

The wines of Lake Garda

This beautiful north-Italian tourist destination is bordered by three classic wine regions offering a full range of styles, writes Alessandra Piubello: the fruity reds and delicate rosés of Bardolino, and the contrasting white styles of Custoza and Lugana

A WINEMAKER'S PARADISE, as well as a tourist's, Lake Garda produces a palette of wines as captivating as its beautiful landscapes. Breezes caress the vineyards, drying up the rain and humidity. The sun delicately kisses the grapes, allowing them to ripen in a healthy climate. The land is well-suited to vines, which have been growing here since ancient times. Towers and castles signal a glorious past, amid vineyards and olive groves stretching as far as the eye can see in tidy lines illuminated by the lake's reflection.

Photograph: Mick Rock/Cephas

Visitors the world over remember the wines of this region fondly, but they are worth seeking out even if you can't taste them in their breathtaking home setting.

We will speak here of the most well known, those from the lake's southeasterly bottom corner. The red (Bardolino), rosé (Chiaretto) and white (Custoza) are complementary and

'Spontaneous and convivial, Bardolino is also versatile in food pairing'

all offer an immediate enjoyment and freshness of flavour that make them ideal, accessible (including price-wise) everyday-drinking wines. Lugana, the other Garda white, has a more full-bodied and energetic profile. Something for everyone then, depending on the moment and the fancy.

Bardolino

Lying among Alpine ruggedness and lakeside beauty, the Bardolino area extends from Torri del Benaco on the eastern shore of the lake, from the slopes of Monte Baldo and the town of Caprino, down to the 'classic' area, further south still and even inland. While the base ➤

Below: view of Lake Garda over the Bardolino Classico vineyards of Veneto



soils are of morainic origin, the rocky outcrops of its northern sector mean that Bardolino is different to the other, nearby areas of Custoza and Lugana (see below). The grapes used in Bardolino wines are all native and include mainly Corvina, Veronese, Corvinone, Rondinella and Molinara.

So what are the wines like in the glass? The fundamental characteristics of Bardolino are freshness, and fruity, fragrant aromas of sweet and bitter cherry, raspberry, redcurrant, blackberry and elegant hints of spices (cinnamon, cloves, black pepper). On the palate it is refined – harmonious, with consistently well-balanced tannins – and pleasant, with a typical touch of saltiness that experts have noticed through the centuries. Spontaneous and convivial, Bardolino is also versatile in food pairing, being enjoyed traditionally even with fish.

‘The new Bardolino project,’ says Franco Cristoforetti, president of the consorzio, ‘promotes territorial distinction, already well-defined at the end of the 1800s. We are aiming at a wine that is able to describe the three historical macro-areas with their relative sub-zones, demonstrating longevity without ever neglecting its main feature – drinkability.’ Expert tasters will recognise the spicy notes and greater refreshing acidity of the northern area; the ripe and intense fruitiness of the classic area with hints of raspberry, blackberry, black cherry; while, in the southern area, they will find fragrances of



dry rose and crunchy tones of cherry.

And, although Bardolino DOC wines are usually aged in stainless steel, Bardolino Superiore – which carries a DOCG classification – uses wood, giving the wine further body and structure.

‘Now,’ says Matilde Poggi, owner of Le Fraghe and president of the Federazione Italiana Vignaioli Indipendenti (FIVI), ‘the trend is to respect the typical light colour of Bardolino, to use a lot of Corvina grapes with their characteristic spicy notes, and large oak barrels. Another important aspect (and I have been in organic production since 2009) is the considerable increase in the number of producers who are changing to organic.’

Chiaretto is the pink version of Bardolino, far-sightedly promoted by the consorzio since 2014 with its ‘Rosé Revolution’ campaign. The aim is to encourage the production of a more uniform wine style that can be easily identified, beginning with its now-characteristic light lychee-pink colour – previously, the colour of Chiaretto wines had been varied and nondescript.

