



Photo: Luigi Vitale

THE WINES OF FRIULI VENEZIA GIULIA

The vineyards of Buttrio
below Buttrio Castle

A borderland cradle of celebrated white
wines and determined people

Friuli Venezia Giulia is
a land of resilience and reinvention
that has always been
subject to contention, writes
Alessandra Piubello

Over the centuries, the history of Friuli Venezia Giulia to the northeast of Italy has seen countless soldiers passing through and constant border changes. A geographical location that has always been subject to contention, the eastern edge of Italy has a border that is not a physical barrier but a historical one. Geography typically defines boundaries through mountains, rivers or seas, but here it is a long and complex history that has drawn the line. This is a land of silences and unspoken truths, of emigrants who, armed with patience and strength, returned home proud and ready to rebuild what had been destroyed. A resolutely individualistic people, dominated by history but never defeated.

Friuli Venezia Giulia is a land that must be experienced, listened to and observed in its often rough gestures that reveal its characteristically deep power of commitment, far from the limelight and accustomed to doing, without bragging. This perhaps reflects the shy, taciturn soul of a proud Friuli man, devoted to hard work but not quite sure of himself. Through centuries of domination, it is the region's rural wisdom that has allowed the soul of the land to survive — a land worked with a sense of belonging rooted in its people's DNA.

Writer Mario Soldati once described Friuli Venezia Giulia as, “a fiery and impetuous land, where, although made in large quantities, they drink more wine than they make.” Perhaps the Friulian finds sociability and sharing in the tavern, a place that represents a part of the Friulian soul with a *tajut* (glass of wine). An old Friulian proverb says: *vin e amis, un paradís* (wine and friends, a paradise). It is no coincidence that writer Giovanni Comisso described Friulians as tenacious people, with a special affinity to wine as something that gave them comfort and the courage to endure.

A unique wine-growing world that has little in common with the rest of Italy due to its distinct history where wine too is human and shaped by our experiences. Friuli Venezia Giulia is a mirror of the Mediterranean bordering central Europe, a land of determined men and celebrated white wines. A region of

rolling hills that enjoys the reflected light of the Adriatic Sea to the south and is protected by the Julian Alps to the north. These mountains, while a valuable barrier against the harshest cold, do not stop Friuli Venezia Giulia from having the highest rainfall in Italy.

This borderland of Italy boasts of 22,000 hectares of vineyards, with a distribution of 81% on the plains and 19% in the hills. It has four DOCGs (Picolit, Ramandolo, Rosazzo, Lison), 12 DOCs and three IGTs, and as much as 80% of its vines produce white grapes.

Native grape varieties reached Friuli Venezia Giulia via two main routes: the first was Latin, following the Roman conquest in the first century BC; and the second (accounting for two-thirds of the region's native heritage)

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through the Balkan Peninsula in an earlier era dominated by Celtic populations. International grape varieties arrived in the 19th century, most likely thanks to Count de La Tour. The Friuli people adopted the grapes, taught them to speak Friulian, then sent them into the world to tell their own story.

With the arrival of inter-regional Prosecco DOC in 2009, the character of Friuli Venezia Giulia vineyards has changed radically. To date, Glera is the most planted grape variety, followed by Pinot Grigio, used in the Venezia DOC (another inter-regional denomination).

Our oenological journey begins in the west in the vast plain of the Grave DOC between the provinces of Pordenone and Udine, named for its alluvial soil rich in stones and gravel. Over two-thirds of Friuli's wine is produced

A vineyard in the subzone of Prepotto



Photo: Alessandro Michelazzi



The vineyards of Ruttars in Dolegna del Collio

here by five of the six regional wine co-operatives. Two inter-regional denominations – Lison Pramaggiore and Lison DOCG – are produced further south. The areas overlap, but the DOCG is primarily Tai or Friulano-based, while Lison Pramaggiore DOC produces a remarkable variety of mainly international white and red grape varieties. The two denominations have predominantly sandy and clay soils.

Moving east to the Bassa Friulana zone, which borders the coast to the south and is subject to the Bora wind, we find three DOCs from the province of Udine: Friuli Latisana, Friuli Annia and Friuli Aquileia. These three DOCs are produced on clay and sandy soils, which are rich in minerals from alluvial activity and support a considerable amount of international grape varieties. Further east, the Isonzo river closes a region with its markedly diverse lowland denominations. This area is

the Gorizia province, with two distinct micro-zones where the Isonzo dynamically imprints the DOC.

