

Is Ribolla Gialla to be relegated to the status of table wine?

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Is Ribolla Gialla to be relegated to the status of table wine? – This is the title of the interview given by Valerio Civa, owner of the Tenimenti Civa estate in the Colli Orientali del Friuli, to QBquantobasta FVG, a monthly magazine of “taste and good taste in the Euro Region” in the January-February 2018 issue.

“Friulan producers must work together and be determined in a project to defend and promote Ribolla Gialla,” said Valerio Civa. All stages of winemaking, including bottling, must be carried out in Friuli to ensure greater control and distribution of the product”.

“The increase in land planted to Ribolla in recent years,” he added, “means that we need new sparkling wine production plants. For this reason, the regional council should take steps to find financial resources to support the development of sparkling Ribolla Gialla”.

“For the next five years, the large supply of Ribolla Gialla, exceeding demand, will result in very low prices for wines from the plains. The demand for Ribolla DOC Collio and DOC Friuli Colli Orientali, meanwhile, is and will remain very high”.

“The 31% increase in supermarket sales (Nomisma data) recorded in 2017 (4 million bottles of Ribolla were sold in 2016) was far below the 25 million bottles forecast for 2019. The absence of a strategic sales plan will mean that most bottles of Ribolla Gialla in the coming years will be sold by producers outside Friuli (from Veneto and Piedmont, for example), who specialize in the distribution of sparkling wines through large retailers and discount stores.”

This in brief summarizes Valerio Civa's opinion on the future of Friuli Venezia Giulia's Ribolla Gialla. The full interview is provided below.

Is Ribolla Gialla to be relegated to the status of table wine?

This is the risk we run if adequate protection is not provided quickly, and across the board. There is, however, a grain of truth in this provocation, also launched on social networks by Valerio Civa, owner and founder of Tenimenti Civa at Bellazoia di Povoletto. He appealed to Friuli's growers to be united and determined in their support of a shared project to defend and promote Ribolla Gialla. “In my opinion, the protection of Ribolla Gialla involves three phases,” he explained.

1. A new DOC zone with geographical qualification – “Ribolla Gialla del Friuli” – would make the product exclusive to a specific area. Achieving this would mean a prior agreement between Italy, Slovenia and Croatia in order to change the name of the variety, but not of the wine, which would remain Ribolla Gialla. This is feasible, but would undoubtedly involve a long process and would require that Ribolla be produced only as a DOC wine and no longer as one with IGT status.
2. To date, the production protocol of DOC Friuli, which includes the production of Ribolla Gialla, does not require any indication of the grapes’ origin. Introducing specific requirements of this kind would mean fully informing the final consumer. Furthermore, in addition to the DOC Friuli Colli Orientali and DOC Collio, which guarantee high quality wines, a request should be submitted for DOCG status for Ribolla Gialla. To complete the various proposals, Friulan producers must work together and act quickly, also because it will not be long before Ribolla Gialla wines from other Italian regions start to appear on the market. These may be IGT wines, or wines without any specification of provenance, and thus not on a par with the quality and territory that is instead expressed in Friuli.
3. Sparkling Ribolla Gialla could be protected through two different designations: Friuli DOC for the lowland Ribolla, obtained with adequate yields, and the Friuli Colli Orientali DOC for wine from the hills, establishing even stricter production protocols for a high quality product.

Does quality mean high prices? We’ve seen bottles of Ribolla sold on offer in supermarkets for less under €3 per litre ...

There's no doubt that value for money comes into it. Each area is able to offer higher quality and lower quality products. A lot depends on growers’ entrepreneurial skills.

Will production protocols attentive to production quantities or yields per hectare and minimum product quality level protect everyone?

I believe so, but in addition specific clauses should be included in the production protocol, to ensure that all the stages of winemaking, including bottling, are completed in Friuli. This would allow for greater control over the production and distribution of the product.

Are there are obstacles to this optimal solution?

