



NORTHERN ITALY WINE TASTING

May 2020



Italy is my favourite country to visit on wine tour – the fabulous scenery (you are never far from a mountain or a beautiful building), the stunning variety of high quality wines, and most importantly warmth of the welcome and hospitality you receive from the people.

I have been lucky enough to run tours to most parts of Italy, and the North has always provided the most exciting experience wine-wise. Every style of wine is made, at every level of quality, and the variety of regional cuisines is an adventure in its own right.

Sadly none of us are likely to visit this wonderful part of the world for a while, so I am paying homage to it by focussing our May tasting on the wines of Northern Italy. The video of the tasting will be released on my YouTube channel on Tuesday 26th May.



My guided tasting of seven wines, offered in full and half bottles, allows an exploration of many of the key styles of wine, and whether you do it over an evening, a couple of days or longer, you will be tasting some of the best this region has to offer.

I am also offering a number of other wines, that unfortunately I cannot source in half bottle, but that would allow you to explore Northern Italy further.

Over the following pages I give some detail on the wines we are tasting, and the regions they are from. Whether you taste every one of them, or a select sample, I am sure you will appreciate their quality and find some that you love – and I absolutely recommend that once you have ‘formally’ tasted a wine, you try it with food. I make cheese pairing and food recommendations in this booklet, and have provided links to Teddington Cheese’s website and recipes.



I do hope you enjoy learning a bit about Northern Italy as you sample some of the best wines it has to offer.

Northern Italian Regions in our tasting



We are tasting wines from the Veneto, Piedmont and Friuli-Venezia Giulia.

Veneto

Our exploration of Northern Italy starts in the Veneto, home to Prosecco, Valpolicella and Soave – and many other wines, as we discovered in the tours I ran in 2010 and 2019

As its name implies, this region fans out across the huge plains north and west of Venice towards the foothills of the Alps. Packed with historic towns, built with the proceeds of Venetian trade, its fertile soils and mild climate make vine growing easy. In fact, too easy.

The best wines in the world come from vines that have had to struggle to produce grapes. Too much water, and the roots do not go deep enough to bring up all the complex nutrients needed from the soil. Too much sunshine and warmth make the leaf canopy grow in profusion, resulting in grapes reaching sugar maturity before the more complex precursors of flavour, colour and tannins have fully developed. The best wines come from vines grown on less fertile soil, often on slopes to aid drainage, and either far enough away from the equator, or at high enough altitude to cool things down.

In the 1970s significant areas on the warm, humid, flat Venetian plains were planted with Pinot Grigio, Garganega, Corvina, Merlot and other varieties with the aim of producing a lot of wine, intended to fill the lake the EEC had kindly dug. The historic vineyard areas on hillsides with poorer soils, many with vines growing on pergolas over other crops, continued to produce higher quality wine, but names such as Valpolicella, Soave and Prosecco became somewhat sullied by the preponderance of cheap quaffing plonk. Luckily, as new world producers proved they could out-compete Europeans on producing simple fresh fruity value wines, enough wine lovers were seeking more complex, interesting wines for the producers who had hung on to the hillsides to survive and indeed thrive.

Soave

The Soave DOC (Denominazione Origin Controllata – a specific region within which the grapes must be grown and the wine made) is to the north east of Verona, and due east of the southern end of Lake Garda. While there is plenty of Soave grown on the plains to the south, the Classico area, where the original vineyards were situated, is on the volcanic foothills of the Dolomites. Yields are lower, flavours more complex and wines longer lasting. Soave is a fresh wine, rarely coming into contact with oak, although some of the very best examples might be barrel fermented and some maturation may take place in large, inert barrels. The best wines can evolve from fresh, floral, citrus/apple flavours to more complex almond and honey notes.

We are tasting two Soaves:

The Cantine di Monteforte is a co-op, sourcing wine from 1,200ha belonging to 600 members mainly in the Classico area. We are tasting their **Soave Classico 'Terre di Monteforte'**, 100% Garganega, which I think is a stunning example of extremely high quality Soave at a bargain price.

