

THE BEAUTIFUL VENETO

Italy's Veneto is one of the most important regions in Italy in terms of both quality and quantity, writes Michèle Shah. The home of internationally renowned wines, it's the birthplace of such important wines as Amarone, Prosecco, Soave and Pinot Grigio.

The Veneto region covers some 20 DOC/G appellations and is one of the most important wine-producing regions in Italy; the three most prominent DOCs are Valpolicella, its neighbor Soave, and Prosecco di Conegliano Valdobbiadene, the home of Italy's most famous sparkling wine.

Valpolicella

The wines of Valpolicella represent some of Italy's top exports. Sales of Amarone have soared from 5m bottles in 2000 to 12m bottles in 2011, while sales of its 'younger brother' Ripasso have almost tripled since 2007, from 7.5m bottles to 20m bottles in 2011. In 2000, the value of wines from the Valpolicella was €160m (\$209m); today it's €300m.

Amarone is produced from local grape varieties known as Corvina, Corvinone, Rondinella and Molinara. Corvina and Corvinone form the higher percentage of grapes in its production and what makes Amarone so distinctive is that some of the grapes are partially dried. The result is a big fruity wine, which on average reaches anywhere between 15% and 17% alcohol; if well balanced, however, the alcohol does not dominate. Its colour is intense and bright, the nose has aromas of cherry, redcurrant, chocolate and spice, the palate is rich in extract, full bodied, yet soft, round, balanced and elegant. Unlike many of the great Italian reds destined for long ageing, its soft tannins and rich fruit allow Amarone to be enjoyed when it is young, although it is also a magnificent age-worthy wine to cellar and appreciate in its maturity.

After harvesting the grapes are laid in single layers on wooden trays or the more modern plastic trays (easier to clean), to allow the air to circulate around the fruit. By the end of the drying period, which usually lasts from October to January, the evaporation will have reduced the weight of the grapes by half, decreased the acidity, and increased the percentage sugar content by 25-30%. The growing popularity and subsequent increase



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Emilio Pedron,
president, Consorzio di
Tuteladella Valpolicella
and MD of Bertani

in production has, however, come at a price. While some producers see the positive side of the increase in production and Amarone's increased success as a recognised brand, others such as Sandro Boscaini, CEO of Masi and Sabrina Tedeschi of the Tedeschi family winery see this rapid increase as a situation that's getting out of hand, as the wines risk a loss of identity. "Out of the 6,400 hectares which comprise the area of Valpolicella, not all are equally suitable for the production of

Amarone," says Tedeschi. She says that the hilly areas of the Valpolicella Classico, with its naturally lower yields, are considered the best, "being also more difficult to cultivate, while benefiting from better climatic conditions."

This, and a number of other issues which relate to the expansion of the area of production, was the reason why in 2010 a number of historic family estates formed their own Amarone Families Consortium, which today includes 12 wineries and conforms to more rigorous quality standards.

The fall in production of the more lightly structured Valpolicella Classico and Superiore wines is another issue being debated among producers. "Production has almost halved over the last ten years and been replaced with production for Amarone and Ripasso," explains Luca Sartori, a director of Casa Vinicola Sartori.

Masi's Boscaini says the expansion in production has "permitted sales of Amarone in discount stores and hypermarkets, at low prices unworthy of a classic fine wine." He adds "this is what the Families of Amarone want to protect by adopting rigorous regulations in terms of quality production and control of sales prices."

This rift in the growers' association is an issue which Emilio Pedron, president of the Consorzio di Tuteladella Valpolicella and managing director of the historic Bertani estate, is moderating in an attempt to bring all voices and philosophies to an agreement.

Valpolicella has always had a backbone of quality-minded producers such as Allegrini, Zenato, Sperti, Tedeschi and Quintarelli, just to mention a few, who had the courage to pursue quality and not simply quantity, along with the larger wineries Pasqua, Masi, Tommasi, Sartori and Bertani.

