

WINES OF THE *North Adriatic*

BY ELIZABETH SMITH

During summer 2025, I spent a week traveling through Europe's broader North Adriatic wine region. Led by Paul Balke, the author of *North Adriatic: Friuli Venezia Giulia/West Slovenia/Istria*, our group of journalists visited key DOCs across three countries: Italy, Slovenia, and Croatia.





FRIULI-VENEZIA GIULIA DOC

Friuli's location in northeast Italy between the influences of the Alps and the Adriatic Sea lends itself to producing bright white wines. According to Wine Searcher, 77% of all wine production is white, and the Wine Scholar Guild describes Friuli as "the birthplace of modern Italian white wines." It is home to native varieties such as Friulano, Pignolo, Ribolla Gialla, Verduzzo, Refosco, Schioppettino, and Picolit (made as a sweet wine), as well as international varieties like Chardonnay, Pinot Bianco, Pinot Grigio, Sauvignon Blanc, Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Pinot Noir.

Day 1

FRIULI COLLI ORIENTALI (COLLI ORIENTALI DEL FRIULI DOC)



Colli Orientali is one of the region's most celebrated areas. Key varieties include Friulano, Picolit, Pignolo, Ribolla Gialla, Schioppettino, and Refosco. The following DOCGs showcase some of the region's most distinctive wines: Colli Orientali del Friuli Picolit, a historic sweet wine made from the rare Picolit grape; Ramandolo, a regional late-harvest sweet wine made from Verduzzo; Rosazzo, mineral-driven dry white blends; and Lison DOCG (shared with Veneto), which only produces Friulano.

We spent our first day immersing ourselves in the wines of Colli Orientali, beginning with a tasting and lunch at Elliot Osteria e Dormire. Afterwards, we drove around the region, with a stop to see the vineyards of Rosazzo DOCG near the historic Benedictine monastery, Abbazia di Rosazzo (Abbey of Rosazzo). We passed by the vineyards of Spessa and continued through the hills, stopping for a group photo at the Rapuzzi family's Ronchi di Cialla. Designated Cru Cialla in 1995, the family grows and produces age-worthy wines from Ribolla Gialla, Picolit, Verduzzo, Refosco dal Peduncolo Rosso, and Schioppettino. After a coffee stop at Bar Gusto di Vino in Prepotto, our day concluded with a portfolio tasting and dinner at Le Due Torri winery, hosted by Ermanno Maniero.

KEY PRODUCERS AND WINES TO TRY

Aquila del Torre *Riesling*

organically and biodynamically farmed — citrusy with minerality

Ca' Lovisotto *Ribolla Gialla*

macerated and amphora-aged, with dried yellow and orange fruit flavors

Conte d'Attimis Maniago *Ronco Broilo*

an aged field blend of Friulano, Malvasia, and Ribolla Gialla; fruity, yet savory

Giovanni Dri Il Roncat *Refosco dal Peduncolo Rosso*

an aged red with savory, herbal flavors

Jacùss *Tazzelenghe (which means "tongue cutter/stinger")*

a rare native red variety, robust, with zingy acidity

Meroi Davino *Ros di Buri (Merlot)*

brimming with dark fruits and firm tannins

Moschioni di Moschioni Michele *Schioppettino*

spicy, with peppery, dark berry fruit flavors

Pizzulin *Scaglia Rossa*

a single-barrel (600 bottles) of rich, ripe Merlot

Rodaro Paolo *Blanc de Noir*

zero-dosage, classic method sparkling disgorged after 68 months; a rich, creamy treat

Ronchi di Cialla *Ciallabianco*

a late-harvest, botrytis-influenced blend of 60% Ribolla Gialla, 30% Picolit, and 10% Verduzzo, with floral notes and flavors of tree and stone fruits (DOC Cialla, Cru Monopole of Ronchi di Cialla)

