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Friuli's

Surprising Whites

The white wines of Friuli-Venezia Giulia are the country's most sophisticated and complex while remaining true to their historic roots.

BY MONICA LARNER

“Intelligent” is the most fitting descriptor for the luminous white wines of Friuli-Venezia Giulia. Italy's northeasternmost region is the crossroads of Europe's Latin, Germanic and Slavic cultures. “Because of our complicated history we have wines that reflect the traditions of Bordeaux, Burgundy, Austria, Germany and the Eastern Adriatic,” says winemaker Andrea Felluga of the Livio Felluga winery. “In addition to Pinots, Traminer, Riesling and Malvasia, we also have a huge offering of indigenous grapes such as Ribolla Gialla and Verduzzo.”

BOTTLES: JON VAN GORDE; BACKGROUND PHOTO: MONICA LARNER



A Friuli trailblazer, Livio Felluga (pictured with son, Andrea) put the region on the world enological map with his sophisticated whites; today, his children represent a fifth generation and continue in a tradition of excellence with wines like the Terre Alte blend.

Winemaker Josko Gravner of the Gravner winery once said he was “interested in philosophy, not enology,” and the choices he famously made—such as aging his wines in ceramic amphorae like the ancient Romans did and following biodynamic farming principles—underline that personal preference. He is from a long succession of winemaking protagonists who have helped turn around Italy’s reputation for quick, easy-drinking whites. Those efforts have established Friuli as the home of Italy’s most sophisticated and complex white wines.

“We enjoy a very strong identity here and a tight relationship with our roots,” says Bordeaux-trained vintner Fulvio Bressan of Bressan. “We don’t make many wines, we make one wine: Friuli wine.”

Friuli whites are rich and creamy expressions with fragrant layers of

stone and passion fruits, honeysuckle and drying mineral tones. They are complex because the region they occupy is so multifaceted. South of Udine are two territories for growing grapes. Colli Orientali del Friuli and Collio comprise the hillside areas, home to the celebrated Rosazzo and Oslavia crus where some of the best wines are made. Flatter lands have been enriched by alluvial deposits from the Tagliamento River and are home to the Isonzo, Grave and Aquileia zones.

As important, however, are the advanced techniques practiced in the cellar. Friuli remains a hotbed of white wine innovation. Late-harvest fruit, extended macerations, contact with the lees and oak aging (both French and Slovenian) help reinforce creamy density and rich texture. These practices also bring out the wine’s natural acidity and delicate mineral nuances.



FOCUS ON PICOLIT

Italy’s most precious and prized dessert wine is Picolit, made from the eponymous grape variety in Colli Orientali del Friuli. Because of a genetic malady known as floral abortion, Picolit’s flowering buds don’t develop properly, resulting in poor pollination rates and an exceptionally small crop. But the few grapes remaining on each cluster are packed with flavors. Some winemakers opt for a late harvest to further develop sugars and some dry the grapes on hayracks.

The grape was largely discarded and ripped out of vineyards to make room for better performing varieties and today a mere 400 acres exist. In the 18th century, Picolit became the rage among the noble courts of Europe and Russia and its peculiar hermaphroditic qualities have helped ensure a cult following.

Often compared to Sauternes, Picolit is a delicate and complex wine without the heaviness or overt over-sweetness of other Italian dessert wines. The wines sell for up to \$100 for a 500ml bottle and offer aromas of honey, pressed flowers, dried apricot and candied orange peel. They can be paired with elegant desserts like custards and creams but an even more successful marriage is with foie gras.

Another thing that distinguishes Friuli is that most of its whites are mono-variety. “We follow an Austro-Hungarian or Anglo-Saxon tradition of winemaking in which we name our wines after the variety: Friulano, Chardonnay, Sauvignon, etc.,” says Alvaro Pecorari of Lis Neris. “In the Latin tradition, wines are named after a place like Chianti, Valpolicella or Barolo.”

Here’s what you can expect from the individual grapes that make up Friuli’s rich patrimony of white wines.

