

Veneto: The Land of Opportunity

BY ERIC GUIDO | MARCH 23, 2023

On each trip to Veneto, I discover something new and exciting that inspires me to dig even deeper. This past December, the hills of Colli Berici, east of Soave, proved particularly intriguing. Readers should also explore Colli Euganei and Breganze, areas that produce top dry reds and some of Veneto's top white dessert wines. Simply put, wine lovers would be remiss not to notice the quality surge taking place across the Veneto.



Looking out across Valpolicella from the high elevations of the Maternigo vineyard of Tedeschi.

A Constant State of Evolution: Valpolicella

Valpolicella is divided into two main zones. The **Classico** side is close enough to Lake Garda that its fronts are visible from many vineyards on a clear day. The Classico zone comprises five communes (Negrar, Marano di Valpolicella, Sant'Ambrogio di Valpolicella, Fumane and San Pietro in Cariano) spread over three valleys. The most traditional families, including Quintarelli, Tommaso Bussola, Ca' La Bionda and Brigaldara, are based here. The Fumane Valley is the coolest, with steep elevations and rocky stratified limestone. Moving east, we find the Marano Valley, benefitting from the cooling effects of the Lessini Mountains to the north with soils of basaltic rock. Finally, the Negrar Valley, just southeast of Marano, is rich in clay loam soils and even stronger currants from the same Lessini Mountains to the north.

Things change drastically just north of Verona, in what is known as the 'expanded' portion of Valpolicella. The **Valpantena** Valley, where the terrain quickly climbs

toward the Lessini Mountains. This is a wild and rocky territory with extreme diurnal shifts. Far detached from the Classico zone, within the valleys of Marcellise, Mezzane, Illasi and Cazzano di Tramigna, lie vineyards for the production of Valpolicella and Amarone. These vineyards benefit from a complex mix of rocks and minerals. Many top estates are in these areas, including Marion, Roccolo Grassi and Dal Forno. In the most eastern sections of Valpolicella, the flatlands and their alluvial soils produce Soave, as the two DOCs intersect.

Producers throughout broader Valpolicella continue searching for the next trend that will resonate with wine lovers worldwide. Time has already taught them a few lessons, as the popularity of large-scale, brooding Amarone has become a thing of the past. Many consumers look to sugar as the modern-day dietary enemy and therefore stay away from wines that taste sweet. Moreover, younger generations are entering the market craving wines with lower alcohol and fresher personalities. Not to mention, what cuisine do you pair with an Amarone? Producers are aware of these challenges and are changing how they think about their wines. Today, a push toward lower alcohol and residual sugar results in a style of Amarone that can perform beautifully at the dinner table.



The barrel aging cellars at Tommasi.

However, both the reputation of Amarone and its traits pose a challenge. The *appassimento* process (air-drying of the grapes to reduce water and increase sugar and concentration) may intensify the depth and character of the wine. Still, it also creates glycerol-like textures and a deceiving perception of sweetness. Basically stated, even an Amarone that finishes at less than one gram of residual sugar per liter and 14.5% ABV can taste sweet-but it's a trick of the mind and palate. At the same time, I found many wines made in a dryer and lighter style that come across as disjointed and out of balance. These are necessary growing pains, as Amarone is the region's traditional wine and should remain the primary focus of producers. There are already a large number of wineries that are turning out perfectly balanced

examples in this new style, but many more that are struggling. As for lovers of Amarone's big, old-school bottlings, have no fear because plenty of producers are happy to stay true to their roots and turn out some of the best hedonistic juice imaginable. In the end, the category of Amarone is in a constant state of flux, but the future appears promising.

Things start to get very interesting beyond Amarone. The trend to produce a better Valpolicella Superiore continues. These wines often come from a single vineyard or a special selection of fruit. Moreover, using *appassimento* to bolster Valpolicella Superiore is quickly going out of fashion. Producers aim to make a wine that speaks of the region, its terroir and native grape varieties, yet also one that communicates importance. For the longest time, Valpolicella Superiore has been considered the Beaujolais of Veneto; simple, easy, fruity-gulpable. That said, the DOC regulations make this a very open-ended category that allows producers to get creative. A Valpolicella Superiore consists of a traditional blend of 45% to 95% Corvina, or the larger-berried Corvinone, 5% to 30% Rondinella, and up to 10%, but not obligatory, of Molinara, Croatina, Negrara and/or Dindarella. The regulation also states that the wine must be refined in the winery for at least one year before release. However, from the label, there is no way to tell the difference between a high-profile Valpolicella Superiore and one representing a fun and fruity introduction to a portfolio. Hopefully, producers will look for a way to better define the category because these really are wines to be excited about.