Tunella *Colmatiss Sauvignon Blanc*

single-vineyard, bold and bright with a long finish

Vigna Petrusa *Friulano*

barrel aged, with floral and nutty notes

Day 2

COLLIO DOC



Elizabeth Smith and winemaker Saša Radikon

Nestled along the border with its Slovenian sister region, Brda, Collio is breathtaking, with stunning hillsides and *ponca (flysch)* soils (marl and sandstone), that impart distinctive minerality. The DOC is most known for its world-class whites such as Chardonnay, Friulano, Malvasia, Pinot Bianco, Pinot Grigio, Ribolla Gialla, Sauvignon Blanc,

plus international reds like Cabernet Franc and Merlot. The wines are both elegant and age-worthy.

Our group enjoyed a tasting and lunch at the Enoteca di Cormòns, a Collio cooperative wine bar and shop. After lunch, we drove through some of the vineyards with Luca Raccaro, president of the Collio Consorzio, who gave us additional information about the region. The day ended with dinner at Locanda alle Vigne, where producers Renato Keber and Saša Radikon shared their wines.



Ermanno Maniero of Le Due Torri winery

KEY PRODUCERS AND WINES TO TRY

Branko di Erzetic Igor *Chardonnay*

rich and round with tropical fruit flavors

Tenuta Borgo Conventi (Collio e Isonzo) *Friulano*

a single-vineyard, citrusy delight

Castello di Spessa *Santarosa Pinot Bianco*

delicately floral and fruity

Due del Monte *Malvasia Istriana*

spicy and full-bodied, with candied fruit notes

Keber Edi *Collio Bianco*

a blend of Friulano, Ribolla Gialla and Malvasia Istriana; spicy and bright

Korsič *Collio Da Uve Autoctone*

a blend of Friulano, Ribolla Gialla, and Malvasia, with flavors of apple, citrus, and white plum

Livon *Solarco*

a blend of 50% Friulano, 50% Ribolla Gialla, with stone and tropical fruit flavors

Pascolo di Pascolo Alessandro *Rosso di Ponca (Merlot)*

red fruit flavors with soft tannins

Radikon Jakot (Friulano)

an 'orange' wine; savory, with dried fruit and citrus rind flavors

Raccaro *Friulano*

soft and minerally, with floral and nutty notes

Renato Keber *Riserva 'MALcheVAda'*

an aged, macerated white with notes of citrus and tropical fruits

Roncús di Perco Marco: *Bianco Vecchie Vigne*

a blend of 60% Malvasia Istriana, 30% Friulano, and 10% Ribolla Gialla; elegant and minerally

In his book, Paul Balke asserts the North Adriatic as a whole should be recognized as a “premium wine-terroir” — “one terroir, three countries” — similar to other greats like Bordeaux, Rioja, Tuscany, etc. However, I also believe each region deserves to be in the spotlight, like Italy’s North Adriatic jewel — Friuli-Venezia Giulia — where we spent three days.

Day 3

AQUILEIA, GRAVE, AND ISONZO

FRIULI AQUILEIA (FRIULI AQUILEIA DOC)

Friuli Aquileia lies on the plains south of Udine near the ancient Roman city of Aquileia, a UNESCO World Heritage site. The area is best known for bright whites such as Friulano, Malvasia Istriana, Chardonnay, Gewürztraminer, Pinot Bianco, Pinot Grigio, and Sauvignon Blanc. The maritime influence of the nearby Adriatic Sea gives the wines a crispness that pairs beautifully with seafood.

FRIULI GRAVE (FRIULI GRAVE DOC)

Friuli Grave is the largest subregion, spread across the plains with gravelly alluvial soils, hence the name. It is best known for producing value-driven, approachable whites like Chardonnay, Friulano, Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Bianco, Pinot Grigio, and Riesling, as well as reds like Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Refosco.

FRIULI ISONZO (ISONZO DEL FRIULI DOC)

Located along the slopes and plain along the Isonzo River, Friuli Isonzo is a subregion that produces whites, reds, sparkling, and dessert wines. Its key grapes include Chardonnay, Friulano, Pinot Grigio, Ribolla Gialla, and Sauvignon Blanc, with reds like Merlot and Refosco growing well in warmer areas.

