

The White Wines of Northeast Italy

by Ed McCarthy and Mary Ewing-Mulligan MW

When most people think of Italian wine, they probably visualize red wine. That's logical, because two-thirds of Italian wine production is red, and it is red wines that have established Italy as a major fine-wine producing country. Even as late as the early 1980s, Italy's white wines just weren't close to the quality of her reds. But today, some of the best white wines in the world are Italian. And Italy excels in white wines at every market segment, from mass-market, commercial wines to very expensive, small-production bottlings of fine wine.

In the three regions that comprise Northeastern Italy – Trentino-Alto Adige, Veneto, and Friuli-Venezia Giulia – white wines have always been significant. Partially due to Austrian and Slovenian influences, this corner of Italy has more of a white winemaking tradition than other parts of the country. For the export market particularly, white wines in these regions have been more important than reds. While all three regions have some white wines in common – the ubiquitous Pinot Grigio is a prime example – each region has its distinct personality and boasts certain white wines as its specialty.



part of Austria until the end of World War I, when the Austro-Hungarian Empire ceded the territory to Italy.

White wines, mainly Pinot Grigio and Chardonnay, account for about 40 percent of Alto Adige's production. Even though some fine Pinot Grigio comes from here, Alto Adige's most interesting whites are made from other varieties. We think the world's best Pinot Bianco (Pinot Blanc) wines are from Alto Adige; also, we like the excellent, characterful Sauvignons (Sauvignon Blanc), the superb, dry Gewürztraminers, and the surprisingly good Müller-Thurgau wines. Some of our favorite Alto Adige whites are the following:

- **Alois Lageder Pinot Bianco, Haberlehof Vineyard**
- **Alois Lageder Pinot Grigio, Beneficium Vineyard**
- **J. Hofstätter Gewürztraminer, Kolbenhof Vineyard**
- **J. Tiefenbrunner Müller-Thurgau Feldmarschall Vineyard**

Hofstätter's Gewürztraminer and **Tiefenbrunner's** Müller-Thurgau are two of the finest examples of these varieties being made today. Other excellent Alto Adige white wine producers to look for include **Franz Haas, Elena Walch, Abbazia di Novacella, Josef Brigl, Hirshprunn** and **San Michele Appiano** — the latter an excellent cooperative that also uses the name, **Castel San Valentino**.

Trentino-Alto Adige

Situated directly south of Austria, Trentino-Alto Adige is Italy's northernmost region, and one of its most beautiful. The Adige River cuts through the Dolomite Alps to form the Adige Valley and the hillsides where most of the grapevines grow.

As its name suggests, Trentino-Alto Adige is a dual region, composed of two very individual parts. Driving through Alto Adige, the northern part, you might think you're in Austria or Germany rather than in Italy. German is the dominant language, and many locals, especially north of the capital city of Bolzano, look as if they've stepped off the movie set of "The Sound of Music." Also known as the South Tyrol, Alto Adige was a

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The Austrian influence disappears in Trentino, directly south of Alto Adige. This is the land of huge cooperatives, such as **Cavit**, in the capital city of Trento, and **MezzaCorona**, just outside Trento, which produce oceans of Pinot Grigio and Chardonnay. **Ferrari**, one of Italy's finest sparkling wine houses, is also in Trento. Although some of the better small producers in Trentino specialize in red wines, the following producers make fine whites: **Pojer & Sandri**, **Roberto Zeni**, **Gaierhof**, **La Vis**, and **Maso Poli**. Apart from Chardonnay and Pinot Grigio, Trentino's specialties include the same whites as Alto Adige, plus **Traminer** and **Moscato Giallo**.

Veneto

As if it were not enough to be home to two magical cities, Venice and Verona, Veneto is the third-largest wine region in Italy (after Apulia and Sicily). As this statistic implies, many inexpensive, mass-market wines, both white and red, are made here. Pinot Grigio and Chardonnay in particular have made great strides during the last two decades, challenging the traditional Veronese favorites, Soave and, to a lesser extent, **Bianco di Custoza**.



