

DOMESTIC BLISS

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The northern Italian region of Liguria is in the seemingly happy position of having a ready market for its wine: itself. But as Michael Palij MW discovers, it would be a shame if this self satisfaction got in the way of international enjoyment of wines once lauded by Columbus and Napoleon

Embracing the top of the Tyrrhenian Sea in a mountainous and infertile crescent, Liguria boasts maritime achievements that completely overshadow a viticultural legacy that dates back to Roman times. The Romans quickly recognised that the Ligurian Alps, responsible for the superb natural harbours of Genoa and Portofino, also provided incomparable sites for cool-climate viticulture and quickly set about terracing the forbidding slopes of the Cinqueterre. Although Liguria may no longer rule the seas, the Mediterranean continues to influence both climate and commerce. Resorts of varying charm occupy every inch of coastline, and viticulture continues to satisfy the demands from tourist and stevedore alike.

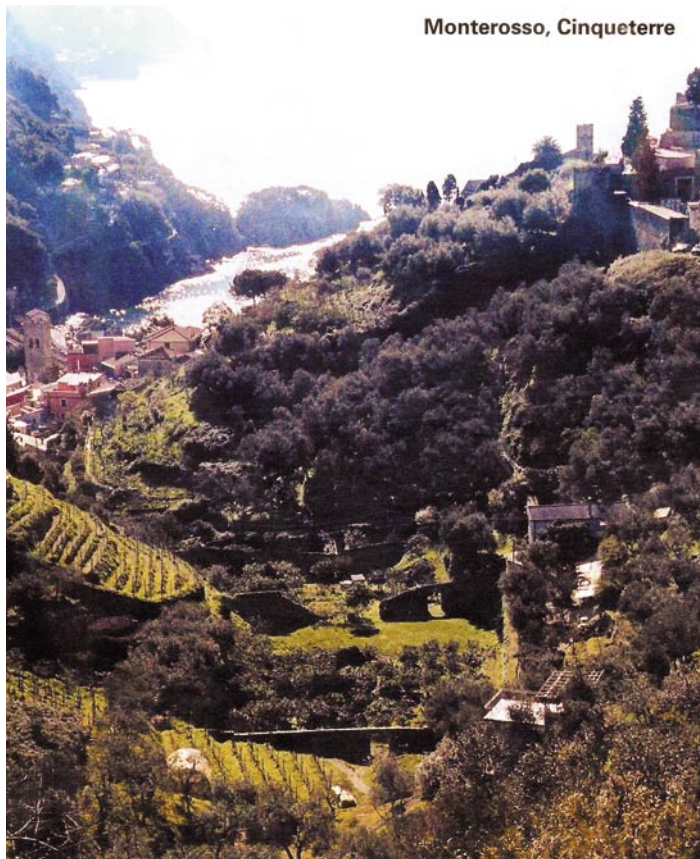
There are virtually no plains in Liguria, and agriculture of any sort is fraught with difficulty. Mountains rise dramatically from the deep and quickly climb to impressive heights. Coastal DOCs such as Rossese di Dolceacqua and Riviera Ligure di Ponente are home to vineyards planted at up to 750m. These are some of the highest in Italy and yet, as the crow flies, they are just a few kilometres from the sea. Altitude provides the cool nights necessary to preserve both acidity and delicate aromatics, and the combination of altitude and maritime influence - responsible for reducing diurnal temperatures - bequeaths Liguria's vineyards with serious potential when it comes to fashioning crisp, fragrant whites. Liguria's whites easily rival the best from Friuli and Trentino-Alto Adige.

The vertiginous countenance that so favours cool nights and aromatic development renders vineyard mechanisation virtually impossible. It is little wonder that the total vineyard area, currently 280,000 hectares (ha), is in steady decline. Average vineyard holdings are tiny - 5ha is considered large - and economies of scale impossible to achieve. The red tide of cheap resorts that chokes the coastline absorbs not only all of Liguria's tiny wine production but also most of its manpower. With a dwindling workforce and insatiable local demand, volumes remain low while prices continue to rise.

The DOC system in Liguria is relatively straightforward. Riviera Ligure di Ponente is a sprawling, catch-all DOC extending from the French border to near Genoa and, at 13,000hl, is the largest denomination in the region. Some 80% of production is white, with Pigato and Vermentino taking the lead roles. Rossese, permitted under the auspices of Riviera Ligure di Ponente, is treated to its own DOC, Rossese di Dolceacqua, in the heavy clay and limestone soils north of Ventimiglia.

