



Valdobbiadene country was recently declared a UNESCO World Heritage site.

COOPERATIVE

MORE THAN 60% OF ITALIAN WINES ARE COOPERATIVE

WINE MAKING

PRODUCED. *TEXT AND PHOTOS BY PATRICIA THOMSON*

“FARMERS FORMED CO’OPS AFTER WWII.”

Little-known fact: More than 60 percent of Italian wine is produced by cooperatives. When I think of coops, my mind goes two places. One is to the big *cantina sociale* that used to exist in every wine zone, the kind of place locals would go to buy *vino sfuso*, unbottled wine. My husband has vivid memories of accompanying his uncle there as an excited five-year-old to buy wine for the family’s osteria. (“I was the mascot,” he says with a laugh. But, this being Italy, he also got to taste.) They’d fill up plastic containers, bring the wine home, and bottle it there, his uncle feeling that bottled wine, even if unlabeled, was more elegant than serving wine in carafe.

The second association is with cooperatives that have cache, the kind that make benchmark wines that win awards, get exported, and appear in top restaurants and wine shops. Places like the *Produttori del Barbaresco* and a host of cooperatives in Alto Adige.

There’s really no parallel in America. This was a European phenomenon built on the smoldering ashes of World War II. In Italy, it was part of a broader wave of agricultural coops, where small farmers banded together in everything from milk to fruit to pasta.

A half century earlier, there was a first wave whose impetus was geography. In mountainous regions like the Alps, grape growers have minuscule vineyard plots, so they united for economy of scale in production. The alpine region of Alto Adige has the oldest coops in Italy. *Cantina Terlano* was founded in 1893, *Cantina Tramin* in 1889, and *San Michele Appiano* in 1907, to name a few.

The best coops pay their growers based on the quality of the grapes. To help them reach their potential, the coops provide train-

ing and technical advisors, who confer on everything from canopy management to harvest date. There’s usually a board of directors elected from the members, a chief winemaker who oversees production, and agronomists and enologists under his command.

The highest quality cooperatives are largely found in the mountainous regions of northern Italy, or else on the islands of Sardinia and Sicily. Here’s a look at two, north and south.

PROSECCO’S VAL D’OCA

I happen to like the name Val d’Oca. It means Valley of the Goose, but *oca*’s secondary meaning is ditz, as in “You silly goose!”

Silliness aside, this small valley is located in the tenderloin of the Prosecco region, being within the boundaries of the *Conegliano-Valdobbiadene* DOCG. It’s a beautiful sub-alpine area, with steep hills blanketed by vines. (UNESCO declared it a World Heritage site in 2019.) Val d’Oca is the label for all wines coming out of the *Cantina Produttori di Valdobbiadene*.

Established in 1952, this is an example of a post-war cooperative. “After World War II, Italy was mostly destroyed, physically and economically,” says managing director Alessandro Vella over lunch in New York. “There were many areas, both in the north and south of Italy, that were economically depressed. So especially in agriculture, many farmers decided to get together to divide the cost and synergize production. In our case, 129 farmers with small pieces of land decided to build this *Cantina Sociale di Valdobbiadene*.”

That number has grown to 600 members, spread across the Treviso province in the Veneto region. The majority lie within the



Left: Experts conduct a soil study on a Mandrarossa vineyard. **Above:** The glera grape is the foundation of all Prosecco.



Alberto Antonini conducted a vineyard mapping project to identify the top terroirs in the Settesoli coop.

“PROSECCO’S CONSUMPTION HAS GROWN WORLDWIDE”

Valdobbiadene DOCG borders, and another 40 percent are in the wider Prosecco DOC Treviso zone. All have seen Prosecco’s consumption grow from a local phenomenon to a worldwide juggernaut.

Altogether the coop makes 14 million bottles under 150 labels, only four are exported to the U.S. Each is a good value within its category.

Going up the appellation’s quality pyramid, we start with Prosecco DOC Treviso (\$13). This is an Extra Dry wine, which means (counter-intuitively) that it’s a tad sweeter than Brut. That comes across as fruitiness rather than sweetness, so Extra Dry is quite popular with consumers. This Prosecco has hints of citrus and wildflowers behind the foam. It’s an easy wine, the kind you’d bring on a summer picnic with friends.

Ditto for the new kid on the block: Sparkling Rosé Extra Dry (\$13). Starting this year, they’ll be able to label it Prosecco DOC Rosé, since the rules were updated in May 2020, allowing pink Prosecco after years of heated debate. So if you’re a fan of rosé, give this a try. Its pretty pink color and whiff of strawberry and red raspberry come from four to six hours of skin contact with pinot noir grapes, which are combined with Prosecco’s mainstay, glera.

Not all Proseccos are created equal. As the Roman historian Pliny the Elder said: Bacchus love hills. That’s because vines prefer good drainage (vines don’t like to get their feet wet) and the exposition to the sun allows for better ripening. So climbing up the quality pyramid takes you inside DOCG territory, where the hills lie. Val d’Oca’s Prosecco Millesimato (\$18) is a single vintage coming from steep hills within the boundaries of the Prosecco Superiore Valdobbiadene DOCG. That’s a mouthful for a wine that shouldn’t intimidate. It’s a crisp glera/chardonnay blend, with a nice suggestion of lemon curd and golden apple. It can go equally well as an aperitif or with fish. (Save the potato chips for the DOC.)