We devoted our third day to Aquileia, Grave, and Isonzo. At Ristorante Al Pellegrino, we tasted a wide range of bright whites to full-bodied, fruit-driven reds from the three subregions and the broader Friuli DOC. After the tasting, we took a drive out to catch a glimpse of Pierpaolo Pecorari vineyards. The journey ended with a delicious wine dinner at Al Pellegrino, a fitting close to three days across Friuli.

KEY PRODUCERS AND WINES TO TRY

Barone de Ritter Záhony, Friuli Aquileia DOC

Theodor Pinot Nero (Noir)

floral, fruity, and herbal

Borgo delle Oche, Friuli Grave DOC

Pinot Grigio Lùsigne (firefly) Ramato

macerated, then aged in amphora, with flavors of dried citrus and red berries

Pierpaolo Pecorari, Friuli Isonzo DOC

Kolaus Sauvignon Blanc

tropical, citrusy, creamy, and yeasty

Pitars, Friuli Grave DOC *Pinot Bianco DOC Friuli*

notes of ripe yellow tree and citrus fruits

Tenuta Luisa di Luisa Eddi, Friuli Isonzo DOC

Refosco

tangy and juicy, with dark berry flavors



Pitars presentation at Ristorante Al Pellegrino

From left to right:
Appetizer course
at Ristorante
Al Pellegrino in
Cividale del Friuli,
dinner course at
Locanda alle Vigne
in Cormòns, and
Lunch at Enoteca
di Cormòns.



WHERE TO STAY & DINE

Buzzinelli B&B

Azienda Agricola Buzzinelli Maurizio in Cormòns combines wine country hospitality with cozy lodging, allowing guests to stay among the vines. Here guests enjoy daily continental breakfast with local charcuterie, cheeses, and breads, as well as lovely morning views and vineyard walks. It's an ideal choice for those wanting comfortable rooms and a taste of vineyard life.

Elliot Osteria e Dormire

Nestled among the vineyards of Manzano, Elliot Osteria e Dormire in Collina is a combination tavern and inn with 12 rooms. Guests enjoy warm hospitality, spectacular views, local wines, and regional cuisine in a quiet, relaxing setting.

Le Due Torri

Le Due Torri, located in the hills near Corno di Rosazzo, is led by winemaker Ermanno Maniero. His winemaking philosophy blends tradition and innovation, demonstrating his commitment to indigenous biodiversity. Visitors can enjoy vineyard and cellar tours and tastings accompanied by local, house-made dishes. Suggested wines

include the Classic Ribolla Gialla, Friulano Riserva, Classic Schioppettino, and Tazzelenghe Riserva.

Enoteca di Cormòns

Enoteca di Cormòns is a wine bar and collective located in the charming Piazza XXIV Maggio. Founded by the Vignaioli di Cormòns in 1984, it is a regional hub with a wide selection of Collio wines, as well as a gathering spot for tastings and events.

Locanda alle Vigne

Under the ownership of the Scarpa family, Locanda alle Vigne in Cormòns offers genuine Friulian hospitality and traditional cuisine. Elegant, yet unpretentious, guests can choose from indoor or outdoor seating with stunning vineyard views or gather around the fogolâr (fireplace).

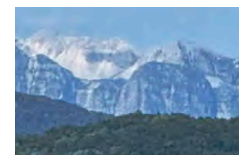
Ristorante Al Pellegrino

Ristorante Al Pellegrino in Cividale del Friuli (Castelmonte) is a family-run casual dining restaurant offering generous portions of traditional local cuisine, including pizza, charcuterie, cheeses, and seasonal produce.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Smith is a brand ambassador at Croatian Premium Wine Imports, a freelance wine writer and studied for her doctorate in education at George Mason University. She lives in Zagreb, Croatia.



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