

"VIGNETO FRIULI":

## "RIBOLLA GIALLA", A BORDERLINE VINE



### Outline of the History and Origins

"An extremely old vine cultivated in Friuli-Venezia Giulia in the provinces of Gorizia and Udine, in the Slovenian hills of "Goriska Brda" and, in the past, in Istria. It is an indigenous vine from the province of Gorizia; for some authors, Ribolla would correspond to the Roman "Avola". Others believe that the Roman "Pucinum" used Ribolla as its base wine.

Coming back to relatively more recent history, there have been many quotations relating to "Ribolla Wine" as the leading quality wine out of the many produced in the Collio region, often used as a "representative" sign to render homage and friendship to famous figures of the ages." This is how Angelo Costacurta starts his valuable "RIBOLLA" research that earned him the "RISIT D'AUR 1977" award and which we summarise from "AGRICOLTURA DELLE VENEZIE N° 8/1978".

The author continues:

"The III volume of Dalmasso's "Storia della vite e del vino" (History of vines and wines) is full of quotations; the "Annali del Friuli" (Annals of Friuli) by F. Manzano, recall that Friuli supplied the Venetian Republic with Ribolla from the Collio region in the XII century.

A contract of sale for a plot of land located in the municipality of Barbana dated 1376, states that the farmer obtained "sex urnas raboli", i.e. six urns of Ribolla from this plot of land. The presence of Raibola (or Ràbola) wine from Istria and the Collio, in Friuli, is also found in a document, which was drawn up in Udine in 1324. Unfortunately, 1327 was mentioned as a year of poor wine production, especially "Ribolla".

Ribolla was offered as a sign of devotion to the lieutenants when they first entered the city, or devotion to the illustrious figures visiting the city; there are documents dating back to 1365, 1368, and 1393 that refer to this. In 1565 to render homage to Patriarch Marquardo for his first visit to Udine, the municipality offered an urn of Ribolla wine (vegiete Rabioli); in 1568, it offered the Duke of Bavaria 28 decanters of Malvasia and 26 of Rabiola. Moreover, the Venetian Senate sent "two barrels of wine" (do bote de vin) from Rosazzo (Ribolla) to Emperor Charles V. The fame of the Ribolla wine became widespread, such that towards the end of the 1300s, "Rainfald" was much praised by German chronicle writers and poets. Even Boccaccio mentions Ribolla in one of his final speeches against gluttony.

The German preference for this wine, according to Dalmasso in the mentioned works, led Duke Leopold III of Austria to ask that in Trieste's act of dedication a clause be included to oblige the city to supply him with 100 urns of the best Ribolla wine per year. This clause must have been very common in peace or dedication treaties among the cities, seeing as according to the "Istrian Diplomatic Code" of 1384, even the island of Istria, where in those days Ribolla was popular, had to give the command of S. Maria of Aquileia "two hundred urns of the usual Ribolla" (urnas centum duas de Ribolio solito).

Costacurta recalls that:

"In "Libro del Cancelliere" by A. di Francesco de Reno from Fiume, an order dated 28.12.1446 can be found, against those who

committed fraud by trading "foreign" (forensem) wine making it out to be Ribolla (dicentas quod sit Ribolla cum non sit). The protection of the wine can also be found in a document of the city of Fiume dated 1445, which mentions that each lot of Ribolla should be certified by an official declaration of the place of origin. Even the evolution in the price of Ribolla is recorded: in 1365 an urn of Ribolla was paid 50 grossi coins in the Municipality of Udine; in 1365 Rabiola was paid 21 piccoli coins a decanter, then in 1407 2 denari a decanter and so on. Moreover, in 1390 Pavia established a tax of one florin for each wine cask of imported Ribolla".

Walter Filiputti, a Friulian wine maker and journalist, quoted Ribolla in his "Vigneto Friuli". Moreover, in his valuable "TERRE, VIGNE E VINI DEL FRIULI-VENEZIA GIULIA (1983)" (Soils, vines and wines of Friuli Venezia Giulia) he recalls that "the vine has various synonyms: "Rebolla"; "Ribuèle"; "Ràbuele"; "Ribuèle zale"; "Ribolla di Rosazzo"; "Raibola"; "Ràbola"; "Rèbula" (in the Slav Collio). According to Filiputti "it is a grape that has always been cultivated in Friuli. The first document dates back to the end of the middle ages, in the distant 1299 and refers to deeds drawn up by notary public Ermanno from Gemona in "Notariorum Joppi". This was a contract of sale. The cultivation must have become widespread if in 1376, a contract of sale for a piece of land located in the municipality of Barbana, states that the farmer obtained "sex urnas raboli", i.e. six urns of Ribolla from this plot of land.

