

Fresh Whites From Northeast Italy

BY JAMES SUCKLING



Collio, located in northeast Italy, is a go-to district for fresh-tasting whites, including Pinot Bianco from vineyards such as these of Russiz Superiore.

Despite the downturn in the economy, I still go out for dinner on a regular basis, usually to family-run eateries, or *trattorie*, in Tuscany, where I live. They offer much better value than restaurants with big names or Michelin stars, and I often find the food is just as good.

But top-quality wine has become expensive in Italy, as elsewhere around the world, and particularly in restaurants. So I tend to order whites from Friuli, or even Slovenia, from the wine lists. I think they represent great value for their quality, and also drink well with fish, my usual choice when I dine out.

Tuscany is renowned for its peasant-style cuisine, featuring big slabs of grilled and roasted meats, but the region also boasts beautiful seafood. The Mediterranean Sea on the Tuscan coast is clean and plentiful in fish and crustaceans, from sweet and succulent red prawns to delicate and meaty sea bass. It makes me hungry thinking about a delicate pasta with prawns and zucchini, or a sea bass roasted whole with fresh herbs and potatoes.

Sadly, I don't drink many Tuscan whites because few if any outstanding dry whites are produced in the region; I guess Tuscan winemakers focus too much on red wine production. But I am sure the area has great white-wine potential. I still remember fondly Poggio alle Gazze, the pure Sauvignon Blanc of Tenuta dell'Ornellaia,

which was discontinued years ago in favor of planting more Cabernet Sauvignon. Apparently, Ornellaia is bringing the white back now, but most whites from Toscana just don't do it for me.

I much prefer drinking Pinot Grigio, Pinot Bianco, Sauvignon Blanc and Ribolla Gialla from vineyards in Friuli and the bordering area of Brda, in Slovenia. I love the tropical fruit character of Pinot Grigio, the floral crispness of Pinot Bianco, the tangy, limy flavors of Sauvignon Blanc, the rich peach and almond aromas of Tocai Friulano and the mineral, white pepper and orange peel flavors of Ribolla Gialla.

Friuli, and in particular the subregion of Collio, is well-known for its aromatic, rich whites. But Slovenia is gaining ground—especially with the cool wines from such producers as Movia and Simcic. Some say Slovenia has more great land for vineyards in that part of the world than Italy. The two areas combined contain about 6,125 acres of vineyards; about 1,730 are in Collio, the rest in Brda.

Vintages are not a problem for the most part in either area. In general, 2008, the current-release vintage, produced balanced and rich wines. Earlier years, including 2007, 2006 and 2005, are also good. I tend to look for the youngest vintage available. The 2008s are just arriving in the U.S. market, so it might be easier to find wines from 2007 or 2006 right now. But I think that 2008 could be better than other recent vintages due to the advances in winemaking in the region and the excellent growing season.

My favorite producers in Friuli include Russiz Superiore, Schiopetto, Livio Felluga, Venica, Vie di Romans and Branko. My top Slovenian producers are Movia, Simcic and Kabaj.

RECOMMENDED WINES

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
GIROLAMO DORIGO Sauvignon Colli Orientali del Friuli Ronc di Juli 2007	90	\$38
LIVIO FELLUGA Pinot Grigio Collio 2008	91	\$24
MOVIA Ribolla Gialla Brda 2006	92	\$29
RUSSIZ SUPERIORE Pinot Bianco Collio 2007	91	\$24
SCHIOPETTO Pinot Bianco Collio 2007	91	\$37
VENICA Sauvignon Collio Ronco delle Mele 2007	91	\$35
VIE DI ROMANS Pinot Grigio Isonzo del Friuli Dessimis 2006	92	\$40



From our European office in Tuscany, senior editor and bureau chief JAMES SUCKLING reviews wines from all over Italy. In addition, Suckling is our man in Bordeaux, reporting firsthand as each new vintage is premiered. The fortified wines of Portugal round out his beat. He has been with *Wine Spectator* since 1981.