Far to the east, on the Tuscan border, lie another clutch of DOCs. The army of meticulous terraces that march up the precipitous

Monterosso, Cinqueterre



Liguria - Key Statistics (of 20 regions)

Total Area:5416km² (18th)
 Total Vineyard Area:6,000ha (19th)
 DOC Vineyard Area:504ha (18th)
 Total Production:280,000hl (19th)
 Total DOC Production:13,000 (17th)
 %White/Red 75/25

Liguria - Key Producers

I Giuncheo: Arnold Schweizer, a Swiss architect, now farms 7ha of immaculately tended vineyards in the heart of the Rossese di Dolceacqua DOC. His Pian del Vescovo bottling is a superb example of Rossese's beguiling drinkability. There are also three excellent Vermentinos.

Terre Bianche: Next door to Giuncheo, Terre Bianche produces a sound range of Ligurian varietals, including a first-rate Vermentino, from 10ha of vineyards.

Bruna: A small (5.5ha), familial estate vinifying Pigato of astonishing intensity in the heart of the Arroscia valley. The U Bacan is a 14% ABV monster made from late-harvest grapes that simply refuses to conform to the light and delicate Ligurian norm.

I Ottaviano Lambruschi: The Lambruschi family controls 5ha planted mainly to Vermentino on alluvial soils in the Colli di Luni DOC. The Sarticola cuvée shows good minerality and concentration without recourse to oak.

Walter de Battè: In what is museum, wine cellar and private home in equal measure, de Battè turns out tiny quantities (3,800 bottles per annum) of artisan Cinqueterre that is neither fined nor filtered nor, in the case of the Sciacchetrà, finished fermenting. As de Battè declares: 'In order to understand the wine, you must understand the vinification. The two grew up together.'

Forlini Cappellini: Even in Cinqueterre it is impossible to find one of the 7,000 bottles of wine produced by this tiny estate. After many phone calls, however, and much waiting around in Riomaggiore's town square, it is possible to meet the ageing Signor Forlini and taste what, for many years, was the only wine to maintain the region's reputation. The wines are superb, gently oxidised giants in the spirit of Malvasia di Bosa and Vernaccia di Oristano.

Buranco: The modern, almost flashy cellar owned by Swiss expat Kurt Wachter turns out superb dry Cinqueterre and a compelling Sciacchetrà. The only problem lies in trying to find them. If Cinqueterre's fortunes can be saved, it will be through the hard work and considerable investment of individuals like Herr Wachter.

Terre Bianche's eponymous vineyard



Terre Bianche's Scartozzoni vineyard



Liguria - Key Grape Varieties

White

Vermentino: An ubiquitous cultivar grown from the French to Tuscan borders, it performs best in the iron-rich clay and limestone soils behind Imperia. Ligurian versions are less unctuous than those of either Bolgheri or Provence, with an herb and stone fruit character supported by an aristocratic mineral note. It is occasionally oaked but responds better to a cool fermentation in stainless steel and some skin contact.

Pigato: Known in Liguria as Pigato, Piedmont's ho-hum Favorita can occasionally surprise when planted in the meagre clay and sand soils of the Arroscia valley high in the Ligurian Alps some 50 km from the French border. Top estates harvest Pigato from the last week of September onwards. The wines are alcoholic (easily 13.5%), deeply pigmented and highly aromatic, with peach, honey, thyme and floral nuances.

Albarola: A widely planted and much maligned variety found in the eastern province of La Spezia and particularly in the DOC of Cinqueterre where it may comprise up to 40% of the blend. Albarola and Bosco both make rather thin soup when vinified to dryness but pack on uncommon richness and complexity when treated to appassimento. Albarola's natural tendency to oxidise stands it in good stead as it lends a rich hue and Sherried tang to the great Sciacchetrà.

Bosco: Varietal Bosco, of either the dry or the sweet persuasion, is difficult to find even within the Cinqueterre DOC. It is inevitably blended, first with Albarola and then with Vermentino. High yields and the surgical precision offered by modern vinification rob Bosco of the haunting, herbal complexity and scorching acidity that renders it incomparable with the pesto, anchovies and olives that characterise the cucina casalinga of rural Liguria.

Red

Rossese: Treated to its own DOC (Rossese di Dolceacqua) in 1972, before, even, the famed terraces of Cinqueterre. Legend holds that Napoleon developed a taste for the elegant charms of this local variety. But his support did little to increase its popularity outside this tiny enclave tucked up against the French border. The high alcohol, moderate tannins and early drinkability are reminiscent of Gamay.