This variety was widespread throughout our hills as well as in Istria and this is confirmed in a document that was drawn up in Udine in 1324. The profile that was traced of the 1327 vintage, defines it as a poor year for the production of wines, especially Ribolla. Ribolla was the wine offered to the lieutenants when they first entered the city; documents dating back to 1365, 1368, and 1393 refer to this. To protect and guarantee the wine the Municipality itself, in 1402 decided to reform the statute of city jurors. This statute also included wine control: "The innkeepers cannot have vessels with a capacity of less than a decanter (0.6 litres) and they must sell the wine according to the fixed price, and give the just measurements; they swear, every four months, not to have put rock alum, especially in the

Rabiola (Ribolla), nor to mix Terzano or general wine, nor foreign wine, with Rabiola from the Collio or Istria regions". In 1565 to render homage, to Patriarch Marquardo for his first visit to Udine, the municipality offered an urn of Ribolla wine; in 1568, 28 decanters of Malvasia and 26 of Rabiola were donated to the Duke of Bavaria.

Moreover, in 1592, the Venetian Senate sent "two barrels of Ribolla wine" (do bote de vin di Ribolla) to Emperor Charles V, who was arriving in the Republic; the reporter assures that the Emperor very much "appreciated" the gift. The wine was so renowned that Boccaccio himself mentions Ribolla in one of his final speeches against gluttony. The Germans were the great connoisseurs of this wine; Duke Leopold III of Austria asked that in the act of devotion of the city of Trieste, a clause be included to oblige the city to supply him with 100 urns of the best Ribolla wine per year

In more recent times from the end of the 1700s, doctor Antonio Musnig in his "Clima goritiense" ranks Ribolla first among the Friulian white wines. After a period of obscurantism, which was provoked by phylloxera, the enthusiasm and perhaps the curiosity raised by the wines beyond the Alps, Ribolla is regaining its proper dimension: two varieties are cultivated solely in the hills (both the Collio and Colli Orientali): those that are better known and able to give the best wine: Ribolla gialla; and the green variety, which is less prestigious and therefore not as widespread. There is also Ribolla nera (noir) or "Pòcalza" (in Slovenian), which produces "Schioppettino" ". Unquote Filiputti.

Nevertheless, let us return to the works of Costacurta, who recalls that:

"Ribolla was still important towards the end of the 1700s, even if in 1767, A. Zanon complains about the deterioration of Italian wines, including "Ribuole", which relented and thus gave way to the French wines. During the same period, doctor Antonio Musnig, in his "Clima goritiense" ranked Ribolla (Rebulla), particularly from Rosazzo, in first place among the Friulian white wines, as far as sweetness and generosity were concerned; Ribolla is also the most popular white wine produced among those of the Collio. Moreover, he informs us that Ribolla is much sought-after by Carinthia and Carniola.

In 1825 Acerbi mentions a "Ribolla verde" (green) and "Ribolla gialla" (yellow) among the varieties cultivated in the surroundings of Udine. The spreading of the vine in the non-traditional areas, too, can be seen in the 1869 "Ampelografia Provinciale Tevigiana" (Provincial Tevigiana Ampelography), which also shows that Ribolla bianca (white) and Ribolla del Friuli were introduced in the Conegliano and Vittorio Veneto hills around 1855 from Friuli.

The name Ribolla bianca is also listed in the "Saggio di una ampelografia universale" (1877) (Sample of a Universal Ampelography) by Giuseppe di Rovasenda.

