

# SUAVE SOAVE: MOVE OVER, PINOT GRIGIO

**R**AISE YOUR hand if you have ever had a glass of sweet, cheap, dull and diluted Soave wine. Don't worry, you are not alone. In fact, until a few years ago, Soave was the "ugly duckling" of Italian wine, and buyers from all over the world kept a justifiably safe distance from it. So, please, don't feel forced to change your mind and buy a bottle of new Soave. Buy two! The first one will be purely for pleasure and also to wash off all those preconceived ideas about Soave. Prepare yourself for a dry but perfumed, lean but luscious white wine that will set the right tone for your dinner party. The second bottle will be for knowl-

edge, and for you to be reminded that a meaningful wine always comes from a meaningful place. One word, two meanings: simply a question of language.

The town of Soave is one of those puzzling combinations typical in the northeast of Italy, its medieval old city surrounded by a belt of new houses, small businesses and plenty of vineyards, conveniently situated halfway between Verona and Vicenza. Its Roman origins have been almost forgotten since the town took on a distinctively new personality in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, when Can-signorio della Scala had Soave enclosed with an impressive fortress wall reinforced by 24 sturdy towers.

Today, the view from the highway is quite charming, but fortifications constructed in the Middle Ages were conceived originally as military statements rather than architectural ones. In fact, the powerful della Scala dynasty, rulers of Verona and of the land around it, were proven soldiers rather than administrators and demonstrated their prowess in self-defense with their walled towns and castles. The castle of Soave, for example, is an imposing Gothic-Venetian structure that dates back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century, strategically erected on a hilltop to dominate the valley below. Today, slightly more than 6,000 residents crowd the stone-paved streets of Soave, and most of them are

involved in some capacity in the production, manufacture and sale of the town's name-sake wine.

**S**OAVE IS USUALLY a blend of white grapes, mainly Garganega and Trebbiano di Soave. It is typically vinified in temperature-controlled stainless steel vats to retain delicate, crisp aromas and a graceful palate of flowers, fresh fruit and almonds. But there are distinctions, as location, ingredients and style of Soave production vary widely. First, there is a basic Soave, made with high-yielding vines cultivated in the wide plains around the town of Soave. Here, large wineries and industrial winemaking are responsible for straightforward white wines with little personality but plenty of market share. An authentic yet simplified use of the Garganega grape is all you can expect in a Soave from the plains, but at least most of these lowland wines are clean, crisp and pleasantly correct.

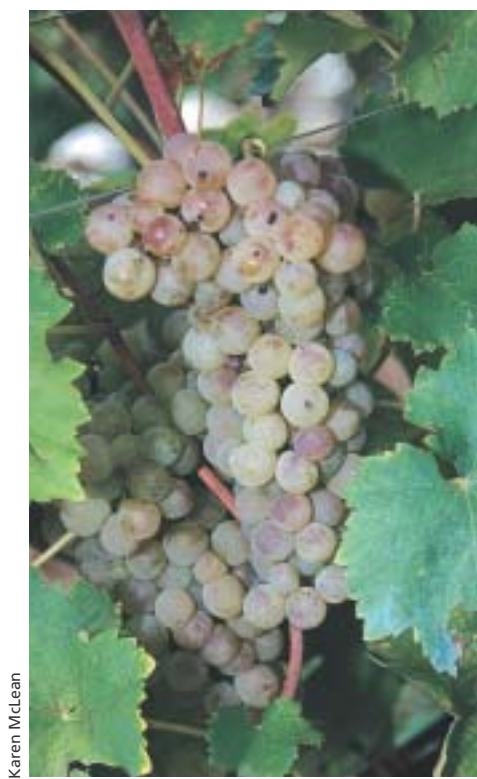
As the land gradually changes its morphology, elevating itself over the valley, the vineyards begin to look more interesting, as older vines are planted with a slightly higher density and better sun exposure. It is still the same high-trained "pergola" system that dominates the panorama from here to Valpolicella, with its wide arcades and its abundance of fruit and foliage, but new and better ideas are starting to leave their mark. Lower production (the maximum yield allowed is much too high at five tons per acre), better training systems, less mechanization, and virtually no irrigation combine for higher quality fruit and better wines. "Soave di collina" (hillside Soave) is therefore a more complex wine, usually endowed with higher concentration and depth of supple and silky Garganega aromas and flavors. Less Trebbiano is used here, but at times some Pinot Bianco or even some Chardonnay can be blended in.

