

VINFORUM

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In 2020, Dutch wine journalist Paul Balke published the book *North Adriatic*, in which he argues that the wine regions of Friuli in northeastern Italy, in the western part of Slovenia and the northwestern part of Croatia have so much in common historically, culturally, in terms of soil and grape that they should be considered a large wine region, with sub-regions in the three aforementioned countries. Vinforum's editor was on a press trip to the region in the first week of July this year, led by the aforementioned Paul Balke.

Friuli, Slovenia and Croatia were part of Austria-Hungary, which disintegrated after the First World War. In Friuli, the easternmost and hilly areas are the most interesting in terms of quality. The westernmost appellations Annia, Aquileia, Grave, Latisana and the southernmost part of the Isonzo are all located on flat land and produce relatively ordinary quality wines, while the hilly and well-drained areas Friuli Colli Orientali, Collio Goriziano (or just Collio), Carso and the northernmost part of the Isonzo (Rive Alte) are qualitatively stronger. In Slovenia, we are talking about Goriska Brda (or just Brda), Kras (which is right next to the Italian Carso), Vipavska Dolina (Vipava Valley) and the Slovenian part of Istria, while in Croatia it is about Istria and Kvarner (with the sub-areas Kastav and Krk).

Common to the entire eastern part of the North Adriatic wine regions is a dominance of a type of soil called ponca, which consists of marl (calcareous clay) and sandstone, often with a distinct reddish hue due to a high content of iron oxide. Carso and Kras, however, stand out with a soil called karst, which consists of pure limestone with a thin layer of iron-containing clay on top, also with a distinct red color.

GRAPE VARIETIES

The grape varieties in the North Adriatic wine regions are a delightful mix of local and international varieties. Many of the international varieties were introduced to Friuli in 1869 in connection with a marriage at Villa Russiz between the French Count Théodore de la Tour (from the Loire) and the local noblewoman (used to produce prosecco) and pinot grigio. Merlot is the most planted blue variety in Friuli and is also very popular in western Slovenia and northwestern Croatia.

TEXTBOX:

Collio and Brda formed one area before 1947 (Collio in Italian, Brda in Slovenian), and the same applies to the Karst, which in the same year was divided into an Italian part (Carso) and a Yugoslav part (Kras).

FRIULI COLLI ORIENTALI

This DOC covers 1897 hectares of vineyards and four sub-areas (Cividale, Rosazzo, Manzano & Buttrio and North of Cividale) and five sub-zones (Cialla, Schiopettino di Prepotto, Pignolo di Rosazzo, Ribolla di Rosazzo and Refosco di Faedis) are defined. In Friuli Colli Orientali, three sub-zones are also defined as DOCGs: Friuli Colli Orientali Picolit, which includes the entire area, and Ramandolo and Rosazzo, which are both sub-areas. The last time I was in Friuli (in 1994) I had the impression that many of the producers focused mostly on international varieties such as chardonnay, pinot blanc, pinot gris, sauvignon blanc, cabernet sauvignon and merlot, but today it seems that local varieties such as friulano (sauvignonasse, sauvignon vert), ribolla gialla, malvasia istriana, picolit, verduzzo, refosco, tazzelenghe, pignolo and schiopettino are more in vogue. I have the most faith in the red wines, where refosco, pignolo and schiopettino are particularly interesting, while

tazzelenghe, which means the wine that cuts the tongue, is unlikely to have a great future in the area. Sweet white wines of picolit and verduzzo, respectively, are also interesting, but here the production is relatively small. Good buys in today's selection here at home are Turian Schiopettino 2021 from Collavini (kr 394.90) and Schiopettino 2018 from Ronchi di Gialla (kr 449.90).

COLLIO & BRDA

Collio Goriziano encompasses 1300 ha of vineyards in the far east of Friuli, while the neighboring region Goriska Brda covers 1878 ha in the far west of Slovenia. Before 1947, these were considered one area, and the names Collio and Brda mean hills in both languages. Around 1870, when the area was part of Austria-Hungary, a group of Austrian experts concluded that wines from the area were the best in the Habsburg Empire. Collio is perhaps the best known of the DOCs in Friuli, and the area is home to the pioneers of Friuli's rise in the 1980s such as Mario Schiopetto, Josko Gravner, Silvio Jermann and Villa Russiz, who all helped put Friuli on the international wine map. And the wines from Collio have not deteriorated. However, it still seems that the area has stagnated, and compared to Friuli Colli Orientali, which focuses heavily on local grape varieties, it seems as if the producers in Collio still focus most on international varieties. We tasted the occasional ribolla gialla and friulano on the trip, but the wines generally did not impress as much as the wines from Friuli Colli Orientali. Best wine was Collio Bianco 2022 from Edi Keber based on malvasia, friulano and ribolla gialla. Collio is also home to two of Italy's most prominent orange wine producers: Gravner and Radikon. A good buy from Collio in Norway today is Russiz Superiore Ribolla Gialla 2023 from Marco Felluga (NOK 299.90). Among the wines from Goriska Brda, it was the wines made from rebula, as the grape variety is called here, that impressed the most, but the impression was also here that the focus was mostly on international varieties. Silvio Jermann has started a project here that seems promising. There are currently only four wines from Brda available in Norway

TEXTBOX:

The Italian Carso covers a modest 41 ha of vineyards, while its neighbor Kras in Slovenia covers 603 ha.

