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Prosecco's elite wines

Italy's sparkling wine star has risen rapidly. But few of its devotees have ever tasted the region's very best. Richard Baudains explains what sets rive wines apart

SEVEN YEARS AGO the map of Prosecco was revolutionised. The traditional production area in the hills between Conegliano and Valdobbiadene was elevated to DOCG status and a new Prosecco DOC zone, stretching across the plains of the Veneto and Friuli, from Treviso to Trieste, was created.

The difference in scale between the DOC and DOCG zones jumps off the page. With new plantings authorised this year, the DOC vineyard area will leap to 23,000ha, while that of the DOCG remains blocked at less than 6,000ha. The traditional area produces a not inconsiderable 83 million bottles a year; but this is dwarfed by production from the plains, which is destined to reach 500 million bottles by 2019. The real differences, however, are qualitative. Both denominations use the Glera grape, but on the one hand you have recent

Above: autumn vines on the Valdobbiadene hills, viewed from Bortolomiol

(DOC) plantings on fertile alluvial soils and mechanised viticulture; and on the other, historic vineyards on stony, pre-Alpine slopes worked exclusively by hand.

The problem faced by the DOCG producers' consorzio in 2009 was how to get across the message of the differences.

This is where the 'rive' came in. The DOCG norms make it possible to label wines with the name of their village of origin, identifying the sub-zone using the term 'rive' – the local dialect word that refers to the slopes of the steep hills typical of the region. Rive wines have to conform to certain conditions. Yields are slightly lower, the grapes must be picked by hand and the vintage must be declared on the label. The initial take-up was sluggish and the sub-zone system was not without critics when it was introduced. Many producers

feared that the outside world would not grasp the significance of the rive label, and leading quality producers such as Ruggeri, Bisol and Nino Franco decided not to take up the option of naming the rive of their top selections.

Sense of place

What is the situation today? Two years after my first visit to the Rive I went back to Conegliano-Valdobbiadene to taste the wines and sound out opinions. Is the cru concept taking hold? And if so, what does it add to our knowledge and enjoyment of the wines?

In terms of numbers, the last two vintages have seen a significant increase in the number of rive bottlings, which are predicted to reach about 2.5 million bottles by next year. Many of these wines come from small-to-medium scale producers, who see rive labelling as a way to distance themselves from the big brands.

Clemente Codello, of the family-owned Roccat estate, works 7ha of vineyard planted by his grandfather in the Rive di San Pietro di Barbozza. He adopted the sub-zone label as soon as the new DOCG came out. He says: 'The rive are not really understood yet, but we believe in them. And in time we hope they will make the difference.' In Colfosco, Renzo Montesel opted in for the first time with the 2015 vintage. He says: 'We decided to declare the rive on the label because it communicates terroir and vineyards worked by hand. It gives a wine credibility.' He has 8ha of old vines on calcareous soils at 250m, and labels two of his three wines as Rive di Colfosco.

Gabriella Vettoretti makes a bigger range

Rive: prominent producers

There are 43 registered rive names, of which around two dozen are in current use. The following is a list of the most exploited ones (in bold), with a brief selection of the top producers in each.

Colbertaldo – Adami
Collalto – Borgo Luce; Tenuta degli Ultimi
Col San Martino – Andreola;

Merotto; Bortolotti
Farra di Soligo – Adami; La Farra
Guia – La Tordera; Tanorè; Bortolin
Ogliano – Masottina; Zardetto
Refrontolo – Andreola; Astoria
S. Pietro di Barbozza – Roccat; Rebuli; Bortolomiol
Santo Stefano – Bortolotti; Le Colture
Soligo – Andreola
Solighetto – Spagnol

from her 43ha DOCG vineyards at the La Tordera winery. She could label all her DOCG Proseccos with their respective rive names, but believes it would create confusion. She reserves the cru name for her most distinctive wine, a brut nature from old vines at Guia. She would be in favour of stricter definition of the rive zones, but believes in the sense of place they communicate: 'We don't need to look for quantity, but quality and identity,' she says.

The historic house of Bortolomiol is one of the larger producers to have opted for a rive label. Here too, the cru denomination is reserved for a stand-out wine. Its Riserva del Fondatore Motus Vitae from the Rive di San Pietro di Barbozza demonstrates the richness and complexity of a longer-aged Prosecco, released at two years from the vintage.

Aiming high

The rive system has its weaknesses. The rive are defined by administrative boundaries rather than any criterion of excellence. Basically any village in the DOCG zone, big or small, can give its name to a wine. The larger ones have growing conditions that are far from homogeneous and not all the sites in a village are necessarily suited to quality viticulture. Another criticism is that the introduction of the rive is simply an exercise in re-labelling. Basically we are drinking the same wines as before, with an extra byte of information at the bottom of the label.

This is generally true (although there are exceptions; for example, Franco Adami created his new Col Creadas selection in response to the new norms), but it surely does not invalidate the intent to describe a wine's place of origin more specifically.