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VALPOLICELLA DOC

- 19 municipalities
- 6,541ha of vineyards
- 208 bottlers
- 7 wine co-operatives
- 2,463 farms declaring grapes suitable for Valpolicella DOC
- 1,495 farms producing grapes for Amarone
- 449 fruit-drying chambers
- 2000: 5m bottles Amarone
- 2011: 12m bottles Amarone
>20m bottles Valpolicella Ripasso
25m bottles Valpolicella/
Valpolicella Classico (from
50m bottles)

and sell at lower prices,” explains Pedron. Exports have been helped by the recent fall in the Euro, with the major efforts focused on the US, Canada and northern Europe. “Asia is still a challenge,” admits Nadia Zenato, marketing director of Zenato winery. “When it comes to red classic wines, Asia still looks to France.”

Soave

Soave is Italy's flagship white wine. Its production zone, east of Verona, is of volcanic origin and is rich in mineral soils. Its hilly areas offer diverse soils and varying altitudes, with some vineyards still planted to historic pergola vines, resulting in terroir-based wines.

Garganega is the primary grape for the production of Soave, accounting for a minimum of 70% of the blend. The other 30% is made up of Trebbiano di Soave, Chardonnay and Pinot Bianco. The grapes are the same for Soave DOC, Soave Classico DOC, and Soave Superiore DOCG.

Soave annually produces 50m bottles, of which 80% are exported to some 60 countries worldwide. According to Consorzio data, 50%

of total exports are shared between UK and Germany; new energy has been put into marketing Soave in Northern and Eastern Europe. A recent campaign to increase awareness in the US and Canada has seen a 20% growth in sales in 2009 and 2010. Soave DOC is also packaging its wines in bag-in-box and screw-cap for export markets.

“Soave, and also Pinot Grigio, are selling well, especially in Canada, US and Scandinavia,” says Carlotta Pasqua of the Pasqua winery. “Competition is rife and wineries should be more responsible in not lowering prices excessively or accepting unfavourable conditions, which create market instability.” From 2009-2011, production yields have decreased at the prompting of the Consorzio, with the aim of increasing the price and maintaining the market demand for Soave.

Soave DOCG was established in 2002 and its regulations are still debated by some of the smaller benchmark producers such as Pieropan and Anselmi, who decided against joining the DOCG. Enthusiastic at first, Andrea Pieropan is disappointed 10 years on that none of his suggestions were included in the DOCG regulations, such as limiting the area of production to the ‘Classica’ zone; using only traditional indigenous varieties for production, reflecting the authority of Soave; bottling only in the historic communes of Soave; allowing a minimum level of 21g/L of extracts to ensure quality; and short pruning by leaving eight to 10 buds on the vine. Roberto Anselmi of Anselmi believes that DOC and DOCG regulations are too similar and need to focus on issues arising from production, rather than administrative issues. Even Cantina di Soave, the largest producer in Soave, led by Luca Sabatini, sees an increase in sales of Soave, but would like to see DOCG production handled otherwise.

The Consorzio, led by Aldo Lorenzoni, declare they are busy upgrading and ensuring stricter regulations for DOCG plantings. To-

day, DOCG production is limited to smaller and specific areas of production, to longer ageing, higher extracts, lower yields, and specific growing systems for new plantings.

“Maybe that's the reason why there are so few DOCG producers,” says Lorenzoni.

Prosecco DOCG and DOC

The great success of Prosecco lies in its pleasant, drinkable quality and its relatively low cost compared to many other sparkling wines. Prosecco is made by Charmat - or ‘tank method’ - in large steel tanks which keep the wine under pressure. The result is a light, delicate wine of medium structure, not more than 11° alcohol, which usually comes as a non-vintage wine.

Since vintage 2009, Prosecco has been given DOCG, or ‘superiore’ status, represented by the Montello and Colli Asolani zone and the historic steep hills of Conegliano-Valdobbiadene. The extended DOC area incorporates the lower areas of the Provinces of Treviso, Belluno, Venice, Padua, Vicenza, Udine, Pordenone, Trieste and Gorizia. Outside of this area anyone wanting to make Prosecco will need to call the grape (and wine) ‘Glera’, the historic name for Prosecco.