FRIULANO The most commonly planted variety in Friuli, Friulano was once associated with easy-drinking taverna wines made to be consumed young. Careful effort has recently turned Friulano into the region’s



Clockwise: Alvaro Pecorari of Lis Neris (pictured with wife Lorena and daughter Federica) crafts elegant whites showcasing the best of Friuli tradition; Fulvio and Jelena Bressan offer a Pinot Grigio, a Verduzzo Friulano and a Carat blend whose long maceration times give them unfolding complexity; run by the energetic Zorzettig family, La Tunella's blends of Friulano and Ribolla Gialla are attracting attention in Italy and beyond.

banner grape. Work by leading winemakers such as the late Mario Schiopetto and Livio Felluga helped bring out luscious aromas of white almond, stone fruit and Cavaillon melon.

Wines including and preceding the 2006 vintage were labeled Tocai Friulano. But after a long battle with Hungary's Tokaji region, the European Union ruled that Friuli Tocai wines should be identified simply as Friulano which means "coming from Friuli." "We fought hard to keep 'Tocai,' but we are better off with 'Friulano' because it identifies our region," says Andrea Felluga.

PINOT BIANCO A French import, Pinot Bianco was introduced during the 19th century Habsburg domination along with international varieties Chardonnay, Sauvignon and Merlot. It is planted across Northern Italy and has found a happy home in Friuli thanks to the calcareous marl soils that enhance its aromas of mineral, apricot, pear and Golden Delicious apple. They are among the most food-friendly whites ever thanks to their naturally creamy structure. Pair them with shellfish or white asparagus risotto.

PINOT GRIGIO Much of the Grigio we see in the U.S. comes from industrial production and overcropping, resulting in watery wines that refresh a parched palate the same way a chilled Budweiser or lemon soda would. Those wines generally score 85 points and below. In Friuli, however, Pinot Grigio benefits from a very different image (and scores in the high 80s). Here, winemakers Ronco del Gelso (Sot Lis Rivis), Vigneti Fantinel (Sant'Helena) and Ermacora craft creamier, denser wines with passion fruit, honeysuckle and bright lemon zest that would pair with Tandoori chicken or spinach and ricotta ravioli.

An interesting new style of Pinot Grigio is Ramato, which means "copperish in color." You could mistake it for a rosé but look close and you will indeed see that it is more amber than pink. The color comes from extended contact with the skins (that are naturally copper-gray in color, hence "Pinot Grigio").



RIBOLLA GIALLA Another important indigenous grape of Friuli, Ribolla Gialla boasts a particularly distinctive personality with a saturated golden color, light body, high acidity and fragrant aromas of exotic fruit, papaya and mango, which turn nutty with time. It has existed in these parts since the 1300s (in Slovenia it is known as Rebula) and gives its best results on hillside vineyards.

SAUVIGNON We call it "Sauvignon Blanc," but in Friuli the grape goes by its variety name "Sauvignon" (the root for Sauvignons Jaune, Noir, Rose, Gris and Vert). What distinguishes the grape in Northeast Italy is that it absolutely lacks those sharply aggressive aromas of nettles and artichoke you sometimes find. In the Colli Orientali del Friuli, Collio and Grave areas, it tends to showcase softer aromas of passion fruit, sage, mint and tomato leaf. Try one with Thai basil coconut curry sauce.

VERDUZZO FRIULANO Made as both a dry and a sweet wine, Verduzzo enjoys a long indigenous existence in Friuli. When vinified dry, it can be difficult to appreciate because of its resin and pine nut flavors and sour astringency (there's a slight tannic bite there too). Dessert wines, such as Scubla's Cràtis and Gigante's version, are much more popular.

BIANCO (or blended wines) Our highest scoring wines (low 90s) were mostly Biancos, or white blends. We adored the combinations that paired an aromatic component like Sauvignon with a richly textured partner such as Friulano or Picolit. These wines also benefit from sophisticated winemaking techniques that produce added elegance and intensity. **W**

For full reviews of top-scoring Friuli whites, see this issue's Buying Guide, page 55.

PHOTOS: MONICA LARNER

ITALY/FRIULI WHITE WINES

Because of space limitations, the following listings of Italian white wines include only the top few wines in each category. For a complete listing of Italian white wines, please consult our online Buying Guide at winemag.com.

