

The Wines of Friuli- a tale of three grape varieties.

The wine producing region of Friuli lies in the north eastern Italian province of Friuli Venezia Giulia (FVG). This area shares a border and a turbulent history with Slovenia. Although not so well known, it is the third most important of Italy's wine producing regions, after Piedmont and Tuscany. One could wax long and lyrical on the wines of Friuli, and some of the best white wines in Italy are certainly produced here. This area has long been internationally acclaimed for its fragrant, elegant white wines, more recently however, the reputation of red varieties and blends has been catching up. What really distinguishes Friuli from the rest of Italy is the emphasis on quality and its quirky interest in many indigenous grape varieties, virtually unheard of in other regions. To give you an idea at the end of the 19thC there were at least 150 grape varieties grown here. Viticulture here is a story of obscure grape varieties lovingly nurtured by dedicated Friuli farmers, despite cultivation difficulties and being completely out of fashion.

Wine making has been chronicled in Friuli since Roman times although the modern day winemaking industry really got started here in the 1960's with the introduction of German wine-making techniques and temperature controlled fermentation. These two innovations produced white wines of exceptional quality, probably Italy's finest which put Friuli firmly on the international wine map. The Friuli wine scene remains somewhat confusing to the uninitiated, due to the large number of sub zones and the number of grape varieties grown here. This is what makes Friuli unique but is also its Achilles heel- too many varieties being produced on many small vineyards. In this way it resembles Burgundy; small producers growing a range of grape varieties on tiny parcels of land. This problem has been exacerbated since the 1980's by the renewed interest in red varieties, which at the present time account for around 40% of total plantings. It is beyond the scope of this article to catalogue all the grape varieties being grown here. There are however, three indigenous grape varieties that are particular to Friuli and form an integral part of its wine history.

**Tocai Friulano** is the most widely planted grape variety in Friuli. This is the white wine you will generally be offered whether it be, in a rustic *frasca* – the place the locals go for a glass of wine, or in an elegant restaurant. Tocai is usually drunk young when it is light coloured, floral with a slight hint of almonds, perfect as an aperitif. It also has the capacity to age making wines of greater character and depth..

However, this great wine has recently suffered a significant setback. From 2007 Tocai Friulano will be renamed due to a long running legal battle with Hungary. Possible confusion with the Hungarian dessert wine of the same name, incidentally spelled Tokaji, has led to legal proceedings resulting in a European Union directive that Friulian Tocai must be renamed. From March 2007 Tocai Friulano will be known simply as Friulano. Seems rather unfair given that Friulian Tocai is actually made from Tocai grapes whereas Hungarian Tokaji is made from a mixture of Furmint and Harslevelu grapes. Incidentally Tocai also bears no relation to the French Tokay d'Alsace which is actually made from Pinot Gris.

**Schioppettino**, also known as Ribolla Nera is one of most interesting red varieties of the Friuli wine world. This indigenous grape has a fascinating history, changing from outlaw to rising star in a little over 40 years. It owes its reprieve to the efforts of one man Sig. Paolo Rapuzzi. He founded his vineyard in Cialla in the late 1960's. At that time Schioppettino was virtually extinct less than one hundred vines remained. Two factors lead to its near demise; disease in the form of phylloxera and competition from international varieties such as Cabernet and Merlot. Such was the demand for international varieties that indigenous varieties were virtually abandoned. Schioppettino was no longer planted and in fact by law could no longer be planted; it was classified as an illegal varietal. Sig Rapuzzi scoured Slovenia and Friuli for Schioppettino rootstock to plant a vineyard below his house and in so doing saved the Schioppettino from ignomy. Today it is still planted in very limited quantities around the villages of Prepotto, Albana and Cialla. It certainly is one of the

stars of the Friuli wine scene. What makes the story most remarkable is that all the schioppettino planted world wide comes from root stock taken from the Ronchi di Cialla vineyard [www.ronchidicialla.it](http://www.ronchidicialla.it) The grapes make a perfumed, medium-bodied red with a hint of spice and the capacity to age. To my mind it is somewhat reminiscent of Syrah. A festival is held in Prepotto, the first week of May which offers opportunity to try Schioppettino from local producers.

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#### **Picolit**

Last but not least is Picolit, probably the best known wine in Friuli. Its name derives from the word *piccolo* meaning small. Picolit is notoriously difficult to grow, prone to disease and producing small, sparsely-berried bunches. The wine is produced using the *passito* method. The grapes are picked in mid October and then air dried to concentrate the sugars before being pressed and vinified. Given the small yields and the elaborate vinification process Picolit is produced in very small quantities and commands high prices.

It can be used in a variety of white blends but its most classic expression is as a single varietal dessert wine. In some ways dessert wine is a misnomer and *vino da meditazione* is a more accurate description. The wine is not luscious or rich, but rather elegant with a dry finish and delicate floral aromas, particularly acacia. The best examples are dry rather than sweet and do not pair well with desserts, they find their best partners in blue cheese and pate.