According to the Consorzio Prosecco DOCG, the main difficulty linked to the new quality system is conveying why and how the quality of the DOCG ‘Superiore’ differentiates itself from Prosecco DOC and IGT. It is a difficult task to explain to export markets that the cru areas relating to Prosecco DOCG's premium production areas - known as Rive - are on steep gradients which cannot be mechanised, hence their higher quality but also their higher cost of production.

“One can create market rules, but one cannot regulate the market,” says Franco Adami, ex-president of the Consorzio. “As a market rule, when the going is good, prices usually tend to rise.” And for Prosecco DOCG production is still on the rise, from 40m bottles produced in 2003 to 69m in 2011, and possibly just over 70m predicted for 2012.

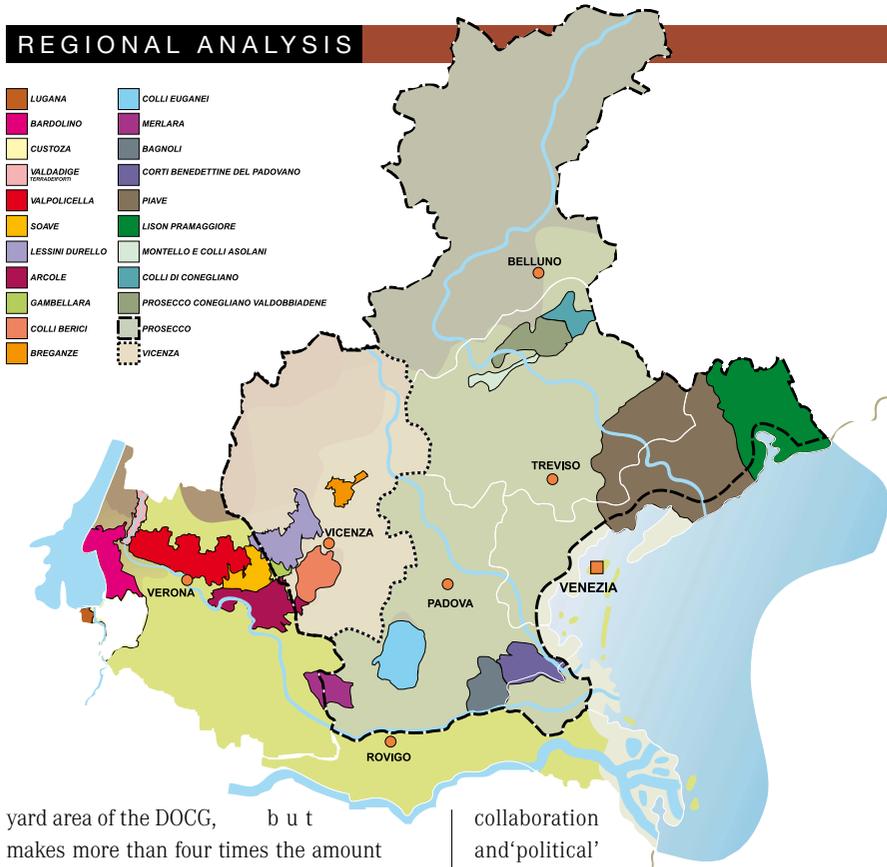
Bisoli, a benchmark company, has registered a 19% increase in sales on their €13m turnover of 2010, with equal distribution in sales to national, European and other export markets, covering some 56 countries. “Prosecco is doing very well; however, the DOCG has limited [the] possibility of expanding its area of production,” says Gianluca Bisoli, the owner and managing director.

The DOC zone has roughly double the vine-

EVOLUTION OF PRODUCTION OF VALPOLICELLA 2007-2010 (in bottles)

	2007	2008	2009	2010
Valpolicella	35,924,667	26,297,333	23,015,600	24,101,733
Valpolicella Ripasso	7,481,867	12,024,267	13,604,667	19,264,000
Amarona della Valpolicella	8,074,400	8,015,067	8,529,467	12,568,800
Recioto della Valpolicella	413,800	578,200	372,600	529,200

SOURCE: CONSORZIO TUTELA VINI VALPOLICELLA



yard area of the DOCG, but makes more than four times the amount of wine, predicted to soar to 280m bottles a year by 2012.