The consorzio suggests opting for very short and low-temperature maceration on the skins so that consistent aromas of citrus and hints of medicinal and floral herbs are enhanced in the glass. It’s a strategy that is already reaping rewards, building, as it is, on an already-growing trend in the region, and which has seen the number of bottles of Chiaretto sold double in just a few years. >



‘An important aspect is the considerable increase in the number of producers who are changing to organic’ Matilde Poggi, FIVI president (above)

Custoza

Sometimes referred to as Bardolino's white alter ego, Custoza DOC is produced in eight out of nine of the same municipalities as Bardolino. The morainic amphitheatre that characterises the zone features a dense series of elongated hills with differences in elevation ranging from 50m to 100m. It is exactly this morainic terrain that gives Custoza its characteristic salty and savoury hint (also found in Bardolino). The area benefits from the influences of the lake but, being on the edge of the plain, it is also subject to some continental influences and is well ventilated. The sudden shifts in temperature between day and night allow the white grapes to develop their characteristic aroma.

Custoza is an immediate, fresh and lean wine. Its essence lies in its simplicity, in its smooth and easy drinking nature, though this does not mean that it cannot evolve and age well. As Luciano Piona, owner of the Cavalchina winery and president of the consorzio, says: 'We have disproved the preconception that our wine should be drunk young by proposing a series of comparative tastings in Italy and abroad called "white&gold". On the one side, a crunchy and slightly aromatic style of wine; on the other, one made with a quality fruit selection and more than 10 years behind it, demonstrating that Custoza's typical acidity remains strong and steady over time.'

Custoza, whose entry-level incarnation represents 98% of production, also has a superiore version, with grapes coming from the best-positioned and oldest vineyards (though the old vines may have been replaced by more recent plants cultivated using the Guyot system), which are more challenging to manage and have lower yields.

The choice of grapes used in a Custoza blend can, along with the choices made in the winery, lead to substantially different interpretations, even though all producers opt for stainless steel. The modern application of the regulations favours Garganega and Bianca Fernanda (a local Cortese clone), accompanied by Tuscan Trebbiano and Trebbianello (local bio-type of the Tai grape), although Malvasia, Riesling Italico, Pinot Bianco, Chardonnay and Manzoni Bianco can also be used.

Our ampelographic wealth,' explains Carlo Nerozzi from Le Vigne di San Pietro winery, 'means that our wine is being rediscovered as something modern. Its subtle, balanced aroma makes it popular among those who may be new to wine. And a large part of our denomination is actually managed by young people: a successful generational change. Collaboration is widespread and quality has risen remarkably, despite the awkward presence of cooperatives.'



'Lugana is experiencing a golden time, and grape and land prices have soared'

Francesco Montresor, Ottella (above)

Lugana

Lugana derives from *lucus*, meaning 'wooded grove' in Latin – the area was one large forest up to the 18th century. 'Things have changed since then,' says Luca Formentini from the Selva Capuzza winery and president of the Lugana consorzio. 'We have launched a pilot project called "Lugana for the environment and the environment for Lugana", which aims to protect the trees that might otherwise be sacrificed to plant new vineyards.'

This flat yet slightly hilly location lies to the south of Lake Garda. Although the soil formation was originally the same as for Bardolino and Custoza, the earth here is a mixture of morainic debris and lake clay. It is exactly these clays that are the organoleptic custodians of Lugana. A varied spectrum of fragrances ranges from citrus fruits and meadow flowers to aromatic herbs and spices. The wine has a particular multi-faceted personality, characterised by stony minerality and a saline backbone, vigour, warmth, acidity, body, elegance and flavour.

Garda's 'other' white wine, Lugana is anything but carefree. It has two souls: at first, it gives the impression of being a white wine with feminine fragrance, but then on the palate it demonstrates a character of virile structure. Despite its mellowness of flavour, >

Below: Selva Capuzza's Selva, Lugana 2015 reflects the 'multi-faceted personality' of the region



Lugana is able to defy time by transforming itself over the years, developing a striking nobility with maturity. The riserva version particularly supports lengthy ageing.

There are, in fact, five categories of Lugana: entry level – about 96% of production, characterised by tension and freshness; superiore and riserva – the result of a late-October harvest, more complex winemaking in steel or wood, lengthy resting on yeasts and prolonged ageing; spumante; and, last but not least, vendemmia tardiva, made by over-ripening grapes on the vine, but no drying.

Lugana has two fronts – 80% of its 1,400 hectares extend into the province of Brescia, while the rest are in the province of Verona. ‘Lugana is experiencing a golden time,’ says Francesco Montresor from the Ottella winery.

‘Grape and land prices have soared. Unlike Bardolino and Custoza, there are no wine cooperatives in our territory. We producers keep the value of our grapes high, and supply is also short; our wine is not subject to wide price gaps and is never undersold.’

