



The Joys of Exploring Italian Wines

By Michael Apstein

One of the many things I adore about Italian wine is its seemingly limitless depth. You can always uncover a wine area or category unbeknownst to you, even if it's been known to the Italians themselves for decades. Take, for example, Albana Romagna. It may be a discovery for me and other Americans, but the Italians have known the potential of the grape grown in this area for decades. Comparably obscure to most of us is Refosco dal Peduncolo, a red variety usually showing hard-edged tannins, according to *Wine Grapes* by Jancis Robinson et al., but a grape that a talented producer has turned into a delightful red wine suitable for chilling. That same producer also makes a dynamite Pinot Grigio (not exactly an obscure grape), that retails for about \$12. And of course, I'd be remiss if I omitted the new category of Prosecco Rosé, a brilliant marketing maneuver combining two of the hottest selling categories in wine today. At least that's what I thought until I explored the subject a little deeper.

But first, let's start with Albana Romagna. In 1967, it was among the first wines to be awarded *Denominazione Origine Controllata* (DOC) status. And then in 1987, it was the first white wine elevated to (*Denominazione Origine Controllata e Garantita*) DOCG status, Italy's highest classification. Although the decision of the wine authorities to name this wine as Italy's first DOCG white was controversial at the time, I certainly recognize their wisdom after tasting scores of examples four years ago at a tasting in Romagna and, more recently, a stunning one, by Celli, just last month at a Zoom® tasting organized by Michèle Shah. Mauro Sirri, owner of Celli, and other producers describe Albana Romagna as a white wine masquerading as a red because of its power and a hint of tannic structure. They also call it a sugar machine, which makes it suitable for sweet wines. Yet, despite the high sugars, the grapes have incredible acidity, providing balance for both the dry and sweet versions.

The grape does exceptionally well in a specific kind of soil, called *spungone romagnolo*, a limestone rich sandy soil filled with fossils thanks to its undersea location three and a half million years ago. The grand cru area for Albana, according to Ian d'Agata, a world authority on Italian wines, in his *Native Wine Grapes of Italy*, is Bertinoro, one of the twelve subzones of Romagna, exactly where Celli is located. In addition to Albana Secco, the dry version, producers make a sweet version from late harvest grapes, Albana Dolce, a sweet one from partially dried grapes (*passito* or *passimento*), and also a sparkling version.

Celli's 2019 Romagna Albana Secco, "I Croppi" (DOCG) is outstanding. It's a substantial wine, conveying subtle nutty and stone fruit character, similar to a white wine from France's Rhône Valley, but with vibrant and penetrating acidity. You feel the underlying mineral component—a captivating salinity—and an ever so slight and welcoming bitter tannic component that results from a short period of skin contact during fermentation. It's an elegant and balanced "orange wine," without emphasis on the "orange." (Orange wines are white wines fermented like red wines, that is, with extended skin contact. Some can be unbalanced and overpowering.) Cutting and clean, Celli's I Croppi's power and verve make it an excellent choice for those otherwise hard-to-match tomato-based or other highly-flavored seafood dishes. But frankly, the wine is so satisfying, I'd be tempted to drink it with most anything. (95 pts., \$20.)

Refosco dal Peduncolo, a red grape named because its stem also turns red as it ripens, is found mainly in Italy's northeastern region of Friuli Venezia Giulia. Though it's the region's best-known red grape, according to d'Agata, it has had little commercial success in the U.S., perhaps because of the potentially tough tannins. Ai Galli, a small, family-run winery based in the eastern Veneto, very near Friuli Venezia Giulia, takes a slightly different approach with their entry level Refosco dal Peduncolo, which carries the Veneto IGT (*Indicazione Geografica Tipica*) designation. They select grapes from younger vines and allow the yield to rise, which results in a lighter wine. They also age the wine in concrete tanks, eschewing wood that could add more tannins.

Despite its dark red color, Ai Galli's 2019 Refosco dal Peduncolo Rosso (Veneto IGT), is not a heavy wine. Fresh and clean, it delivers bright cherry-like fruit flavors wrapped in mild tannins. Indeed, the tannins are soft, which means that chilling the wine does not amplify them. The acidity keeps it fresh, making this charming wine an excellent alternative to a rosé, especially for those who are disappointed by the banality of most rosé. It's also a good match for hefty seafood as well as pizza or pasta with a Bolognese sauce. (88, \$12.)

Ai Galli also shows their talents with a bargain-priced ("entry-level," as they call it) Pinot Grigio. The Ai Gailli 2019 Pinot Grigio, (Delle Venezie DOC), a fresh and floral wine, has a captivating delicacy. This clean, crisp Pinot Grigio finishes with a welcoming hint of bitterness. It costs all of about \$12 per

bottle! (88 pts.). Most Pinot Grigio bottlings at that price are vapid. Ai Galli's is not. Alberto Piccolo, spokesperson for Ai Galli, told me via Zoom® that he felt it was essential to avoid skin contact entirely during fermentation because the grapes' skins are grey-ish in color—hence, the Grigio or Gris, in French—and could impart color to the wine.

Starting with the 2019 vintage, Prosecco Rosé is an official DOC. As noted in the introduction, I thought this was simply a brilliant marketing maneuver combining two of the hottest selling categories in wine today. But, after speaking at length with Piccolo, whose winery makes an array of Prosecco, including a Prosecco Rosé, I've come away with a different impression. He explains that Prosecco Rosé is a premium product that will inevitably cost more for a few reasons. Most importantly, it must include 15 percent of Pinot Noir, the grape which gives it its rosé color. The requirement that the Pinot Noir must be grown within the area will push the price up because that grape is not widely planted there. Additionally, the Prosecco Rosé must be vintage dated, so blending over multiple years, as is allowed with regular Prosecco, is forbidden. Thirdly, the secondary fermentation must be twice as long as for regular Prosecco, 60 days versus 30 days, which will also increase production costs. I've not tasted many Prosecco Rosés yet so I'm looking forward to seeing for myself whether Piccolo is correct.

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