BLENDED WHITES

92 Bressan 2006 Carat (Venezia Giulia); \$34. A fabulous Friulano-based wine (with 10% Malvasia and 10% Ribolla Gialla), Carat is a rich and intense wine that will certainly last another five to 10 years in the cellar. Its quality is evident thanks to the velvety and rich feel the wine imparts in the mouth and its bright aromas of peach and apricot. This wine has extraordinary length on the finish too. To be released fall 2009. Imported by VinUS Inc. *Editors' Choice.* —M.L.

92 Livio Felluga 2006 Terre Alte (Colli Orientali del Friuli); \$75. This blend of Friulano, Pinot Bianco and Sauvignon delivers impressive aromatic intensity and a beautifully creamy texture. You'll get peach, apricot and soft citrus tones backed by subtle oak shadings and toasted nut. The wine is smooth and polished with an elegant and sophisticated style. Imported by Moët Hennessy USA. —M.L.

91 La Tunella 2007 Campo Marzio (Colli Orientali del Friuli); \$39. This delicious blend of Friulano and Ribolla Gialla offers sophisticated aromas of passion and exotic fruits, peach, vanilla cream and white almond. The wine boasts a luminous golden color and a soft, supple mouthfeel that is both lively and well structured. Pair with lobster. Imported by Quintessential Wines. *Editors' Choice.* —M.L.

CHARDONNAY

91 Alois Lageder 2005 Löwengang Chardonnay (Alto Adige); \$43. Löwengang is a gorgeous expression of Chardonnay from cool-climate Alto Adige in Northern Italy that offers perfumes of peach, yellow flower and white almond backed by a dense, creamy

structure. The wine awards a long, cooling finish and pairs well with sophisticated seafood dishes. Imported by Dalla Terra. —M.L.

91 Jermann 2007 W... Dreams Chardonnay (Venezia Giulia); \$82. This white wine is so big and dense, it drinks like a red. It could pair with spicy pork or honey-roasted ham, thanks to its intense aromas of toasted nut, vanilla, banana and exotic fruit. It's thick and chewy with golden saturation and pulpy extraction. Imported by Empson (USA) Ltd. —M.L.

FRIULANO

90 Bastianich 2006 Plus Tocai Friulano (Colli Orientali del Friuli); \$70. Offers amazing intensity and layered aromas of honey, candied orange, caramel and butterscotch. The wine also delivers an interesting combination of sweet fruit flavors and a bitter almond close. Imported by Dark Star Imports. —M.L.

90 Ronco del Gelso 2007 Rive Alte Friulano (Friuli Isonzo); \$22. Thick and luscious with bursting citrus flavors backed by stone fruit and nectarine, this is a perfect choice to pair with fried calamari or onion rings. The wine is deliciously thick and creamy in the mouth with lingering fruit. Imported by Panebianco. *Editors' Choice.* —M.L.

PINOT BIANCO

90 Russiz Superiore 2004 Riserva Pinot Bianco (Collio); \$30. This creamy, rich Pinot Bianco will win you over at first sniff thanks to the intensity and purity of its aromas. You'll get peach, apricot, passion fruit, yellow and a light mineral dusting backed by rich concentration. Pair this wine with crustaceans or *risotto con crema di scampi*. Imported by Dalla Terra. *Editors' Choice.* —M.L.

88 Ermacora 2007 Pinot Bianco (Colli Orientali del Friuli); \$17. Ermacora's luscious Pinot Bianco offers a decisive mineral backbone that is enhanced by soft layers of orange zest, almond blossom and apricot. The wine delivers excellent structure and caps it off with fresh acidity. Imported by Premier Wine Co. —M.L.

88 Jacùs 2007 Pinot Bianco (Colli Orientali del Friuli); \$24. This pretty

Pinot Bianco features big aromas of sweet orange, almond and stone fruit. The wine offers a rich, tightly packed mouthfeel with layers of light spice and mineral on the close. You get both elegance and intensity. Imported by Vitis Imports. —M.L.