Many have sung the praises of this wine over the centuries, including the 1st century BC Latin lyric poet Catullus, who spent long periods in Sirmione, a small town at the end of the peninsula on Lake Garda’s southern shore. The area was already well known then as a ‘climatic cradle’ of rare mildness where the Turbiana grape, or Trebbiano di Lugana, finds its most appropriate expression. Almost all the producers now tend to use purely Turbiana grapes in their wine, though the regulations stipulate a minimum of 90%. **D**

Alessandra Piubello is a writer and journalist with a focus on wine and food. She grew up in a winemaking family in the Valpolicella region

Piubello’s picks: top buys from Lake Garda



La Cavalchina, Amedeo, Custoza Superiore 2015 91
£15 **Vinumterra**

Complex nose with aromatic herbs, hay and linden flower highlights. All this wine’s energy is expressed on its lively palate, which has a refreshing bite and a dynamic feel. Shows great potential for further development.

Drink 2017-2022 **Alcohol** 13.5%

Zenato, Santa Cristina, Lugana 2015 91
£15.99-£19.99 **Bon Coeur, Eurowines, Raffles, Totnes Wine**

Intense, with hints of orange blossom, mandarin and Fuji apple. A precise palate, with a vibrant, acid-savoury balance sustaining the ripeness of the fruit, bringing drinkability and energy. Typical almond character to finish. A classic. **Drink** 2017-2022 **Alc** 13%

Gorgo, San Michelin, Custoza 2015 90
£12 **Ellis of Richmond**

Aromas of meadow flowers, citrus fruit and pineapple. Refreshing, contrasting flavours and a vivacious saline seam in a forward, expressively carefree style, offering plenty of fruit and depth. **Drink** 2017-2021 **Alc** 12.5%

Monte del Frà, Ca’ del Magro, Custoza Superiore 2014 89
£13.95 **Berry Bros & Rudd**

Well-crafted, aromatic profile of

camomile, saffron, golden apple and vanilla. Generously flavoured but finely textured, developing with a lively rhythm across the palate, and balanced by a pleasantly bitter note on the finish. **Drink** 2017-2021 **Alc** 13%



Ottella, Molceo, Lugana Riserva 2014 90
£60 **Enotria&Coe**

Exotic balsamic tones with light woody scents. Well-structured with admirable freshness, elegance and poise in the mouth. Worth keeping in the cellar for a few years – its longevity may surprise you. **Drink** 2017-2025 **Alc** 13%

Selva Capuzza, Selva, Lugana 2015 90
£16.50-£17 **Astrum, The Solent Cellar, Wined Up Here**

Saffron spice and grass aromas. Well-articulated and rhythmic palate, the wine extending harmoniously with elegance and refinement. Combines body and substance with juicy fruit and salty mineral traits. Good persistence. **Drink** 2017-2022 **Alc** 13.5%

Le Fraghe, Rodòn, Chiaretto, Bardolino 2015 90
£10 **The Wine Society**

Wild strawberry, dog rose, redcurrant and pink grapefruit aromas. Great tension and expression on the palate, with a fresh and vibrant flow. Crunchy

texture and great energy with a saline minerality developing through to the finish. **Drink** 2017-2019 **Alc** 12%

Corte Gardoni, Le Fontane, Bardolino 2015 91
£20 **Smith & Gertrude**

Hints of spice and smoke accompany a fruity fullness on the nose. Fine tannins in the glass, cut by an acidity that brings a note of tension. An irresistibly enjoyable drink, stimulating right up to its moreish finale. **Drink** 2017-2023 **Alc** 12%

Giovanna Tantini, Bardolino 2014 91
£14 **Winetraders**

A fragrance of cherries, liquorice root and spices. A bold Bardolino, pulpy and well-structured, with great depth of flavour. The acidity brings freshness to a harmonious and dynamic palate that culminates in an impressively long finish. **Drink** 2017-2023 **Alc** 12.5%



Le Vigne di San Pietro, Bardolino 2015 91
£17 **Highbury Vintners, Thorman Hunt**

Hints of forest fruits, pepper and thyme on the nose, with a fragrant, ripe fruit focus on the palate. Delightfully juicy character; a drinkable style with good mineral nuances. **Drink** 2017-2023 **Alc** 12.5%

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