



2015 Colliano Ribolla Gialla \$19

One of the great under-appreciated categories for white wine in the world are those from the Friuli region of Italy and the neighboring country of Slovenia. Although they are separated by a border, for centuries the two parts were one as part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. For this reason, both regions produce white wines that have more in common with Austria and central Europe than the lighter, crisper examples from Italy. This month, the feature is one of the indigenous varieties of the region, an example of the grape Ribolla Gialla from the Slovenian side of the border.

To understand the wines of Slovenia, we need to have a quick history lesson. Wine grapes were first cultivated in this region around 400 to 500 BC by the Celts, making this one of the few European wine regions not developed by the Romans. The area was a gateway for trade on the spice route with the east and grape vines were carried by these traders from Turkey and Asia Minor. In fact, the region boasted more varieties of grapes than anywhere else until phylloxera struck in the late 1800s, wiping out thousands of unique varieties. The region was eventually ruled by Rome and later fell under control of the monasteries during the dark ages. Then, the region was conquered by the Austro-Hungarian empire, where it remained until WWI. It is for this reason that the winemaking style bears a closer resemblance to those of Austria than to neighboring Veneto region of Italy. After that war, it was annexed into Italy where it remained until after WWII when it was taken by Tito and became part of Yugoslavia.

For this period, until the breakup of Yugoslavia the region produced oceans of cheap wine for the Eastern block. These were dark times for the producers, as there was no advancement in technology and they also could not afford to replant the vines. The silver lining is that today, Slovenia a treasure trove of old vines and is the reason why the area has a reputation among many wine enthusiasts as a hotbed for extremely exotic whites (and reds). Although there is considerable new plantings of international varieties such as Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc, their reputation is being built on the stunning wines from the old plantings native to this part of the world.

The Ribolla Gialla variety is one that only really grows in this part of the world and is well suited to the mineral rich soils of the region. Historical records show propagation of this variety in 1296, making one of the oldest white grapes on record. In the Goriska Brda region of Slovenia, directly on the border, DNA testing shows that there is considerable genetic diversity within the Ribolla Gialla vines, but they are all grown, harvested and fermented together. This is not uncommon with very old varieties, Pinot Noir being another good example. This lends to the added layers of complexity in the final wine.

Our feature example from Colliano is produced by a local cooperative with extremely high quality control standards. All of the grapes for this wine were hand-harvested, pressed directly to large wood tanks for fermentation and aging. These are very old wood tanks so they do not add any flavor, but allow for a slow oxidation to further build complexity. When you open this wine do, not be afraid to decant it for fifteen minutes before serving. This wine then rewards you with an exotic nose of lemon oil, gardenia, dried red apple, tahini paste and cloves. On the palate it is quite broad and waxy, with a savory richness not unlike schmaltz, with a wave of minerality that pulls the wine together into the moderate finish. Drink this wine with roast chicken rubbed with lemon peel, garlic and olive oil, or with pan seared sea bass with a composed butter of shallot, lemon and dill.

2017 Marchetti Castro di San Silvestro Rosso Conero \$16

As a rule I don't wish to be anyone else, but I think it might be nice to be Maurizio Marchetti for a couple of months. His great, great grandfather made a fortune in the spice trade, bought a 400-acre estate in the Marche on the Adriatic coast of Italy, then built a small castle. Maurizio spends his time painting and making a little wine. I say "little" because he only has about 36 acres of grapes planted and only produces about 8,000 cases of wine. The Marche region (pronounced mar-kay) is dominated by the Apennine Mountains, and most of the vineyards lie in the east-west valleys and a strip of land near the Adriatic Ocean. Until 30 years ago, the region was considered very poor but since then has experienced a mini industrial revolution and is now considered a stronger-than average state. With the growth in wealth has come an improvement in the region's wines, and now the Marche is seen as a great source for modern, Italian wines at reasonable prices.

For red wine, the dominant grape of the region is Montepulciano but there are also significant plantings of Sangiovese (there is strong DNA evidence the two are closely related). Many examples of the wines are grown in the low valleys, where sand is the dominant soil type, and the wines display a pleasant, fruity quality. Marchetti's vineyards lie on the south side of the Ensino River, where the soil is mostly clay and limestone; consequently, his wines have bigger shoulders and more dimension. Maurizio is also lucky enough to be very picky about his fruit, often harvesting less than a bottle of wine per plant if he feels that is what makes the best wine.

