

Think you know Pinot Grigio?

Drink again. As Stephen Brook found on a recent trip to Friuli, there is a nucleus of winemakers crafting Pinot Grigios on the slopes of Friuli with more poise and persistence than its bland alter-ego ever had

LAST SUMMER, AT a wine event in Barolo, I was asked to comment on a range of top Pinot Grigio wines from Friuli. I threw caution to the winds and remarked that I felt the best wines, while exotic and complex, were flirting with overripeness and thus heaviness. I was unaware that many of the producers were in the room, taking note of what the panel was saying. Instead of a stiletto through the shoulder blades, I received an invitation to return to explore Friuli's wineries and wines. So off I went.

The American wine blogger Ron Washam memorably noted that "Pinot Grigio is the Italian for 'water'". Outrageous, of course, but everyone knows what he's getting at. Pinot Gris can produce rich, satisfying wines in Alsace, Friuli, Alto Adige and Oregon, but you'd never know it from the dross that has inexplicably made the variety so popular. Who would have imagined that Pinot Grigio would become one of Germany's most exported wines? It's rumoured that the flavourless stuff that comes from the Veneto is more likely to be Trebbiano than Pinot Grigio. This is plausible, since Trebbiano is hardly a byword for 'flavourful'.

Go your own way

The variety is in urgent need of rescue. There is a big gap in quality between the average supermarket Pinot Grigio and the full-bodied wines from the best corners of Friuli. Even here it's a difficult variety to pin down. It bears only a faint resemblance to Pinot Gris from Alsace, which has a thicker texture and is often vinified with some residual sugar to give a wine that, while often gorgeous, is also sweeter and rounder. Alsatian versions can also show musky aromas that you rarely find in Friuli, where the dominant aromas are pear and apple, though often with stone fruits or citrus to the fore as well. It's no newcomer, and had already been planted in Friuli in the 1840s.

Friuli Venezia Giulia is a vast region, taking in

the flat alluvial lands around Pordenone and Udine in the west, and the maritime flatlands of Aquileia and Latisana near the huge Marano Lagoon. Here the wines tend to be well made but, with a few exceptions, they rarely rise to great heights. The problem is one of yields: at least 75 hectolitres/hectare and thus not ludicrously high, but high enough to limit ripening and flavour. (An IGT Pinot Grigio can be cropped at up to 190hl/ha. Water indeed.) The wines tend to be characterised by blandness. Even Marco Rabino of Ca' Bolani, one of the largest producers, admits that its Pinot Grigio is made to be drunk within two years.

Heading for the hills

The best zones for the variety in Friuli are Colli Orientali, Collio and the northern part of Isonzo. They have excellent soils and microclimates, but also a large number of producers who take Pinot Grigio seriously, even though they may differ in the styles they aim for. The main difference between these three zones and those further south and west such as Grave and Aquileia is that they are mostly hilly: the soils tend to be marl and limestone, and growers can choose the right slopes and exposures to ensure full ripeness at moderate yields.

Annalisa Zorzetig in Colli Orientali green-harvests to cut yields to around 50hl/ha. Adriano Gigante, however, says many of his best wines have come from much higher yields, and he doesn't believe that yield, in a good vintage, is a particularly crucial factor. His wines certainly don't lack concentration. Martina Moreale of Il Roncal says there is no way she can get high yields because of the poverty of her soils. This too is a major difference between the hills and the flatlands: the latter have far more fertile soils.

Gigante explains: "Up in the hills there is a greater diurnal range, and cool nights maintain the acidity levels, which are not naturally that high ➤



Left: with good slopes, the right mix of marl and limestone, and producers who care, Colli Orientali is one of the best areas for Pinot Grigio in Friuli

Above: in Friuli, key aromas for Pinot Grigio are pear and apple, perhaps with a touch of stone fruits and citrus to the fore

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