We can assume the existence of "Ribolla bianca", "Ribolla nera" and "Ribolla verde" from the "Elenco descrittivo dei vecchi vitigni coltivati nel Veneto" (list of the old vines cultivated in the Veneto region) by G.B. Zava (1901). A more recent ampelographic description can be found in "Atlante ampelografico" by G. Poggi (1939) relating to "Ribolla gialla", where it is considered by the author both as a wine grape and table grape. The author recommends substitution with other vines that are considered capable of supplying a better production in terms of quality (Tocai, Traminer etc.).

Up to the early 1900s, Ribolla was cultivated throughout the Collio, even mixed with old local vines, such as "POGROZNICA", "PICA", and "GLERA", to produce an excellent sparkling wine.

In the '60s, interest in Ribolla decreased in the Italian Collio region, but increased as regards Tocai Friulano, Pinot Bianco and Grigio, Sauvignon, Traminer and Riesling.

On the other hand, in the Slovenian Collio, the cultivators believed more in the potential of the vine, which in the '80s represented over 65% of the overall production. Only in the past ten years, has the introduction of the "universal" white berry variety been a major prerogative of the vine-growers in "GORISKA BRDA".

### **Characteristics and cultivation trends**

"Ribolla", as outlined by Costacurta, is a vine that has vigour and a constant production, especially in the "verde" (green) variety and the one that he renamed "Castel Dobra". The latter two are more productive than the "giallo"

(yellow), in that the bunch is more compact and less subject to dripping; however, they are more subject to botrytis, which does not cause serious damage, due to the fact that the cultivation has an inherent resistance and because it is usually cultivated in ventilated and very sunny hilly areas.

As regards the adaptation of various rootstocks, the Ribolla grafts on 420A, 3309, Rupestris du Lot and Kober 5BB, have not given rise to any particular inconvenience.

### **Area of cultivation and cultivating technique**

"Ribolla - continues Costacurta - is widespread mainly in the "Collio" area, both on the Italian and most of all on the Slovenian side. As far as Italy is concerned, in 1976, the overall area of specialised cultivation recorded in the "Registers" was about 60 hectares, 12 of which were in the province of Udine and approximately 48 in the province of Gorizia. In the same year, the total declared production was around 2,500 quintals (approximately 300 in the Province of Udine and the remaining amount in the Province of Gorizia).

To be borne in mind is that the data relating to the Province of Gorizia, as regards area and production, is rather approximate as the declarations do not specifically refer to "Ribolla" vineyards, but more generally those called "Collio Goriziano", which, what is more, were half "Ribolla gialla" (in "Tocai Friulano" and "Malvasia Istriana" blends). Obviously, to be added to the aforementioned quantities are those relating to other vinestocks that were not used in specialised cultivations, and which at the end of the '70s were found to be spread in vineyards of other cultivar and can be estimated at a few thousands.

The major municipalities cultivating "Ribolla gialla" are, in decreasing order: San Floriano del Collio, Gorizia (particularly Oslavia), Dolegna del Collio, Cormons, Capriva and Mossa. This variety is cultivated by grafting, especially on Kober 5BB. This makes it vigorous, but also sensitive to droughts, which is sometimes the case in the hilly areas. At one time, this inconvenience was less frequent due to the 420A and 3309 rootstocks used. The almost universal pruning system used is the double system, followed by the Guyot system.

From the '60s onwards, vine-growers in the Slovenian Collio definitely focused on this vine for their new plantations, and contrary to what happened in the Collio of Gorizia, the spreading of other vines such as "Tocai Friulano", "Pinot Bianco", "Merlot", etc. slowed down. Towards the end of the '70s, production of the Ribolla grape in Slovenia was around 80,000 quintals, 65,000 of which in the "Collio" area and approximately 15,000 in the Vipacco area, with a specialised vineyard cultivation of 750 and 150 hectares, respectively.

The places in which Ribolla (Rèbula) is mostly grown remains Castel Dobra (which also has a Cooperative Wine Growers' Association, that from 1960 to 1990 gave considerable value to the vine), Medana, Cosana, Quisca, San Martino, Bigliana, San Lorenzo, Cerò, Visgnavicco, Vedrigano (for Goriska Brda) and Vipacco.

Also to be noted is that, during the mentioned period, the best plots of land located in the highest and sunniest parts of the hills in these areas were used for cultivating Ribolla. Since 1970, the most widely used rootstock has been Kober 5BB, whereas in the past, *Rupestris du Lot* and 420A were very popular. (The latter picking-up with SO4).

