wine is in high demand. Of the 12 million bottles produced annually, 65% are exported.

‘We started travelling the world with our Luganas 15 years ago,’ says Ambra Tiraboschi of Cà Lojera, one of the area’s most respected producers. ‘Luigi Veronelli, Italy’s greatest wine critic at the time, was a supportive advocate for Lugana. Many of us from what is now the older generation would take our wines to international fairs and be the

only Italians present. People thought we were crazy. But we believed in Lugana and that has certainly paid off. The wines, like the name, have become popular with many consumers visiting Lake Garda and beyond, and now it’s the younger generation that can carry the torch for them.’ **D**

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Above left: Igino dal Cero of Cà dei Frati

Above: vineyards around the 10th-century Castello di Pozzolengo

Where to stay and eat in Lugana

Cà Lojera: The most authentic food in the area, like mamma cooks it. Weekends only. www.calojera.com

Cascina Capuzza: Vineyard restaurant with huge wood grill for meats; spacious garden for warm weather dining, and for the kids to play in. www.selvacapuzza.it

Tenuta Roveglia: Worth visiting to see a historic farmhouse. Guided tastings with home-cooked food to accompany the wines. www.tenutaroveglia.com

Agriturismo Feliciano: Comfortable rooms with a restaurant serving traditional food. www.feliciano.it

Ottella: Five rooms in the vineyards, decorated with modern art. www.ottella.it

Borgo San Donino: Self-catering farmhouse apartments, with pool,



Above: Ambra Tiraboschi of Cà Lovera

surrounded by vineyards. www.selvacapuzza.it