Finally, there is "Soave Classico," the wine made in the hilly district located just

**Luca Mazzotti**

*The town of Soave is a meeting place for medieval and modern influences.*

Previous page: The castle of Soave; the Bolla winery produces an excellent Soave. This page: A ripe cluster of Garganega grapes.



Karen McLean



Photo courtesy of Bolla





outside the city walls that was first identified and protected in 1931, and that it is now in the process of requesting a DOCG status, the highest level of quality approved by the Italian government. The best wines made here carry the name of important *crus* (or vineyards) like great Burgundies and Barolos. There are rich, baroque perfumes in the wines from the Colombara *cru*; delicate and sensuous qualities in those from Frosca; and an unexpected intensity of flavor in the Ronchetto wines, just to name a few pearls on a string of vineyards of world-class quality. At these vineyards Garganega fruit reaches such complexity that advanced practices like skin-maceration, micro-oxygenation and oak-aging are often implemented. Wines produced in the “classico” tradition are not only some of the best wines of Soave, but are among the very best in Italy.

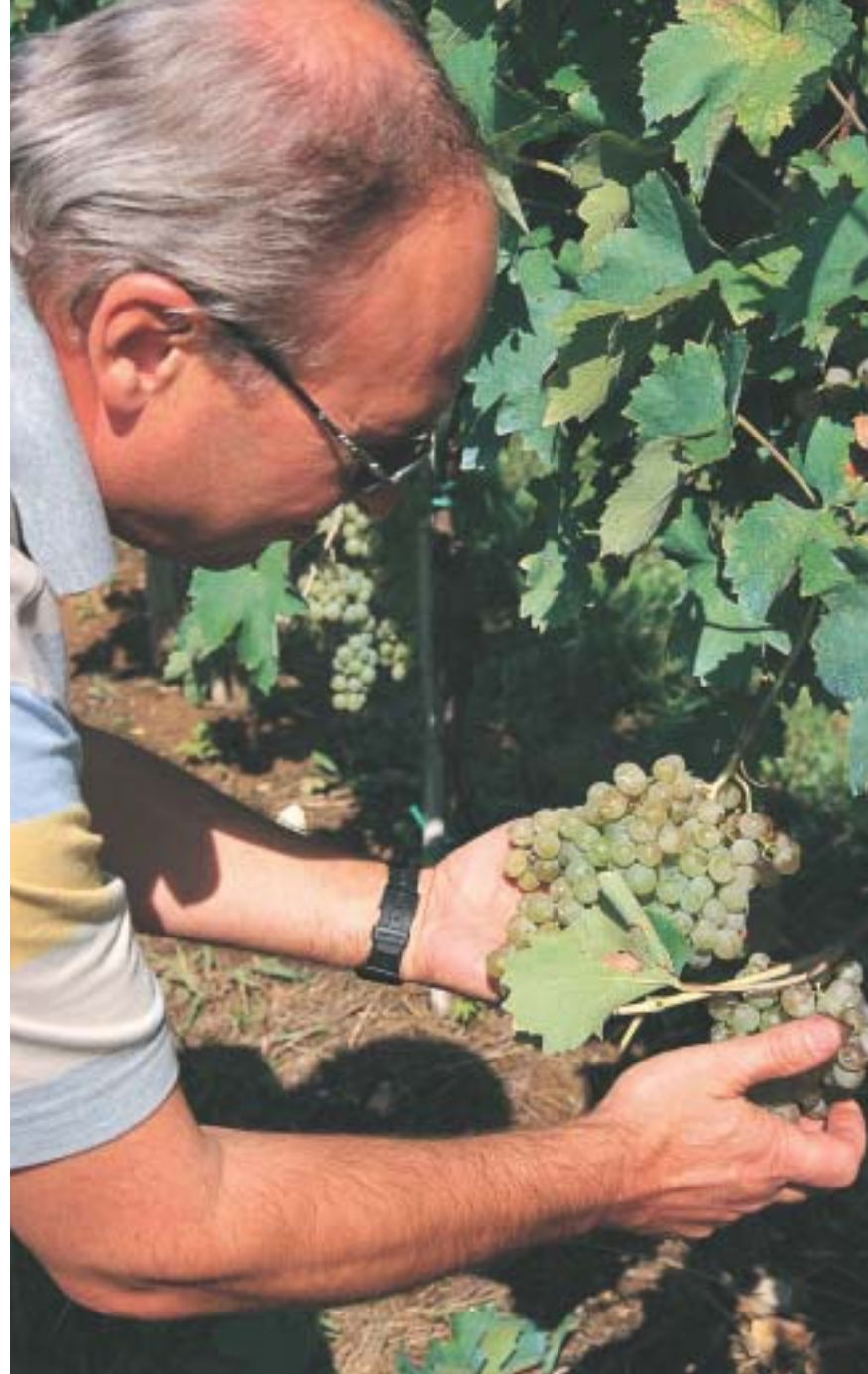
To be included in this complex equation are two other Soave wines, the Recioto and the Spumante. The former is made with air-dried, botrytis-affected Garganega grapes that are slowly fermented and aged in small oak barrels. This is an important albeit rare wine that was awarded DOCG status in 1998. Sweet, silky and slightly higher in