And yet Soave—made primarily from the local **Garganega** grape—can be one of the finest dry white wines in Italy. This is true when the wine comes from the hilly *classico* zone and from the hands of the best producers, such as **Pieropan** and **Gini**. Some of our favorite Soave wines are the following:

- **Pieropan Soave Classico Superiore**
- **Pieropan Soave Classico “La Rocca”** (a great, single-vineyard Soave)

- **Pieropan Soave Classico Calvarino**
- **Gini Soave Classico Superiore**
- **Pra Soave Classico**
- **Pra Soave Classico Monte Grande**
- **Santa Sofia Soave Classico Superiore** (Other good Soave producers include **Bertani**, **Bisson**, **Inama**, **Lamberti**, **Suavia**, and **Tamellini**.)

Bianco di Custoza is a bit lighter-bodied than Soave (and also less expensive), from the same general vicinity, near Verona. Its quality is surprisingly high for a wine retailing for \$10 to \$12. It's made primarily from **Trebbiano Toscano**, **Garganega**, and **Tocai Friulano**. Good producers include **Lamberti**, **Cavalchina**, **Montresor**, and **Santa Sofia**.

The Central Hills area of Veneto, between Verona and Venice, boasts two important producers of both white and red wine. **Fausto Maculan**, in the **Breganze** district, north of the city of **Vicenza**, produces a **Breganze Bianco**—made mainly from **Tocai Friulano**—plus two Chardonnays; his pride and joy, however, are his two fabulous dessert whites, **Torcolato** and **Acinobibili**, both intensely flavored with aromas of honey and apricots. In the **Colli Euganei** district, around the city of **Padua**, **Vignalta** makes a blended Bianco from **Garganega**, **Prosecco**, **Tocai Friulano**, and **Sauvignon**. His most interesting white, however, is his **Fior di Arancio**, made from **Moscato Giallo**, and redolent of orange blossoms.

Wine districts north and west of Venice and Treviso specialize in the **Prosecco** variety—an apple-scented, aromatic grape mainly used to make one of Italy's most popular, inexpensive sparkling wines. A little dry white wine also comes from Prosecco, but the variety definitely performs best as a sparkling wine.

Friuli-Venezia Giulia

Friuli-Venezia Giulia occupies the extreme northeast corner of Italy. Because its eastern sections were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire prior to World War I, many residents speak three languages, Serbo-Croatian, German and Italian—and many wine-makers also have Slavic surnames.

Friuli is a quality-conscious region, and many critics believe it makes Italy's best white wines. Friuli's yields are among the lowest in Italy, and yet at \$15 to \$25 retail, most of its wines are great values. The two best wine zones—**Collio** and **Colli Orientali del Friuli**, both in the southeast—produce mainly whites, which are quite rich and full-bodied compared to other Italian whites. These wines are primarily varietals; the most important are **Tocai Friulano**, **Pinot Bianco**, **Pinot Grigio**, **Sauvignon**, **Chardonnay**, and two local white varietals, **Ribolla Gialla** and **Malvasia Istriana**.



Of Friuli's many great white wines, one stands out: **Silvio Jermann's Vintage Tunina**, from **Collio**. A blend of five varieties, **Vintage Tunina** is amazingly complex, and demands at least ten years of aging to develop fully; some call it Italy's finest white wine. **Vintage Tunina** retails for \$45 to \$50. In addition to **Jermann**, some of the best producers in **Collio** and **Colli Orientali del Friuli** include **Girolamo Dorigo**, **Livio Felluga**, **Gravner**, **Le Due Terre**, **Russiz Superiore** (of **Marco Felluga**), **Ronco dei Tassi**, **Zamò and Zamò**, **Abbazia di Rosazzo**, **Vigne dal Leon**, **Venica & Venica**, **Villa Russiz**, **Mario Schiopetto**, **Doro Princic**, **Ronchi di Cialla**, **Ronco del Gnemiz**, and **Volpe Pasini**. Other excellent Friuli producers—from the **Isonzo** zone, which borders **Collio**—include **Vie di Romans**, **Lis Neris-Pecorari**, **Ronco del Gelso**, and **Sant' Elena**. From the **Grave del Friuli** zone, **Plözner** is a top producer.

We're big fans of Italian white wines, particularly those from the three northeastern regions that we've highlighted here. These wines all vary in weight, intensity and price, but their common chords of crispness, lively acidity and genuine flavor, in a (usually) unoaked style, make them ideal companions with food at the dinner table.