To the north is the Rive Alte (upper slopes), a cooler area rich in noble clays mixed with red gravel. To the south is the Rive di Giare (gravelly slopes), whose soils, subject to constant breezes, comprise white calcareous gravels and sands brought from the nearby Adriatic. Although the grape varieties in this DOC are diverse, there is no shortage of strong performers, especially Friulano and Sauvignon. Continuing eastward, we come to the Karst Plateau between the provinces of Gorizia and Trieste, a melting pot of cultures.

“Karst” means rock, one of the founding elements of this limestone plateau that rises sharply from the sea to around 200 or 300 metres above sea level. The intense light of this soulful place is striking. The restless mobility of the sky seems to communicate in its own

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Vineyards in Russiz Superiore, Capriva del Friuli

way. The wind, which shapes rocks sweeps away anything that is not part of the *genius loci*. The earth, arid and rocky, retains little water and vines struggle to find sustenance. A thin layer of red soil, rich in iron oxides and mineral salts, overlays mother rock.

The Karst people, tough, observant and respectful of nature, have wrested the earth from rock for local viticulture in harmony with nature without oenological interventions. Tufts of the shrub sumac can be seen changing colour from yellow in spring to red in autumn not far from the rows of Karst's typical vines, Vitovska and Istrian Malvasia white grapes, and Teran, a red grape from Refosco. This is a world that grips the senses, where a vibrant energy flows in the earth and air and permeates into the sapid, dynamic and characterful wines. Here too, as in Collio, the whites are macerated, giving them greater

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structure, texture and volume.

Further up the eastern edge, we enter the Collio Goriziano, and walk through its vineyards growing on ancient Ponca soil — calcified, clayey, sandy soil that greatly influences the flavour and longevity of the wines. Collio wines are the most famous in the region and are renowned throughout Italy and beyond. International wines include Sauvignon, Pinot Bianco, Chardonnay and, of course, Pinot Grigio, while those made with native grapes are Friulano, Malvasia Istriana and Ribolla Gialla. The Ribolla Gialla grape variety is most prominent in the Oslavia area, particularly known for its practice of maceration on the skins. It was from here that the revolutionary winemaking philosophy of using Georgian amphorae, began and later spread throughout Italy and beyond.

Just above this area, lies another significant Ponca soil zone: the Eastern Colli in the



Cividale del Friuli town, a day trip from Udine and UNESCO World Heritage Site

province of Udine, which borders the Republic of Slovenia for a stretch, representing a sort of *trait d'union* between the two regional spirits, Friulian and Julian. The wine-growing area is vast with diverse wine landscapes and grape varieties, including Friulian, the region's signature variety. Three of the four regional DOCGs (Ramandolo, Picolit and Rosazzo) and the highest concentration of Friulian sub-zones (Refosco di Faedis, Cialla, Ribolla Gialla di Rosazzo, Pignolo di Rosazzo, Schioppettino di Prepotto) predominate here. The two rare and much celebrated sweet wines Picolit and Ramandolo (Verduzzo Friulano in purity), are liquid poetry, pearls of regional oenology, able to enhance acidic freshness and tannic sapidity. Among the reds, Schioppettino di Prepotto expresses itself well with its spiciness and drinkability; Refosco wines have an impetuous and vital character; and the tannic and whimsical Pignolo, which is making a

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comeback for its astounding ageing potential, is one of Italy's most complex and long-lived wines.

This journey through Collio, Eastern Colli and Karst showcases the resilience and independence of Friuli's winemakers. Their ideas and convictions often led them to reject the dominant Friulian winemaking trends of the 1990s. With a very strong sense of terroir, their wines often reflect not just the countryside, but also social, ethical and political ideals. Joško Gravner is a fine example. His courageous rejection of classical winemaking has had an enormous influence, not just in Italy but globally. He was the first non-Georgian winemaker to choose qvevri vinification, and one of the first to introduce the world to amber wines macerated on the skins.

In the end you may agree with Ippolito Nievo, the writer who described Friuli Venezia Giulia as “a small compendium of the universe” ♦