Furthermore, Valpolicella Ripasso has fallen out of favor in a big way with consumers and producers. Much of this has to do with the better refinement of Amarone and the improvement of the Valpolicella category. A Ripasso is a Valpolicella wine passed over the pulp of an Amarone crush and allowed to go through secondary fermentation. The wines are dry but also much darker, deeper and with a bitter note that reminds the taste of Amarone. There is still a place for Ripasso in collectors' cellars, especially for those who prefer more intense and highest wines without crossing over into Amarone territory. A good Ripasso can be enjoyed at and away from the dinner table. Nevertheless, producers feel that the wines no longer communicate the freshness and importance of the varieties. Considering the addition of the Amarone pulp, they also lose any sense of individuality, being a wine created from two different wines.

Most winemakers will still look upon their Recioto with great love. Speaking of difficult categories in the market, the bittersweet Recioto is no longer in demand with wine drinkers. This is one of Italy's most interesting dessert wines, often more savory than one would imagine. Recioto is created through extended *appassimento*, usually a month or longer past Amarone, and then forced to stop fermenting before completely dry. This results in a wine of serious power and depth. The best of them can also age remarkably well.



Fog rolling in following the sunset in Soave Classico.

Soave: The Importance of Place

Very few categories of Italian wine can compete with the value that Soave offers. Granted, readers need to look past the ocean of wine bottled within the all-encompassing Soave DOC to find the real gems, a treasure trove of age-worthy, exceptional expressions of terroir. The best Soaves are made from vineyards in two distinct areas. The lion's share of world-class Soave hails from the **Classico** zone. Soave Classico starts between the towns of Soave, to the west, and Monteforte d'Alpone, to the east, and fans out north across a series of steep volcanic hills. Soils here are extremely diverse, including volcanic and basaltic rocks, but also densely stratified limestone and clay known as Scaglia Rossa. Elevations range from 150 to 600 meters. This is one of the most picturesque territories in all of Veneto. The **Colli Scaligeri** DOC, with just 20 hectares of vineyards of the 3,700 in the Soave DOC, comprises the limestone-rich hills of Val di Mezzane, Val d'Illassi and Val Cazzano di Tramigna to the east, or the volcanic hills of Val d'Alpone to the west. There is untapped potential in these remote districts, as is proven by a small group of producers turning out high-quality wine. An example is Monte Calvarina, located in the extreme northeast of the area, with basaltic rocks (volcanic) and elevations that reach up to 600 meters.

Another fine option is the Soave Superiore DOCG, which covers the communes of Soave Classico, Monteforte d'Alpone and Colli Scaligeri. It also limits the amount of Chardonnay in the blend to just 5%, and dictates that yields can be no higher than 10 tons per hectare, down from 15 tons per hectare in the Soave DOC, and 14 tons per hectare in the Classico zone. Within these areas, it isn't rare to find Soave that is now 100% Garganega or blended with just a small amount of Trebbiano di Soave, but nothing else. Another significant development is the outlining of 33 crus, or UGAs (Unità Geografica Aggiuntiva) throughout the Soave territory and the allowance for producers to now use these crus when labeling their wines. These

locations can and do show a stamp of terroir. I expect a day when consumers in the know will be specifically searching for a Soave Classico Carbonare versus a Soave Classico Foscарino or a Soave Colli Scaligeri Castelcerino.

Unfortunately, while top estates continue to push the envelope of quality and refinement, producers have a difficult road ahead. When consumers think of Soave, they expect a fun and fruity wine with enough acidity to keep the style fresh, yet little in the way of depth or staying power. Still, the mass-produced wines that earned the category of this reputation are here to stay, generally coming from the vast plains of the Soave DOC where the soils are alluvial and rich in clay and sand. Moreover, in neighboring Valpolicella, it is not uncommon to find a Soave in a top producer's portfolio (just to round things out). However, with a little digging, it's often the case that the fruit was purchased from a grower or even as a finished wine from these larger locations and labeled with the winery's name. These wines aren't helpful in establishing a better stature for Soave in the eyes of consumers. Lastly, beginning in 1992, the blending rules of Soave DOC permitted producers to stray from the traditional varieties of the region, Garganega and Trebbiano di Soave (which is related to Verdicchio), adding Chardonnay to the mix. Even today, the blend of Soave DOC dictates at least 70% Garganega, 30% of either Trebbiano di Soave or Chardonnay and 5% of "other allowable non-aromatic white grapes."