Marco Fantinel, a key DOC player in Friuli, is registering a 10% to 15% increase in exports to classic markets such as Germany, UK and the US. He explains that this is helped by the fall of the Euro, particularly against the dollar. According to Fantinel, the DOC also needs to work harder on its branding and differentiating its Friuli product to that of neighbouring Veneto.

Domenico Zonin, responsible for the 8m-bottle production of Zonin's Prosecco DOC has seen continuous growth, with sales over the last five years increasing by 55% in value in Italy. Exports have increased by 300%, and the wine is distributed in 75 countries.

Yet despite the efforts of top producers, branding is one of the main issues that the Prosecco hierarchy is struggling with, in trying to get consumers to differentiate between DOC and DOCG production.

"Fragmentation and competition in production in both DOC and DOCG areas is one of the reasons why benchmark producers with brand image have not been able to establish brand positioning and consumer loyalty," says Antonio Motteran, CEO of Carpené Malvolti, a key DOCG player that produces more than 4m bottles. "Private labels, which derive mainly from DOC production, add to the confusion of branding." Motteran would like to see more

collaboration and 'political' harmony between the two areas of production, rather than each consorzio looking to bolster its own interests.

Bardolino

Despite being overshadowed in recent years by the better-known wines of Valpolicella, Bardolino's light- to medium-bodied reds – produced mainly from red Corvinone grapes – are seeing sales on a positive uptrend. Over the last decade, Bardolino tried to simulate the big, muscular, international wine styles, becoming beefed up with Merlot, Cabernet and new oak, which did not become it at all. Now back on track, it has regained its authentic style, producing some excellent value, un-oaked, succulent berry and spicy wines with crisp acidity and silky tannins. Chiacetto, a light rosé from the shores of Lake Garda, has also revamped its image with a new Chiacetto Sparkling, produced in the Charmat method.

According to Angelo Peretti of the Consorzio of Bardolino, Bardolino's production has increased fivefold in the last five years, producing some 21m bottles in 2011; Chiacetto produced 11m bottles. Exports represent 65% of production and the main markets remain Holland, Belgium, US and Canada, as well as – above all – Germany, thanks to the strong traditional bond with Lake Garda's tourism. ■

VENETO AT A GLANCE

BARDOLINO DOC

- 2,700ha of vineyard
- 32m bottles: Bardolino 21m
Chiacetto 11m
- 65% exported

Top five producers in value and volume

- Cantina di Castelnuovo del Garda
- Cantina Caorsa
- Vigneti Villabella – Delibori
- Cantina di Custoza
- Le Giare – Lenotti

PROSECCO DOC

- 2010: 156m bottles
- 2011: 200m bottles (+28%)
- 15,600ha in 2011, to rise to 20,000ha in 2012
- 7,840 grape growers
- 319 winemakers
- 296 bottlers
- €498m in export value

PROSECCO DOCG

- 15 municipalities
- 6,100ha of vineyards (plus 106ha of Superiore Cartizze)
- 2,781 farms
- 166 Spumante houses
- 65.76m bottles produced
- 35% exported
- €400m in export value

Top five producers in value and volume

- Valdo Spumanti S.R.L.
- La Marca Vini E Spumanti S.C.A.
- Cantina Produttori di Valdobbiadene Soc. Agr. Coop
- Contarini Vini E Spumanti S.P.A.
- Carpené Malvolti S.P.A.

SOAVE DOC/G

- 13 municipalities
- 6,583ha of vineyards
- 2,781 farms
- 116 winemakers
- 249 bottlers
- 6 co-operative cellars
- 56.42m bottles

Top five producers in value and volume

- Cantina di Soave
- Cantina di Monteforte
- Collis
- Pieropan
- Gini