alcohol than its dry version, it belongs to the league of the great sweet wines of Germany and the Loire, rather than Sauternes and Vinsanto. (“A pure expression of overripe fruit,” says producer Leonildo Pieropan of the ideal Recioto.)

The Spumante, or sparkling, version of Soave represents almost the opposite of Recioto, as light, perfumed but slightly bitter bubbly are produced in large quantities by many cellars. Unfortunately, here the lack of balance between the high yield allowed and the little effort produced leaves scant hope for the immediate future. But let’s look on the bright side and put bubbles aside for the moment.

**S**OME CLAIM that it all starts with quality Garganega. The local pride and joy of Soave is an ancient ingredient of the Roman *acinatico* wine, the strong, sweet wine made with dried-out Garganega grapes that has led the way to the current Reciotos. In 530 A.D., the historian Cassiodorus described the grape as “beautifully white and pure...as if it were born from lilies.” Seven centuries later, the agronomist Pier De Crescenzi mentions Garganega in his agricultural treatise as the original *uva retica* of pre-Roman times.

Today, this healthy and dangerously over-



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## SOAVE DOCG

### RECOMMENDED PRODUCERS

Roberto Anselmi  
Bertani  
Bisson  
Bolla  
Giuseppe Campagnola  
Ca’ Rugate  
Cantina del Castello  
Inama  
Leonildo Pieropan  
Pra  
Tamellini  
Zenato

### ALCOHOL CONTENT

10%

### IDEAL SERVING TEMPERATURE

45° to 50°

### FOOD PAIRINGS

Seafood appetizers, seafood and vegetable risotto, spaghetti with clams, grilled fish, fish stew, grilled and stewed poultry, stuffed vegetable dishes.



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Photo courtesy of Bolla



Photo courtesy of Bolla

productive grape, rich in natural sugars and protected by a thick, tense skin that turns brilliant gold in September, is responsible for 70 to 100 percent of all Soaves, the remaining 30 percent made with any or a combination of various Trebbianos, Chardonnays and Pinot Biancos. Garganega is Italy’s fifth most important white grape variety, with about 35,000 acres planted; it also is the mother of a myriad of subvarieties, strains, and clones, including Garganega di Gambellara, grown in the adjacent province of Vicenza.

Trebbiano di Soave is one of the many subvarieties of Trebbiano grown in Italy. As a family of grapes, Trebbiano is responsible

Previous page, top left: Two versions of Bolla’s Soave. Bottom, from left to right: Harvesting grapes; the Bolla insignia. This page, clockwise from top left: Checking the ripeness of Garganega clusters; a hillside outside of Soave; the Bolla estate.





*Hillside Soave is a complex wine, endowed with depth and concentration of flavor and aroma.*

for one-third of Italy's DOC white wine production. Even though the ancient Roman writer Pliny mentioned a *vinum trebulanum* in Campania, some argue that the wine's origins are connected with the River Trebbia in Emilia-Romagna, where, back in 1303, that same agronomist Pier de Crescenzi recorded the existence of the Trebbiano vine. Trebbiano is widely grown in Italy and abroad—with the extensive plantings of its sibling *Airen* in Spain and *Ugni Blanc* in France, Trebbiano is by far the most planted white grape variety in the world. The most important subvarieties grown on Italian soil are Trebbiano Toscano, Trebbiano di Romagna, Trebbiano Giallo, and Trebbiano

di Soave. At its best, the latter is perfumed, with low acidity and good alcohol level.