PINOT GRIGIO

88 Lis Neris 2007 Gris Pinot Grigio (Venezia Giulia); \$30. This delivers much more than standard Pinot Grigio. There's thickness and density here all backed by fragrant aromas of stone fruit, citrus and chopped almonds. The mouthfeel is creamy and thick. Pair with lemon-marinated chicken. Imported by Lis Neris Estates. —M.L.

88 Plozner 2008 Malpelo Pinot Grigio (Venezia Giulia); \$27. Malpelo is a ramato-style Pinot Grigio (which means it sports a copperish color) with a cool glass closure that has done a good job of locking in the wine's fresh fragrances of citrus, rose, peach and white spice. Pair this wine with tuna steak or raw salmon tartar. Imported by Empson (USA) Ltd. —M.L.

88 Ronco del Gelso 2007 Sot Lis Rivis Pinot Grigio (Friuli Isonzo); \$24. This is an immaculate Pinot Grigio with pristine aromas of stone fruit, white stone and honeysuckle. The wine is smooth and creamy in the mouth and begs a pairing with Tandoori chicken. In fact, it's hard to find a Grigio with this level of intensity. Imported by Panebianco. —M.L.

RIBOLLA GIALLA

89 La Tunella 2008 Rigialla Selènze Ribolla Gialla (Colli Orientali del Friuli); \$27. Rigialla Selènze (Ribolla Gialla) is a white wine with fresh and fragrant aromas of peach, papaya and banana. The wine is generous and smooth on the palate and ends with a silky but fresh feel. Pair it with seafood salad or crustaceans. Imported by Quintessential Wines. —M.L.

88 Cantarutti 2007 Ribolla Gialla (Colli Orientali del Friuli); \$19. This wine delivers big aromatic intensity with layers of apricot and peach backed by a compact, almost chewy feel in the mouth. Imported by Vinilandia USA. —M.L.

88 Vigneti Fantinel 2007 Vigneti Sant' Helena Ribolla Gialla (Delle Venezie); \$25. Here's a fragrant Ribolla Gialla that is redolent of sweet peach, honey and fresh jasmine. It is creamy, rich and soft in the mouth and ends with an almond-like aftertaste. Imported by Domaine Select Wine Estates. —M.L.

SAUVIGNON

89 Girolamo Dorigo 2007 Ronc di Juri Sauvignon (Colli Orientali del Friuli); \$30. This is a wood-aged Sauvignon with sophisticated aromas of butter and toasted nut that frame mature notes of peach, melon and papaya. The wine is rich and long-lasting in the mouth and there is a note on the close that reinforces the oak overtones. Imported by Panebianco. —M.L.

88 Comelli 2007 Sauvignon (Colli Orientali del Friuli); \$19. You have to admire the roundness and supple softness of this Sauvignon. Yes, it has sharply aromatic notes of tomato leaf and exotic fruit, but they are delivered in a delicate and harmonious fashion. The wine is crisp and lean with enough substance to pair with spicy Indian dishes. Imported by Fourcade & Hecht Wine Selections. —M.L.

88 Lis Neris 2007 Picol Sauvignon (Venezia Giulia); \$30. Here's a wine that delivers both fragrant aromas and impressive structure in one glass. Made with Sauvignon, Picol offers layers of orange zest, passion fruit and lemongrass. It also has density and staying power. Imported by Lis Neris Estates. —M.L.

88 Russiz Superiore 2008 Sauvignon (Collio); \$24. This fabulous Sauvignon shows amazing aromatic intensity. Young and crisp, the wine offers exotic fruit, lemongrass, and chopped basil, then finishes zesty and crisp finish. Imported by Dalla Terra. —M.L.

88 Vigna Traverso 2007 Sauvignon (Colli Orientali del Friuli); \$18. A broad and fat expression of Sauvignon with dense aromas of honeysuckle and fragrant lilies. Those floral aromas are backed by distinct accents of chopped herb and tomato leaf. The wine boasts very good structure and length on the finish. Imported by Superior Wines LLC. —M.L.

88 Vigneti Fantinel 2007 Vigneti Sant'Helena Sauvignon (Collio);

\$25. Lively fruit aromas are backed by loads of papaya, mango and grapefruit in this stylish expression of Sauvignon from northern Italy. The wine is smooth and compact in the mouth with more texture than expected. Imported by Domaine Select Wine Estates. —M.L.