Our second Soave is the **Pieropan Soave Classico**, a blend of 85% Garganega and 15% Trebbiano di Soave (also known as Verdicchio).

Pieropan have been producing wines in Soave since the 1890s, and have led the production of quality wines in the region. All of their 58ha of vineyards are 100% organic.

In 2010 we visited the Pieropan estate, in Soave. Andrea Pieropan escorted us through their beautiful cellars, past the racks where the grapes that would go into their Reciotos dry over several months after harvest, up to the roof terrace for stunning views of the vineyards and town.



In our tasting we will explore the contrasts between the two wines, one made by a very reputable co-op, and the other by one of the most famous producers in the region, and try to answer the question: does the Pieropan merit its significantly higher price?

Food matches. Soave is very versatile and will go with lots of dishes, but my choice would be a Butternut Squash Ravioli with fried sage leaves and sun dried tomatoes. I think Teddington Cheese's Dolce di Maremma and Caciattone di Capra al Fieno would pair really well with these wines.

We will return to the Veneto for an appreciation of Valpolicella when we move on to the red wines, but we now head west...

Piemonte

Piemonte, to the south and east of Turin, was home to the Savoy kingdom, and as a result of their inheritance laws, supplied a ready source of younger brothers first to the church, and subsequently to the FIAT factory in Turin. Its incredible Monferrato hills are a UNESCO world heritage site, recognised for their unique agricultural landscape.

Piemonte has more DOCs and DOCGs (like DOCs but with tighter restrictions such as lower yields, higher alcohol levels and minimum ageing periods), than any other region in Italy. The fact that it has no IGT wines at all (Indicazione Geografica Tipica, equivalent to Vin de Pays in old money) suggests this is because it was smarter than other regions in how it went about classifying its vineyards—in addition to having some superb wine growing areas. Its DOCGs are a hall of fame, including Barolo, Barbaresco, Barbera d'Asti, and of course the sparkling wines of Asti and Moscato d'Asti.

Gavi

Wines from the Gavi DOCG (just north of Genova), are made from the Cortese grape which like Garganega produces fresh high acidity wines with floral/citrus/apple/mineral notes, and when yields are kept low, of a pleasing intensity. Superiore versions are aged for one year (in inert vessels), and some have potential to develop further over time.

We are tasting **La Giustiniana 'Lugarara' Gavi di Gavi** (meaning it comes from the commune of Gavi itself). La Giustiniana's imposing palace (look at the label!) sits among vines planted by Benedictine Monks, and the Lugarara vineyard with its sandy/marl layered soils produces attractive forward wines.



I think this would be a great match for seafood—why not try Grilled Tiger Prawns with a white onion puree and seared cucumber? Or a Taleggio cheese, with its fruity flavours and pinkish rind.

We come back to Piemonte at the end of our tasting, but now we head east, to the border of Italy with Slovenia...This region only became part of Italy after the second world war, and in the eastern hills many winemakers still own vineyards across the border in Slovenia's Goriska Brda region (another fabulous wine producing destination).

Friuli-Venezia Giulia

The finest vineyards are in the foothills of the Julian Alps, in Colli Orientale di Friuli and its neighbour Collio, where there is sufficient altitude to ensure nights are cool, and the Alps proper protect the region from cold northerly weather. Scirocco winds from the Adriatic bring warm humid air, and occasional thunderstorms in the summer, and the region is gloriously verdant.

Colli Orientale di Friuli



A range of grape varieties are grown in the region, including Friulano (called Sauvignonasse in Slovenia or Sauvignon Vert in France), Pinot Grigio, Pinot Bianco and Sauvignon Blanc. Intense fruit flavours, freshness and rich minerality typify the wines.

Last year our tour of this region visited the historic Abbazia Rosazzo, with its exquisite chapel and cloister, and one of the most elegant tasting rooms we have ever encountered. It is here that **Livio Felluga**, one of the architects of modern Italian wine making, established his winery after the WWII, when most other people were abandoning the land to go and work in the local chair-making factories. Livio died (at 102 years) about three years ago, but his family still run the business, and their wines are stunning.