CARSO & KRAS

The Italian Carso encompasses a modest 41 ha of vineyards, while its neighbor Kras in Slovenia covers 603 ha. As mentioned, the soil here is limestone with a thin layer of red iron-containing clay on top. The most interesting grape varieties used here are the green Vitovska, which produces acidic and distinctly mineral wines, and the blue Teran (or Terrano), which produces fresh, acidic and characterful red wines. We have previously had good versions of Vitovska from the producer Zidarich and Terrano from Castelvecchio, but currently there are no wines from Carso available in Norway. From Kras, however, there is an excellent Teran 2023 from Stoka (NOK 319.90).

ISONZO DOC

Isonzo is located in the extension of Collio, to the south, and it is precisely in the part of Isonzo that is closest to Collio, in the hilly part of the district called Rive Alte, that we find the best wines. Isonzo covers a total of 681 hectares of vineyards. The area is generally warmer than Friuli Colli Orientali and Collio, producers are always struggling between perfect ripeness and trying to keep alcohol down and acidity up, and it is generally the cool vintages that give the best results. The vineyards near Carso also have some of the karst soil, and here Malvasia and Refosco produce good results. Friulano, Pinot Bianco, Pinot Grigio, Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Merlot and Cabernet Franc are also popular varieties. Isonzo's most

TEXTBOX:

The best wines in the Vipava Valley were white and made from the local grape varieties zelen, malvazija, rebula, pinela and vitovska

Isonzo DOC >>

Leading producers are Vie de Romans, Ronco del Gelso and Lis Neris. The latter has six wines in Polet (*the monopoly in Norway*), but the wines are in my opinion overpriced.

THE VIPAVA VALLEY

Vipavska Dolina is an east-west-running valley located north of the Kras and covers 2317 ha of vineyards. Parts of the soil here are ponca and parts are karst. Merlot is the most planted grape variety in the region, followed by rebula, sauvignon blanc, malvazija, welschriesling, cabernet sauvignon, barbera, chardonnay, pinot blanc, zelen and pinela. Barbera was introduced to the region from Piedmont in the 19th century and does well in the area. Otherwise, the best wines were white and made from the local grape varieties zelen, malvazija, rebula, pinela and vitovska. Both pinela and zelen produce delicate wines with moderate alcohol content. Pinela is also grown in the DOC Colli Euganei in Veneto, but is rarely used here for single-grape wines. Otherwise, there is a long tradition in the area of making white wines with skin maceration, which many still use.

ISTRIA & KVARNER

Istria includes approx. 3300 ha in Croatia, approx. 1800 ha in Slovenia and a few ha in Italy (called Muggia). When Yugoslavia was divided in 1991, it became clear that Istria would be divided into a Croatian part and a Slovenian part. The producers tried in vain to have a transnational appellation created, as had been the case before, but the authorities in Zagreb and Ljubljana said no. In both the Slovenian and Croatian parts, the most important grape variety is Malvazija Istriana for white wines and Teran for reds. Here a little clarification is in order. Many people believe that Teran is the same grape as Refosco del Peduncolo Rosso, but this is wrong. Teran is also referred to as Refosco d'Istria and Refosco del Carso, but these are two very different grapes. Teran in Croatia is referred to as teran or terrano in Italy, as refosk in the Slovenian part of Istria and as teran in Karst, while refosco del peduncolo rosso is referred to as refosk in Croatia. The white wines made from malvazija from Istria are consistently of high quality, but it is the red wines made from teran that really impress. Best red wine we tasted on the trip was a magnum of Gran Teran 2007 from the producer Coronica in the Croatian part of Istria. Kvarner covers 210 ha and has, as mentioned, two sub-areas: Kastav and Krk. There are small amounts of international grape varieties in the area, but the focus is on the local varieties zlahtina, debejan, kamenina, sansigot, plavina, trojiscina, brajkovac, mejsko, divjaka, verdi (glera), malvazija and jerbola. Unfortunately, we did not get to visit Kvarner on the trip, nor did we get to taste wines from this region.

TEXTBOX:

The white wines made from Malvazija from Istria are consistently of high quality, but it is the red wines from Teran that really impress. The best red wine we tasted on the trip was a magnum of Gran Teran 2007 from the producer Coronica in the Croatian part of Istria.

CONCLUSION

Paul Balke obviously has a point when he chooses to see all the northern Adriatic wine regions as one large main region with a number of sub-regions. With the caveat that I have not tasted wines from Kvarner, it is my impression that the most interesting wines are made from local grape varieties in the areas of Carso, Kras, Istria and Friuli Colli Orientali. So here is a call to Norwegian wine importers: We need more white wines of Malvzija Istriana and Vitovska and more red wines of Teran from the areas of Carso, Kras and Istria. And then I have great faith in red wines of Pignolo, Refosco dal Peduncolo Rosso and Schiopettino from Friuli Colli Orientali.