



DINING & WINE

Friulano, an Italian White Wine That Makes Friends Easily

By FLORENCE FABRICANT JUNE 12, 2014

CIVIDALE DEL FRIULI, Italy — You may have sipped a pleasant pinot grigio from Friuli, a region in the far northeast of Italy known for its white wines and more properly called Friuli-Venezia Giulia. But you are less likely to have had a glass of friulano, a more distinguished wine that is worth discovering.

When I was in Friuli last month, I drank friulano like it was my birthright. If a region can have a house wine, it's friulano. It's what you will find on tables by the glass, sometimes for as little as 1 euro, or about \$1.40. It's the first choice in homes and restaurants. But it is being overshadowed on the international market by the region's better-known white wines like pinot grigio. Even the local winemakers are starting to pay less attention to it.

"Pinot grigio and sauvignon blanc are increasing in Friuli and friulano decreasing," said Elda Felluga, whose father, Livio Felluga, established the renowned estate that bears his name in 1956. "But friulano is the flagship white wine of Friuli."

Part of the reason for the decrease in popularity stems from a name change in 2007. For centuries the grape from which it is made was widely known as tocai friulano. But after joining the European Union in 2004, Hungary successfully lobbied to obtain the exclusive use of the name tocai for its famous sweet wines. So the winemakers in Friuli and elsewhere in Italy, who were calling their wines tocai friulano, had to come up with an alternative. They considered "sauvignon vert" and "sauvignonasse," two names for the actual friulano grape, but rejected them as too French. Friulano won.

“The demand seems to have diminished since they changed the name,” said Chris Cannon, the consultant to All’onda in Manhattan, where the cooking takes its cue from Venice, some 90 miles west of Friuli. “But it’s one of the best wines of the region. Friulano can stand up to bigger white wine dishes like roast chicken.” He likes the Dario Raccaro Friulano from a small producer.

Now, beyond Friuli’s farmland, hills and beaches, friulano is a “niche wine, a wine for connoisseurs,” as Wayne Young, the winemaker for Bastianich winery, put it. That winery, owned by the family of New York restaurateurs, takes pride in its friulanos, especially a wine called Plus, which is made from 60-year-old friulano vines. In the wine cellar at Orsone, the new country inn owned by the Bastianichs adjacent to the winery outside Cividale del Friuli, there is a bottle of 1998 tocai friulano. The wine, one of the very first produced by the winery, is lush, with elegant whispers of pear and a refreshing bitter almond finish. You’ll find hints of the same characteristics in younger friulanos.

Stylistically, friulanos range from light and crisp to richer and full-bodied, but reliably exhibiting an alluring perfume of pears. Some of the finest, more complex friulanos are vinified in contact with the skin of the grapes, allowing the character of the grape to intensify. They may also be aged briefly in oak.

While the Livio Felluga winery is happily capitalizing on the popularity of pinot grigio (it makes an excellent one), Andrea Felluga, a son of the founder and the winemaker and managing director, contends that friulano is one of the world’s best white wines. “It can exhibit minerality when young, but mellows as it ages without losing its steely cloak,” he said. “It needs time, even time in the glass.” Terre Alte, the winery’s marquee white blend made with grapes grown at Rosazzo, an Augustinian monastery, depends largely on friulano.

In Friuli I was served friulano with the area’s nutty-tasting San Daniele prosciutto; with seasonal asparagus, white and green; with an earthy barley pilaf; and with cheeses like Montasio, often used to make the lacy frico pancake. I would drink it with a lobster roll or pasta with clams in New York. It’s harder to find in wine shops; they may stock only two or three, though perhaps one can assume that with so few, they are well selected. Depending on the wine and its age, you’ll pay from \$20 to more than \$100 a bottle. In wine shops and restaurants, you’ll still see the label tocai friulano from a handful of American winemakers using the sauvignon vert grape, including Channing Daughters in Bridgehampton, N.Y.

“Friulano is a quality grape,” said Joe Campanale, the beverage director of the Epicurean Group, which owns L’Apicio and other restaurants in New York where you’ll find several friulanos. “There are stylistic differences depending on the producer. It’s versatile and good value at lower price, food-friendly and usually more distinctive than pinot grigio. But I can’t remember the last time someone actually ordered it.”

Olivier Flosse, the beverage director for A Voce and the other Marc restaurants, said, “It deserves more recognition than it has right now because it is such a fine, balanced wine.”

Recipe: Asparagus With Prosciutto and Egg

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