We are tasting their **Pinot Grigio**, which is an antidote to anyone tired of the bland, tasteless Pinot Grigio served up in winebars and restaurants (remember those?). I hope you enjoy it as much as we did—its richness and acidity would pair beautifully with a Torta cheese from nearby Trieste (layers of Mascarpone and Dolcelatte or Gorgonzola). I'm also suggesting a recipe for Baked Salmon with Leeks and Parsley Sauce.

Valpolicella

Now we retrace our steps back to Veneto, and to the west of Soave we find Valpolicella. Like its neighbour, its reputation is somewhat tarred by the oceans of cheap plonk that this famous name has become associated with, and that went out of fashion for the same reason – the New World's fruity, approachable, value wines made out of grape varieties that people recognise.

Corvina is the black grape that goes into Valpolicella, and in common with other varieties we have considered, in order for it to express its best features it needs to be restrained. So the best Valpolicellas are grown on hillsides, as is the case with the wine we are tasting: 'Torre del Falasco' from the **Cantine Valpantena** (the co-op of the Valpantena subregion, which has its own DOC).

No oak was involved in the vinification of this wine, which is 75% Corvina (including some Corvinone, its bigger berried relative), and 25% Rondinella (another productive black grape variety). Its fruity, fresh character with approachable tannins makes it a very summery wine, and I would particularly recommend it with a platter of cured meats, or Melanzane All Parmigiana. Cheesewise, I suggest a Puzzone di Moena washed rind cow's cheese

I haven't offered a contrasting Valpolicella as part of the tasting case as it has proved difficult to source half bottles, but I am recommending some potential 'add ons' which demonstrate more of its fabulous variety, to be enjoyed at leisure – see page 10.



To finish our tasting we return to Piedmont for two wines that epitomise the contrasts of the region.

Barolo

Made from the Nebbiolo grape, which has steadfastly refused to settle down (at least to make great wine) anywhere but Piemonte, these enigmatic wines (with those of neighbour Barbaresco) are among the most acidic, tannic, unapproachable wines imaginable in their youth. Why are they considered so desirable?

Nebbiolo has a really long growing season. Because it is still ripening late into September it can only do well on south facing slopes, where it will catch more sunlight from a sun that is lower in the sky than it was in June or July. Luckily this region is defined by natural amphitheatres and a variety of soil types that result in some wines being more approachable when younger and others hanging on for a couple of decades.



Once the tannins soften, and the glorious 'tar and roses' aromas evolve, Barolo is a wine of silky elegance to compete with the best Burgundies.

Massolino is based in Serralunga d'Alba, the heart of the area where the most long-lived and structured Barolos are grown. The vines in their **Barolo** are up to 55 years old, and the wine was matured in large oak casks for 30 months, and released after a further year in bottle.

Barolo needs serious food, and what better than a Wild Boar Ragù on a bed of buttery pappardelle pasta. The ideal cheese is a Pecorino di Fossa from Emilia-Romagna.

Moscato d'Asti

A good hour's drive east of Serralunga is Strevi (note: the roads are very windy). This is the heart of Asti country, where the Moscato grapes are fermented to a low alcohol level in pressurised tanks which keep the carbon dioxide produced by the yeast dissolved in the wine.

Fermentation is stopped by cooling and filtration, and the gently sparkling Asti Spumante wines are bottled under pressure to retain the sparkle in a sweet (>100g residual sugar/litre), low alcohol (<8% abv) wine. **Moscato d'Asti** is made from the highest quality grapes ensuring these go into the sweetest (>150g residual sugar) and lowest alcohol wines (6%). Whether for an aperitif, or with a light summery pudding, there is no better wine to top or tail an al fresco meal on a warm summer day.

And there is no better maker than **Contero**. I can say unreservedly that the Marengo family are my favourite wine makers in the world. Michaela Marengo, her husband Gian Costa, her sisters Doretta and Patrizia and her son Andrea have welcomed so many of my groups to their hilltop winery with bottles of Moscato or Brachetto d'Aqui (a red wine spumante made from the Brachetto grape), platefuls of homemade pizza, delicious buffet lunches and as much of their time as we could possibly hope to share.