Then there is Chardonnay, the world's favorite variety, here used to enhance structure and complexity, but especially to make Soave wines more marketable to a foreign audience. Problems arise when a Garganega with personality problems is paired with too much Chardonnay: The flattening impact of the French variety on the Italian one is one of the reasons why Soave is, at times, indistinguishable from the majority of white wines produced worldwide. The secret, then, seems to be to use as many top-quality Garganega grapes as possible, a task undertaken by a group of illuminated Soave

producers sharing some of the best slopes in the Classico district.

Pieropan, Anselmi, Tamellini, Cantina del Castello, Gini, Ca' Rugate, Coffele and Inama are among the best producers in Soave today. They own on average 20 hectares of hilly vineyards from which they produce distinctively unique bottlings of Soave (they all produce three or more Soave wines, usually labeled after the vineyard of origin). Their wines are complex, with crisp, pristine fruit flavors, good complexity and balanced acidity. In detail, the outstanding Soave La Rocca made by Leonildo Pieropan, a wine of great concentration and aromatic complexity, was awarded the title of "Best Italian White Wine" in the 1998 vintage. Many other excellent Soave wines, from Gini's La Frosca to Cantina del Castello's Monte Carniga, are in the same celebrated league and are still offered at a very reasonable retail price.

**E**VEN THE GIANTS of the appellation are upgrading their Soave offerings. The Casa Vinicola Bolla, a mammoth winery established in 1883 that today produces over 18 million bottles of wine, has released a quality Recioto di Soave Classico, the sweet Garganega *passito*-based wine that is embracing a new trend. The long-estab-



Previous page: A sweeping view of vines outside Soave. This page, clockwise from top right: Harvested grapes await vinification; a multi-hued bunch of grapes; a cluster of Garganega; a flowering vine.

All photos on this page by Karen McLean





This page: A view of the flourishing Roberto Anselmi estate in Monteforte D'Alpone.



Slava Petrakov

## WHERE TO GO

**ROBERTO ANSELMINI**  
(Monteforte D'Alpone)  
Tel. 011/39/045/7611488

**BERTANI (Negrar)**  
Tel. 011/39/045/6011211

**BISSON (Soave)**  
Tel. 011/39/045/7680775

**BOLLA (Soave)**  
Tel. 011/39/045/8670911

**GIUSEPPE CAMPAGNOLA**  
(Marano di Valpolicella)  
Tel. 011/39/045/7703900

**CA' RUGATE**  
(Monteforte d'Alpone)  
Tel. 011/39/045/6175082

**CANTINA DEL CASTELLO**  
(Soave)  
Tel. 011/39/045/7680093

**COFFELE (Soave)**  
Tel. 011/39/045/7680007

**INAMA (S.Bonifacio)**  
Tel. 011/39/045/6101411

**LEONILDO PIEROPAN (Soave)**  
Tel. 011/39/045/6190171

**PRA (Monteforte d'Alpone)**  
Tel. 011/39/045/7612125

**TAMELLINI (Soave)**  
Tel. 011/39/045/6190491

**ZENATO (Peschiera del Garda)**  
Tel. 011/39/045/7550300



Karen McLean

lished Bertani estate (another large producer of improving quality, owning 180 hectares of vineyards between Valpolicella and Soave) is also becoming successful in matching quality with quantity, as their Garganega-based La Lave demonstrates.

The same can be said for Zenato, a large producer of popular red fruity wines made to appeal to an international market, alongside serious and complex renditions of Trebbiano di Lugana. Their Soave Classico Superiore is made with fruit from the famed Colombara vineyard, proof that the quality gap between the boutique wineries and major estates is quickly shrinking. Finally, even the many powerful *cantine sociali* (wine

cooperatives) of the Veronese region, traditionally abundant reservoirs of lower-quality grapes and wines, have been sharpening their public image recently by coming out with improved products, like the promising Rocca Sveva bottling offered by the 1,200 producers of the Cantina di Soave. In all, these are pretty exciting times for lovers of Soave. The wines are improving consistently year after year and their availability doesn't drive prices out of range. Also, its versatility as an ingredient makes it the ideal companion of a wide range of dinner menus. Whether served alone or as an ingredient in other dishes, it is a deliciously refreshing way to banish preconceived ideas. **C**