For this wine, Maurizio hand harvests the fruit and then ferments it in stainless steel tanks. After a 10 day post-fermentation maceration, the wine is gently pressed into Slovenian oak casks (all very old) and aged for 18 months. The wine is then lightly filtered and bottled. The final blend for the 2007 is 90% Montepulciano and 10% Sangiovese. He produced 2500 cases.

If you don't like Italian wines because they are too light, this one should be a revelation for you. The color is deep garnet and there is pretty good staining in the tears. The nose is a heady combination of fresh blackberries, some black cherry, black tea, dried sage and saddle leather. In the mouth, this wine shows a big first impression of black fruits then develops a firm, muscular frame that holds everything in place into a long finish. Drink this wine over the next three years with braised meats or grilled sausages.

Braised Halibut with Fennel

I am a sucker for the combination of halibut and fennel. On New Years Eve in 1999, we hosted a dinner party and served a version of this dish. While we all waited for modern civilization to end (remember Y2K?), we sipped a stunning white Chateauneuf-du-Pape and this incredible combination. Today I pull this one out anytime I am serving a white wine with hint of licorice or cloves, and it always sings.

4 (6- to 8-ounce) skinless halibut fillets, 3/4 to 1 inch thick

Salt and pepper

6 tablespoons unsalted butter

2 (10-ounce) fennel bulbs, stalks discarded, bulbs halved, cored, and sliced thin

4 shallots, halved and sliced thin

3/4 cup dry white wine

1 teaspoon lemon juice, plus lemon wedges for serving

1 tablespoon minced fresh tarragon

1. Sprinkle fish with 1/2 teaspoon salt. Melt butter in 12-inch skillet over low heat. Place fish in skillet, skinned side up, increase heat to medium, and cook, shaking pan occasionally, until butter begins to brown (fish should not brown), 3 to 4 minutes. Using spatula, carefully transfer fish to large plate, raw side down.

2. Add fennel, shallots, and 1/2 teaspoon salt to skillet and cook, stirring frequently, until vegetables begin to soften, 2 to 4 minutes. Add wine and bring to gentle simmer. Place fish, raw side down, on top of vegetables. Cover skillet and cook, adjusting heat to maintain gentle simmer, until fish registers 135 to 140 degrees, 10 to 14 minutes. Remove skillet from heat and, using 2 spatulas, transfer fish and vegetables to serving

platter or individual plates. Tent loosely with aluminum foil.

3. Return skillet to high heat and cook until sauce is thickened, 2 to 3 minutes. Remove pan from heat, stir in lemon juice, and season with salt and pepper to taste. Spoon sauce over fish and sprinkle with tarragon. Serve immediately with lemon wedges.

Oven Steamed Mussels

I don't cook mussels very often because my family doesn't enjoy them. Every time I do, usually for a gathering of friends when my wife is out of town, I am always amazed by how much people love them and how easy they are to cook. They are also a very common dish in the Marche, where the Rosso Conero originates. For this recipe, make sure to test each mussel that they close when tapped, a sign they are fresh. When cooking, do not worry if one does not open if you tested them before. Simply microwave for 15-30 seconds and wait for it to open. You can serve this over pasta. Remove the mussels after step 2 before adding the parsley, and cover to keep warm. Add a half pound of cooked, al dente spaghetti to the juice left in the pot after baking and stir. Pour into a bowl and add the mussels on top. Then sprinkle with the parsley.

1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil

3 garlic cloves, minced

Pinch red pepper flakes

1 cup dry white wine

3 sprigs fresh thyme

2 bay leaves

4 pounds mussels, scrubbed and de-bearded

1/4 teaspoon salt

2 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into 4 pieces

2 tablespoons minced fresh parsley

1. Adjust oven rack to lowest position and heat oven to 500 degrees. Heat oil, garlic, and pepper flakes in large roasting pan over medium heat; cook, stirring constantly, until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Add wine, thyme sprigs, and bay leaves and bring to boil. Cook until wine is slightly reduced, about 1 minute. Add mussels and salt. Cover pan tightly with aluminum foil and transfer to oven. Cook until most mussels have opened (a few may remain closed), 15 to 18 minutes.

2. Remove pan from oven. Push mussels to sides of pan. Add butter to center and whisk until melted. Discard thyme sprigs and bay leaves, sprinkle parsley over mussels, and toss to combine. Serve immediately.