Even here the double Guyot growing system is the most widely used, with plants arranged at approximately m 1.5 x 3, and approximately 20-30 buds per plant, but the bottlers of the "new course", i.e. post-June 1991 – independence from Yugoslavia – decreased it to more like 10-15 buds. In the more fertile areas some attempts to grow plants with the "Friuli" system (which, due to the spreading of the so-called "Mal dell'Esca" (apoplexia)), has had less and less interest.

## Use

Since the most remote times, Ribolla has been used almost exclusively for vinification, except for small quantities, known as "Rabuelat", which were used as table grapes.

After the splendours and reputation gained by Ribolla wine in past centuries, the beginning of the 1900s marked a difficult period for the wine, with a very modest reputation as regards quality between the two World Wars (Poggi 1930) and, in effect, only in a limited number of cases was high quality

levels achieved. From here, the heavy downturn in its propagation during last century, in favour of the more popular quality vines.

Today, with the advent of the new vinification techniques, together with the new high-tech equipment available, extremely interesting Ribolla wines can be obtained, thanks to quality oenology, accurate vinification obtained "without skins" and with conservation of the wine in stainless steel vats. All this is indispensable to protect such a "pleasant" wine from the ill-fated oxidants of irrational vinification. The wine, however, is a young wine and must be consumed within a year from vinification.

In the Winery of Castel Dobra, Ribolla was considered a good base for the production of sparkling wines using the Charmat method, achieving a consistent market share in the '80s. The current downturn of this method is a consequence of the profound social-economic evolution of the territory, in which few agricultural owner-occupier associations with good managerial capabilities have progressively started working alongside or substituted the vine-grower, wine-making co-operation.

Also to be remembered is the interesting, even if limited, use of Ribolla marcs for the preparation of an excellent quality grappa.

A valuable statement is again given by Filiputti in his prestigious "Il Friuli-Venezia Giulia e i suoi grandi vini" (1997) (Friuli Venezia Giulia and its great wines), in which he dedicates plenty of space to indigenous vines entitling it:

### **"Ribolla: a modern wine because it is ancient"**

"It is a wine that has assisted and contributed to the history of the Friulian people over the last seven hundred years. And it has done so as a leading actor. From 1300 up to 1770, when Picolit came onto the scene, Ribolla, especially the one from Rosazzo, was the representative wine of Friuli of that age." The author continues:

"It is a wine that is capable of supporting the infinite variables in taste that have followed on up to the present day. Vinified without any other variety, it has been unscathed by the profound criticisms, such as those expressed in the 1863 catalogue, which states that for some, the prestige of the Rosazzo wines

was due to other grapes (and not Ribolla) and that "even the wine of the Collio, although it bears the name of Ribolla, owes its reputation to the favourable positions and other perfumed vines ". Modern and fashionable, because it is immediate, simple, easy and clean; modern and fashionable, because of its enormous cultural "wealth" that has been accumulated over many centuries of the history of taste. Up until the thirties, says Perusini, "when the cultivation of Ribolla was still quite widespread, the wine sold under that name was produced in a dozen varieties: "ribuele zale, ribuele verde, ribuelat, gran rap (also known as paje debits), agadene (agadele), pogruize, cividin, cividin garp, prosecco, coneute, glere gruesse, glere secie". Back in 1877, in a Note on the status of the wine-making industry in the Gorizia area, Levi emphasised how "Ribolla was a general name for white grapes or white wines from the hills, the production of which included many vines, amongst which were mainly Ribolla and Glera". Levi, acknowledging that Ribolla grew well in dry and sterile stratified arenaceous soils with marl, known as "ponca", implicitly affirmed that Ribolla was a variety suitable only for the Eocene hills, with vineyards being in an excellent position of exposure. Ribolla continues to bring with it the traditions, like drinking it sweet. Up to the Fifties-Sixties, Ribolla was harvested very late, even in mid October to achieve consistent sugar levels, but, with the initial frosts, fermentation would be blocked or slowed down considerably (in fact, the avant-garde cellars of the time had heating and no cooling units, which are in use nowadays); this is how a pleasant, sweet, sparkling wine was obtained, which was ready for drinking on All Saints' Day with chestnuts. Then the techniques were refined with filtering using Dutch sacks and bottling while it was still sweet so that a slight fermentation would take place again. The success of all this became so "fashionable" that once again all wines that were slightly sweet and cloudy were sold in the Inns for All Saints' Day with the name of Ribolla, but very often they were not. Then, when it was no longer fashionable it became a tradition, which, although on a lower key, is still continued during the first few days of November. In 1865, the law stepped in against such a "pleasure", with a notification that was proclaimed on 24 August by the Municipal Congregation of the City of Udine, signed by P.