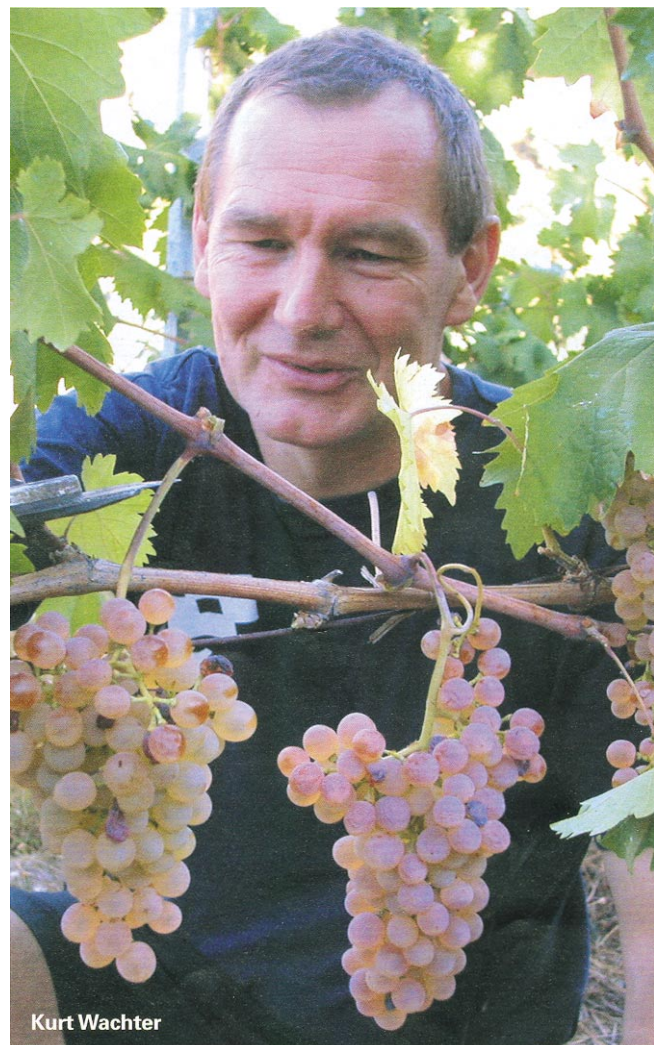
Ormeasco: Ligurian for Dolcetto, it is less successful here than further north in Dogliani and Alba. It struggles to ripen in the thin air around Pornassio, where vineyards race up the slopes to more than 750m.

cliffs of the Cinqueterre DOC are an awesome feat of agricultural engineering. Like much of Liguria, exorbitant labour costs mean production is in sharp decline. In 2003, just 2,500hl were produced. Straddling the border with Tuscany is the OOC of Colli di Luni, where fine Vermentino is made from vineyards on the foothills of the Apuane Alps.

The market for Ligurian wines is entirely local. A few producers have importers in Germany and the US, but the vast majority of their production slakes the thirst of the tens of thousands of tourists who invade Liguria's dramatic coastline every summer. Producers inevitably sell out, and an undiscerning clientele means that the very good and the very ordinary fetch much the same price in the trattorie that line the Ligurian littoral. There is little incentive to reduce yields when the domestic market is so accommodating.

In the UK, the commercial importance of Liguria's wines is non-existent. Last year the WSET axed both Liguria and Valle d'Aosta from the Diploma syllabus. There are no Ligurian estates with distribution agreements. High prices, scant availability and a flavour profile poles apart from the gushing fruit of the New World ensure little commercial imperative for either producer or importer to forge an alliance.

With producers happy not to sell and importers happy not to buy, it's difficult to muster much support for the 'Save the Sciacchetrà' brigade. And yet it seems wrong that wines enjoyed by both Christopher Columbus and Napoleon should be destined to grace no grander table than that covered with a check tablecloth. Here, in what we are continually told is the most savvy and urbane wine market in the world, it would be nice to see someone making the effort. With cries for 'history and mystery' rising from all sides (usually from those sides responsible for something as historical and mysterious as Kumala or Banrock Station), Liguria appears to be ideally placed to stage a comeback. Cinqueterre's terraces, hand hewn by Roman slaves 2,000 years ago, would be the star attraction in any New World country. Perhaps it's time for us to stop photographing the terraces and start drinking the wines. ■



Kurt Wachter

PER SAPERNE DI PIÙ

Harpers the wine and spirit weekly