At the appellation’s pinnacle are the steepest hills, called *rive* in dialect. There are 43 altogether, and each has a name which appears on the label. Val d’Oca makes five rive wines, but just the Rive di San Pietro di Barbozza (\$33) is imported. It’s another Prosecco Superiore Valdobbiadene DOCG, but this one is pure glera. It’s also a Brut, meaning it’s drier. The impression is one of minerality more than fruit. Managing director Vella concurs: “Normally, the Rive has this kind of sapidity. So in my opinion, it’s more elegant in the nose and in the mouth. The Millesimato is a more flowery, fruity wine.”

Both the Millesimato and the Rive are niche Proseccos, found predominantly in restaurants (where brands are built). If you’re lucky, you’ll find them there by the glass.

SICILY’S MANDRAROSSA

The Settesoli cooperative in southeast Sicily has always been held in high esteem. Now they have a premium line of terroir-driven wines, Mandrarossa, which is essentially a winery within a winery.

Founded in 1999, Settesoli is huge, comprising 2000 growers and controlling about 5 percent of Sicily’s vineyard area. Because the island is so geologically diverse, that means lots of soil variation.

Enter Alberto Antonini and his vineyard mapping project. The

Tuscan native had worked with boldface names like Frescobaldi, Antinori, and Col d’Orcia before becoming an independent consultant. The first thing he did at Settesoli was identify the coop’s top terroirs. “When you want wines with a sense of place, you have to understand the place,” he says.

According to Antonini, there are four soil types in the world of fine wine, all coming from limestone, schist, granite and basalt. The best soils are decomposed mother rock, showing a good mix between “the bone and the beef,” as he says — that is, between stony parts and clay. His team zeroed in on the limestone soils around the town of Santa Margherita and identified over 1200 acres that they consider premium turf. Limestone soils are also found in Tuscany, Piedmont, Burgundy, Champagne and Rioja, he notes, which is good company indeed. “Limestone gives the vine a lot of voltage and vitality,” he says.

These top vineyards belong to 200 growers. They’ve become an elite group, who meet often and are under strict control. “It’s important to motivate growers with pride, not just money,” Antonini says.

Antonini is philosophically opposed to what he calls “the devastating Bordeaux colonization of the wine world” and expounds upon “the six enemies of winemaking with sense of place”: over maturation, over extraction, overuse of oak, synthetic chemicals, “winemaker wine,” and howing to the market.

“In the past,” Antonini adds, “drinkability was associated with simplicity.” He wryly observes that the beloved pizza margherita is simple too. “Thank god, drinkability is back at the center of quality. That’s what we try to deliver with the Mandrarossa wines.”

And they do. All eight wines I tasted had a beguiling purity. Nothing was over the top — not the concentration, nor the alcohol, nor the occasional use of oak.



Mandrarossa’s new premium grillo, grown in limestone soil.



The climate in Valdobbiadene is perfect for cool variety grapes, like glera.

Mandrarossa makes good-value varietal wines in the \$12-\$18 price range. These include native varieties like grillo and zibibbo in the whites, and frappato and nero d’avola in the reds, as well as French grapes that do well to Sicily, like syrah, cabernet sauvignon, and petit verdot. I was crazy about the latter, a pure petit verdot called Timperosse (\$20). Usually a blending grape, petit verdot can be overpowering by itself. But this was fresh, juicy, and extremely drinkable. I also liked Bonera (\$20), a 50/50 cabernet franc/nero d’avola blend. It had lush, lively fruit, smacking of dark cherry and plum, and was deliciously intense without being weighty.

The soil study has allowed Mandrarossa to introduce two new premium wines. The white is a grillo called Bertolino Soprano (\$43), named after the piece of land. Grillo was historically used to make Marsala wine, but since the 1980s winemakers have been fermenting it dry into zesty seafood wines. Grown on rocky limestone, this grillo ferments in stainless steel and concrete vats, then spend 11 months in untoasted casks for a bit of micro-oxygenation. That

imparts a rich, soft body and slight nuttiness to a wine that’s true to grillo’s colors, showing stone fruit, Meyer lemon, and honeysuckle.

The red comes also from limestone plots: Terre del Sommacco (\$50). To get a nero d’avola, this perfectly balanced takes the right touch. Some winemakers attempt to lower the grape’s naturally high acidity, ending up with something that tastes like breakfast juice. Others pump up the structure with barrique. This one’s just right. The acidity (read freshness) makes it an excellent food wine and promises ageability to boot. But it’s enjoyable now, full of cherry and blackberry flavors, and soft tannins. All hail drinkability!

Where to find the wines: Val d’Oca is imported by Prestige Wine Imports, which has “Find Our Wines” tool on its website. For internet sales, go to Wine.com. Mandrarossa is imported by Palm Bay Imports, which has a “Where to Buy” tab on their website. For internet sales, try VinPorter.com and Wine.com.

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