Pavan, stating: "To prevent damage to health caused by early use of young wines, the Provincial Authority prohibited the sale until St. Martin's day .... It is well-known that unboiled must (Ribolla) and also wine, even though it has fermented regularly, when it has not settled for a certain number of days and is completely stripped of its heterogeneous parts. And therefore the honourable Central Health Council deliberated: in inns and other places where there is a retail trade, the sale of must (Ribolla) and wines for the whole month of October is prohibited".

The wine was used for All Saints' Day and the evening after All Souls' Day, with chestnuts boiled in water and laurel leaves or roast chestnuts. Ribolla: a wine with an endless regenerating capacity, that has been revived thanks to its own merits when, in the early seventies, it was vinified without being blended, presented dry and launched on the markets with determination. The success achieved, even internationally, with this extremely old wine interpreted on a modern key, proved – as concluded by Filiputti – the numerous defamers wrong, at the same time comforting that small group of "fans" including the writer, who was contaminated by the enthusiasm of prof. Perusini, who fought hard for the survival and spreading of this historical wine ".

### **Ribolla in the D.O.C. areas**

In only two D.O.C. appellations is it possible to find Ribolla gialla: Collio and Colli Orientali del Friuli.

To tell the truth, when Presidential Decree of 24.05.1968 was issued, acknowledging the Collio D.O.C., Ribolla gialla was included as a "blend", and not on its own, it described the situation of the "classical" Collio where at least 90% of the vines were white berries; the old vines were mostly a mix of "ours" with Tocai Friulano and Malvasia Istriana.

In 1968 – in the Collio region - Pinot bianco was growing fast and there was still room for aromatic wines (Traminer and Riesling). Pinot grigio and Chardonnay would come later, like Cabernet Sauvignon.

In the Colli Orientali, on the other hand, Ribolla gialla, right from the first appellation (Presidential Decree of 20.07.1970) was

foreseen in its pureness on its own, without being blended, and it is still so.

In the subsequent modifications of the regulations and with the most recent Presidential Decree of 25.03.1998, (Official Bulletin n° 88 of 16.04.1998) the Collio, while still maintaining and including Ribolla in its wide range of blends, also admitted the Ribolla on its own, thereby, as it should have been, adhering to the two philosophies.

### **Ribolla at table**

Few have thought about offering Ribolla above the lines (late harvest, ageing in barrique), and the results are still in the process of being interpreted. To be mentioned is that there are other types of whites (acclimatised French, even before the indigenous types), which in the "Vigneto Friuli" have the right characteristics to be guided from vinification to ageing.

The making of sparkling wine using the "Charmat" or "Classic" methods, seems to have attracted more Slovenian producers from "Brda" than Italian.

In blends, the Ribolla gialla, thanks to its "neutralness" and high acidity, is a good second lead, before being a protagonist.

Pure Ribolla brings out all its pleasant freshness (vinification off the skins, ageing in steel vats, controlled temperature) to make it ideal with all fish starters. It is served cool (7-9 degrees approximately).



## **"RIBOLLA GIALLA", a borderline vine**

### **Bibliographic reference notes**

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- (2) [Filiputti W.](#) (1983): "Terre, Vigne e Vini del Friuli-Venezia Giulia";
- (3) [Costacurta A.](#) (1978) : "Ribolla", op. cit.;
- (4) [Poggi G.](#) (1939) : "Atlante Ampelografico";
- (5) [Costacurta A.](#) (1978) : "Ribolla", op. cit.;
- (6) [Ibidem;](#)
- (7) [Filiputti W.](#) (1997) : "Il Friuli-Venezia Giulia e i suoi grandi vini";
- (8) [Ibidem.](#)