Ultimately, all tools exist for Soave to succeed and thrive in today's markets. Winemakers understand their challenges, and they are focused on creating wines of terroir using the traditional varieties of the region. They are backed by a well-organized and dedicated producer Consorzio. The real work is changing consumers' preconceptions and educating them further regarding the importance of place.



The Inama vineyards in Colli Berici.

Beyond Valpolicella and Soave - Colli Berici, Breganze, Colli Euganei & Lugana

Just to the east of Soave, nearing the center of Veneto, we encounter **Colli Berici**, south of the town of Vicenza. Created by tectonic shifts, the hills here are a mix of

calcareous red clay and rock, with vineyard parcels planted between thick outcroppings of forest. Here the hills are more rounded, with an elevation of up to 400 meters with limestone soils and iron-rich marls. This is a warmer, dryer area than Soave and Valpolicella, where varieties like Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Carménère thrive, along with the “native” Tai Rosso, which is related to Grenache. Since 1997, the Inama family has worked to promote Colli Berici with a selection of vineyard-designated wines that primarily feature Carménère. The variety, originally referred to as Bordeaux Nero and later thought to be Cabernet Franc, arrived here over 150 years ago. Tai Rosso has an interesting story in the Colli Berici, identical to Grenache in France or Cannonau in Sardinia, having arrived here in the late 19th century from Châteauneuf-du-Pape. In the limestone-rich hills of this district, Tai Rosso creates a wonderfully perfumed and gracious expression that invokes violets, wild berries and sweet spice. It doesn't display the power of its French relatives but instead impresses with its energy and lightness of being.

To the north and farther east is **Breganze**, long championed by the Maculan family. Here we come across a hilly terrain of volcanic soils that enjoys a confluence of cooling effects from the mountainous north and warm currents from the south and the Adriatic Sea. Bordeaux varieties find a happy home here, along with Vespaiole, used to create sweet elixirs that can compete with Sauternes. To the south, we have **Colli Euganei**, with soils similar to Breganze, as well as the varieties they produce, but with a more Mediterranean climate due to their proximity to the Adriatic Sea. Last but not least, **Lugana** is quickly becoming one of Veneto's hot spots for white wine. This picturesque appellation on the shores of La Garda features soils of glacial origins, with a mix of clay, limestone and gravel, along with the highly aromatic Trebbiano di Lugana, also known as Turbiana.



Recent Vintages

The **2021s** I've tasted are full of energy with vivid fruit and a bump of inner sweetness, yet have plenty of vigor to balance. This was a warm vintage that got off to a cool and rainy start. From mid-June through July and August, Veneto witnessed above-average temperatures without significant heat spikes. For the most part, Valpolicella received a balanced amount of precipitation throughout the season, while Soave experienced a dry summer with hail in mid-July. September and October were sunny and warm, which helped to ensure healthy bunches, along with strong diurnal shifts that maintained acidity. Both Soave (it's important to note that Garganega is harvested from late September through October) and Valpolicella benefited from perfect harvest conditions. A mix of cool and rainy conditions in May, frost in lower elevations and hail in Soave Classico resulted in reduced quantity reported by around 10% on average. The majority of 2021s tasted for this report were from Soave, with a small amount of young Valpolicellas that come across as fruit-focused yet energetic. Producers in the region are excited about the Amarone's aging in barrel, yet we'll have to wait to see how they come along.

Let's briefly look back on **2020**, a vintage that I place behind 2019 and 2021. The wines I have tasted so far are mostly Valpolicella Superiores and the top selections from Soave, as Amarones will only start to appear later in 2023. This is an open-knit and elegant vintage, yet, at times, lacks the acidity to bring the wines to the next level. The top producers' wines, many of which I tasted on this trip, turned out beautifully balanced expressions to drink best on the younger side.

All wines for this article were tasted in the Veneto in December 2022 and in our offices in New York City in January of 2023.