

The Lord of Ribolla Gialla

Manlio Collavini's forty years of dedication to a unique sparkling wine; an unusual grape variety and a special method of production

Like many of Italy's historic wine producers, Collavini is a family company; founded in 1896 by Eugenio Collavini, and now run by his heirs: Manlio and his sons, Giovanni and Luigi. And like many of the producers in Friuli, the company makes a wide range of over a dozen different wines: white, red, rosé and sparkling, from a mixture of native and international grapes. This year marks the fortieth anniversary of Manlio's focus on one of Friuli's most original grapes, Ribolla Gialla, and in particular, its creation as a sparkling wine to rival Franciacorta and Champagne for exclusivity and quality.

It was the 1970s when Manlio, the curious and questing winemaker, decided to investigate the local Ribolla Gialla grape. It wasn't thought of with any great admiration then. People knew it in the Collio area of Friuli and over the border in Slovenia. But back then it was made into a kind of "novello", a just-fermented, cloudy wine, drunk with roast chestnuts in the autumn, soon after the vintage. It was the season's first wine and a sign of the beginning of a new vinous year. Manlio thought there was more to it than that though, and set about making it into a serious still white wine. He said he was fascinated by the name, but he'd spotted the potential, encouraged by his neighbour, Gaetano Perusini of Rocca Bernarda.

Still or sparkling?

Still Ribolla Gialla was the first experiment, and it thrives today at Collavini in a precious single-vineyard version called Turian, made from grapes picked in the

historic Clo' Turian vineyard and then given a light appassimento, or drying, to enhance the sugar content of this naturally acidic grape. A lighter aperitif-style Ribolla Gialla is also made, called Benedete after the Benedictine friars who used to cultivate the vineyards of the Abbey of Rosazzo, in the heartland of this particular grape.

But in his experimentation what occurred to Manlio was just how acidic the grape was when harvested; and, of course, the earlier the harvesting the more acidic the grape. Which sounded perfect for making a sparkling wine. The company already had some experience in this field with Il Grigio, the sparkling blend of Chardonnay and Pinot Grigio that was first made in 1971 and was perhaps the first Martinotti method (tank fermented) sparkling wine to be made in Friuli. So what method would Manlio choose for the new, prestige sparkling wine?

Bottle fermented or tank fermented - Metodo Collavini?

The first experiments were with bottle fermented Ribolla Gialla, and, as Manlio observes, sometimes it is better to carry out one's experiments in the privacy of one's own winery. It didn't produce the results that were wanted.

So, the obvious solution would seem to be to go back to tank fermentation, like everyone else did. This time, however, Manlio's experiment produced a really remarkable result. His reasoning was this: Why not combine the all-important continuous control on the wine's development that tank

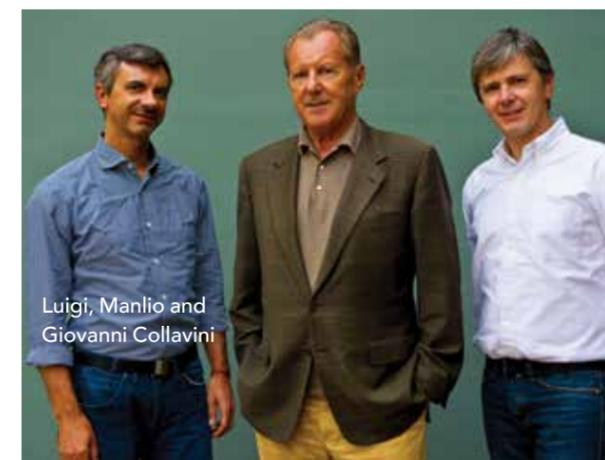
fermentation produces (and bottle fermentation doesn't) with the benefits of long fermentation that come with prolonged contact with the lees?

This began what curious journalists at the time began to refer to as the "Metodo Collavini". The tall 200hl fermentation tanks were up-ended and used horizontally, to keep the maximum amount of fermenting must on the lees; and the fermentation period was extended from the normal matter of days to around 30 months.

Asked about the keeping qualities of this painstakingly produced sparkling wine, Manlio will say that this should be "like Champagne", even though the wine is definitely not intended to be a Champagne look-alike. It has its own point of reference.

Success

It must be good, Collavini's sparkling Ribolla Gialla, because the sales are so good. After forty years production has reached 200,000 bottles and its price point is reputedly higher than the average for a Franciacorta. Which means Manlio got it right with the sparkling evocation of Ribolla, just as he has done with the still. His skills as a Friulan patriot combined with his political expertise have also resulted in national recognition for the variety: Ribolla Gialla as a DOC or IGT wine can now only be produced in Friuli.



Luigi, Manlio and Giovanni Collavini

Collavini Sparkling Vintage Ribolla Gialla

Type: Spumante Brut Millesimato
Grapes: Ribolla Gialla
Origin: vineyards in Corno di Rosazzo and Manzano, Friuli
Yield: 80 ql/ha
Training system: Cordon spur and Guyot

Density: 5000 vines / ha
Harvesting: early picking
Alcohol: 12% vol.

Method: handpicked grapes in the morning. Delicate whole-berry pressing; free-run must settles overnight. Fermentation at 14°C part in steel, part in barriques. Re-fermentation in large horizontal pressure tanks at 12°C. Maturation on the lees for at least 30 moon cycles. 12 months' bottle age.

Tasting notes: Bright straw yellow with greenish tinges, persistent mousse. Subtle aromatics of nectarines, white figs and green apples. Hint of minerality. Fresh-tasting and generously structured on the palate with kaleidoscope of citrus fruits complementing exceptional length.