There are two main obstacles. Firstly, the increase in Ribolla Gialla plantings in recent years means that sparkling wine production plants need to be installed, with the purchase of pressurized vats: the regional council should find the necessary financial resources to support the development of Ribolla Gialla sparkling wine. Furthermore, the absence of a strategic sales plan will mean that significant quantities of Ribolla Gialla in the coming years will be sold by producers outside Friuli (in Veneto and Piedmont, for example) who

specialize in the distribution of sparkling wines through supermarket and discount store channels. Basically, the Friulans have planted Ribolla in the hope that someone else will take care of processing and selling it!

Some data on Ribolla Gialla stress this risk. 2014: 300-400 ha of land under vine (niche product). 2016/2017: 1300 hectares of land under vine (small-scale product). For 2018/2019 another 500 ha are planned, for a total of 1800-1900 ha (medium-sized product). If current production stands at 5,000,000 bottles, in 2019 the expected production is 25,000,000!

For the next five years, the large supply of Ribolla Gialla, exceeding demand, will result in very low prices for wines from the plains. The demand for Ribolla DOC Collio and DOC Friuli Colli Orientali, meanwhile, is and will remain very high”.

According to the recent Nomisma report, Ribolla Gialla is the wine that in the last year saw the greatest increase in supermarket sales, at +31%, but also in wine shops and among Millennials

It's true! But the +31% recorded in 2017 compared to the 4 million bottles of Ribolla sold in 2016 (about 2 million of still wine plus 2 million of sparkling wine) gives a total of about 5 million. This increase in sales was far below the 25 million bottles forecast for 2019.

Does the increase in numbers correspond to an increase in price per bottle?

If demand outstrips supply, this will always lead to an increase in price per bottle, but this only holds true for small production figures and, above all, for the Friuli Colli Orientali and Collio DOC wines, since these are designations associated with high quality wines sought after by the market. For the Friuli DOC, I expect the exact opposite: growing production, low demand for the product and prices in sharp decline. The purchase price of grapes in the lowland areas will drop by 50% compared to today.

Domestic vs. export market

Before even thinking about the foreign market, we need to consolidate Ribolla Gialla, in its various forms, on the domestic market. Many consumers still don't connect Ribolla to Friuli. According to the aforementioned Nomisma study, only 36% of the interviewees correctly associate Ribolla with Friuli Venezia Giulia. “Expert” consumers, meanwhile, know the regional origin of this wine and are aware that two versions, still and sparkling, exist. It will be of fundamental importance to inform and spread the knowledge of Ribolla as a Friulan variety/wine, with wines from the plains produced under the Friuli DOC protocol, and those of even higher quality under the Friuli Colli Orientali and Collio DOCs.

Cooperative cellars vs. small growers

Everyone will play their part, just like in other Italian regions. In Tuscany, in Montalcino itself, small growers, big names, co-operative wineries and bottlers all coexist. The prices for a bottle of Brunello range from €12 to €100 and are aimed at various types of consumer. The product is famous and appreciated independently of such differences in value.

Where does Tenimenti Civa fit into this picture?

Tenimenti Civa is an estate in the Colli Orientali del Friuli engaged in the development of high-quality still wines in the Friuli Colli Orientali DOC zone. More recently we have started producing DOC Friuli wines, including sparkling Ribolla Gialla. In the future, our hope is to be able to produce the same sparkling wine as DOC Ribolla Gialla Friuli Colli Orientali.

What, briefly is your relationship with Friuli and what projects are you working on?

I firmly believe in this territory, dedicated to viticulture and wines of the highest quality. I would like to promote the knowledge of native varieties, which are still too little known. One of our objectives is certainly the production of quality wines at a fair price while gradually increasing production, thus giving as many people as possible the opportunity to understand and appreciate the quality expressed by the territory. The variety we are investing in is Ribolla Gialla. In a few years the 30 hectares planted at Manzano will also go into production – a single plot dedicated to this variety which is probably the largest of its kind, at least in the Colli Orientali del Friuli area.

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