OTHER VARIETIES

90 Bressan 2006 Verduzzo Friulano (Venezia Giulia); \$37. This is incredibly intense with aromas of candied fruit, pine nut, resin and honey. The mouthfeel is dense and persistent and ultimately this Verduzzo Friulano drinks more like a red wine than a white. Imported by VinUS Inc. —M.L.

88 Masottina 2008 Incrocio Manzoni 6.0.13 (Colli Trevigiani); \$21. This delicately fragrant wine is made from Incrocio Manzoni 6.0.13 grapes (a cross between Pinot Bianco and Riesling). Perfumed aromas of spring flowers and passion fruit lead into a wine that's well structured and creamy in the mouth with zesty peach flavors. Imported by Pavi Micheli Lawson-Robert Lawson. —M.L.

SPAIN RED WINES

CASTILLA Y LEÓN

95 Numanthia-Termes, S.L. 2006 Termanthia (Toro); \$200. Termanthia is the pinnacle of Tinta de Toro. Aromas of wild blackberry, crude oil, forest floor and truffles are just now showing themselves, while the tight, tannic palate is full of black plum, blackberry and bitter chocolate flavors. Espresso and roast meat notes grace the dark, jam-packed finish, and as a whole this is one bold, boisterous wine. Best in 2011 thru 2013. Only 531 cases. Imported by Moët Hennessy USA. *Cellar Selection.* —M.S.

93 Numanthia-Termes, S.L. 2006 Numanthia (Toro); \$60. Dense and dark, with huge black-fruit aromas, toasty oak, chocolate and balsamic notes. Numanthia is ripe, rugged and intense, with in-your-face black fruit, coffee and burnt-toast accents. The feel and finish are deep as a cool well, and smooth as a whistle. Masculine to the max, and pretty close to being ready to drink. Best to hold until the fall or

winter. 12,000 cases made. Imported by Moët Hennessy USA. *Editors' Choice.* —M.S.

92 Astrales 2006 Ribera del Duero; \$67. Astrales has really nailed it the past couple of years, and while the '06 isn't quite as good as 2005, it's still an excellent wine. Blackberry, tobacco and cocoa aromas lead into a stacked flavor profile of boysenberry and plum. And on the finish it expands and brings vanilla and fudge into play. Drink now and over the next six years. Imported by Grapes of Spain. —M.S.

92 Numanthia-Termes, S.L. 2006 Termes (Toro); \$30. Dark, rubbery and focused on the nose, while the palate is wider, richer and propped up by a band of zesty acidity. The flavors are typical of Toro, meaning dark blackberry and boysenberry. A finish of brandied berries, kirsch and chocolate is almost like dessert. Imported by Moët Hennessy USA. —M.S.

91 Muruve 2006 Élite (Toro); \$36. The nose is all dense blackberries, while the palate is deep, flashy and ripe, with flavors of black cherry and blackberry. If you like big, bold wines, then this one should strike you in a good way; it's saturated and dark, with a touch of vanilla and mocha on the finish. Great balance for such a big wine. Drink now through 2012. Imported by Spain Wine Collection. —M.S.

90 Conde de Siruela 2005 Reserva (Ribera del Duero); \$32. Ripe, dark, a little oily and totally compelling from an aromatic standpoint. The palate is right where it should be, as neither the tannins nor the acidity are out of whack. Boysenberry, blackberry and plum flavors carry an herbal touch, and the finish is layered, with a lasting impression of coffee. Imported by Spain Wine Collection. —M.S.

89 Conde de Siruela 2006 Élite (Ribera del Duero); \$48. A big, ripe and earthy wine, with some baked black fruit and chocolate to the nose. Far more saturated and dense than Siruela's other Ribera wines, but amid the heft there's rich plum and roasted berry flavors and good overall balance. The finish has an herbal tinge. Imported by Spain Wine Collection. —M.S.

89 Muruve 2006 Crianza (Toro); \$16. The aromas are powerful and just the slightest bit brambly. A little hot and rugged on the palate, but loaded with prime black fruit, pepper and mocha notes. It's a potent wine with