Even I draw the line at pairing cheese with such a delicate, floral wine, but I do recommend fresh strawberries and crème Anglaise with the Moscato d'Asti.



Further suggestions

In addition to the tasting case of seven wines, I am also offering some other Northern Italian gems.

Prosecco

Prosecco is a clear gap in the tasting, but again, half bottles are a challenge, and I don't think I need to reveal the delights of Italy's sparkler to many people.

However, I do have a fabulous example of what the Glera grape can do when it is grown on the best sites (in the DOCG regions of Conegliano-Valdobbiadene and Asolo), at low yields.

The **Ca'Morlin Prosecco Superiore Spumante (DOCG Asolo)** is perfumed, delicate, with a long lasting mousse, and an award winner to boot. Classified 'Extra Dry', which actually means a bit sweeter than Brut (with 13g of residual sugar), the lovely acidity and low alcohol make this a most refreshing way to start your day.... No I really didn't mean that! Have it instead with some Burrata (a mozzarella shell containing Stracciatella and cream) if you can get hold of some, if not then some Parmigiano Reggiano (yes really!).

3 Valpolicellas

Allegrini's **Valpolicella DOC** is from a Classico site but does not claim the Classico DOC. This is because, in contravention of the requirements of the Classico DOC, the closure is a screwcap rather than a cork. It's a super step up from the Falasco, and at £1.50/bottle more, is a real bargain.

Allegrini also make wines as négociants, ie buying in grapes from other growers. I'm going to describe their Amarone first, but if you are trying both this and the Ripasso I suggest you save the Amarone to last.

The **Corte Giara Amarone della Valpolicella** is a great example of this now famous style of wine – made from grapes that have been dried for several months before vinification, ensuring a more concentrated wine with higher alcohol (in this case 15% compared with 12.3-13% for regular Valpolicella), and bigger but still approachable tannins. Amarones are DOCG wines, which are aged for 2 years before release, in this case including 15 months in a combination of large Slavonian oak barrels and second use French barriques. At £30/bottle, it would make a very nice treat with a Loin of Venison En Croute.

The Amarone style without doubt enabled Valpolicella producers to compete with New World Shiraz and Cabernet in the market for bigger, denser, more alcoholic wines. But they couldn't compete on price, and so the Ripasso method was developed – taking the 'must' that is left after an Amarone fermentation is complete (the majority of the wine having been run off), and rather than pressing it to extract finished wine, combining it with freshly made 'basic' Valpolicella. The sugar and yeasts remaining in the must initiate a second fermentation, and the resulting wine is richer and bigger, though not in the league of an Amarone – there again neither is the pricing (£16/bottle) of the Allegrini's **Valpolicella Ripasso 2018 Cortegiara**. I recommend it with Wild Mushroom Risotto.

These big wines with their rich fruit are quite a challenge for many cheeses, but a Pecorino Fiore Sardo or, if you are feeling adventurous, a Gorgonzola Dolce should be up to the task!

I do hope that you enjoy the tasting, and find the video I am filming guides you through the wines and adds to your appreciation.

And of course, I look forward to raising a glass with you in person one day soon!

Jim



Wines we are tasting

	Other detail, eg % alcohol, grape variety etc?	Price/ 75cl Vintage	Price/ 37.5cl Vintage
Soave Classico Monteforte		£8 2019	£4.75 2018
Soave Classico Pieropan		£15 2019	£8.50 2018
Gavi di Gavi Lugarara		£16 2019	£9 2018
Pinot Grigio Livio Felluga		£25 2018	£13.50 2018
Valpolicella Torre del Falasco		£11.50 2018	£6.75 2018
Barolo Massolino		£40 2015	£21 2016
Moscato d'Asti Contero		£15 2019	£8 2019

Further wines

		Price/75cl
Prosecco Superiore Asolo DOCG	NV Ca' Morlin	£16.50
Valpolicella Allegrini	2018	£13
Valpolicella Ripasso Cortegiara	2018	£16
Valpolicella Amarone Cortegiara	2016	£30