The real questions are more practical. First of all, are the rive a guide to terroir character? ➤

Right: Franco Adami's Col Creadas selection was created in light of Prosecco's new rive standards



'The standard is high. Producers are using rive names for their top wines'

This is hard to answer because the number of examples from any given sub-zone is still relatively limited. But on the basis of what we have, I think we can begin to form an idea of specific characters. Rive di San Pietro di Barbozza wines have freshness and finesse: features they share with the nearby Rive di Santo Stefano and Rive di Guia. Wines from the Rive di Rolle appear fuller-bodied with a more herby character. And those from the warmer eastern zones, such as Rive di Ogliaio, are softer with more peachy fruit.

Second question, does a rive label indicate superior quality? In this case the reply can be a

confident 'yes'. The standard is high. Producers are using rive names for their top wines. An issue of style might be looming on the horizon, in the sense that producers seem sometimes to be swaying towards an over-characterisation with these wines, with very mineral brut nature wines, for instance, or at the other extreme very ripe, floral aromatic ones – forgetting perhaps the delicate balance that makes Prosecco such a joy to drink.

It is unlikely, however, that a bottle of rive Prosecco will disappoint, and it might well open a window onto a new world of Prosecco quality and style. **D**

Richard Baudains is a Regional co-Chair for Italy at the DWWA and has written on Italy for Decanter for 25 years

Prosecco rive: Baudains' top 10



Bortolomiol, Grande Cuvée del Fondatore, Motus Vitae, Rive di San Pietro di Barbozza Brut, Valdobbiadene 2013 90

N/A UK www.bortolomiol.com
Slightly leafy start on the nose, but opening to a rich floral bouquet, with dried fruit and then intriguing Mediterranean herbs. Pears and yellow apple follow on the palate, a beautiful light airy texture, but intense flavours. **Drink** 2016-2018 **Alc** 12%

Andreola, Más de Fer, Rive di Soligo Extra Dry, Conegliano Valdobbiadene 2015 89

N/A UK www.andreola.eu
Intriguing complexity on the nose, revealing rose petal notes with a hint of gunflint. Concentrated red apple freshness and dried apricot fruit on the palate, with very tangy, citrusy acidity underneath. Has structure and length. **Drink** 2016-2019 **Alc** 11.5%



Merotto, La Primavera di Barbara, Rive di Col San Martino Dry, Valdobbiadene 2015 89

£16.99-£17.10

Vinitalia, Zonin UK

Luxurious mousse in the glass, with aromas of apple pie, lovely concentration of ripe fruit flavours and great progression on the palate, with a lovely sugar-acid contrast and a touch of bitter almond on the finish.

Drink 2016-2017 **Alc** 11.5%

Roccat, Rive di San Pietro di Barbozza Brut, Conegliano Valdobbiadene 2015 89

N/A UK www.roccat.com

Floral nose of wisteria and lilac blossom. Creamy texture, lemon peel and pear with a touch of apricot on the palate.

Drink 2016-2018 **Alc** 11.5%



Tanoré, Rive di Guia Brut, Valdobbiadene 2015 89

N/A UK www.tanore.it

Delicate white flowers on the nose, hawthorn, lovely balance on the palate with grapefruit and Golden Delicious apple. Long and fruity on the finish, crystalline.

Drink 2016-2018 **Alc** 12%

Astoria, Casa Vittorino, Rive di Refrontolo, Conegliano Valdobbiadene 2015 88

£11.95 Albion Wine Shippers

Very engaging nose, with hints of incense and pot pourri aromatics. Slightly chalky character on the palate, lots of body and a long, soft finish of ripe peaches. **Drink** 2016-2018 **Alc** 11.5%



La Tordera, Zero Zuccheri, Otreval, Rive di Giua Brut, Valdobbiadene 2015 88

£19.99 Shawbury Vintners

Nose of herbs and nettles, with a hint of a sea breeze. Bone-dry palate, a touch austere, the finish classic salted lemon peel and green apples. Bags of personality.

Drink 2016-2019 **Alc** 15%

Adami, Col Credas, Rive di Farra di Soligo Brut, Valdobbiadene 2015 87

£17.50 AG Wines, Astrum, Corks of Cotham, Field & Fawcett

Delicate floral character on the nose, which is a little understated. The palate is light, dry and crisp, showing plenty of green apple and a touch of bitter herbs. Long and tangy on the finish, this is a nervy thoroughbred, with high slopes character. **Drink** 2016-2019 **Alc** 11.5%



Masottina, Le Rive di Ogliaio Extra Dry, Conegliano Valdobbiadene 2015 87

£12.12 (2014) Christopher Keiller

A little subdued on the nose, perhaps, with some hints of geranium. However, the palate displays the plush fruit character of the warm

2015 vintage and is supported by very well integrated bubbles. A relatively chunky style, by Prosecco standards. **Drink** 2016-2017 **Alc** 11.5%

Montesel, Riva dei Fiori, Rive di Colfosco Brut, Conegliano Valdobbiadene 2015 87

N/A UK www.monteselvini.com

Fresh, spring flowers on a nose that's delicate but very precise. Softly textured, with a lovely refreshing quality on the palate. Classic apple and pear fruit profile, but it finishes with a delicate, spicy-floral aromatic note.

Drink 2016-2017 **Alc** 11.5%

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