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"There is a communion of more than our bodies when bread is broken and wine drunk. And that is my answer, when people ask me: why do you write about hunger, and not wars or love?" -- MFK Fisher

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The wines of Rossese di Dolceacqua DOC

It is a rare pleasure, in an increasingly homogenized and commercialised wine world, to discover something genuinely new and unexpected. Imagine a red wine with a beguiling perfume of red fruit and flowers, vaguely reminiscent of a pinot noir's aromatic depth, only for those notions to be dispelled by a mid-palate of herbs and pine needles. And at the finish, a distinct salty tang, almost as if you were standing by the shores of the Ligurian Sea itself.

These are the wines of Dolceacqua.



The Bricco Arcagna vineyard, surrounded by morning fog

A History

The Rossese di Dolceacqua D.O.C. encompasses various municipalities in the hill country just inland of the Italian Riviera near the French-Italian border. Situated less than 10km from the coastline, with the valleys running perpendicular to the coastline and the Ligurian Alps, it experiences great diurnal variation, with the cold winds rushing down from the Alps by night and the warm *mistral* blowing in from the sea by day. Its main grape, Rossese (which must constitute a minimum 95% of any wine in order to qualify for the D.O.C. classification), is known as Tibouren in the C tes de Provence where it is used to make an insipid ros . But it is in the unique *terroirs* of Dolceacqua (Italian for "sweet waters") that it reaches its ultimate expression.

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Terre Bianche labels feature an ancient map of the region and its province, Liguria

Viticulture and winemaking in Dolceacqua is not new, in fact far from it. Its steep, terraced vineyards are actually home to some of Europe's oldest vinestock, with some Rossese vines in excess of a hundred and forty years old. As Filippo Rondelli, the 5th-generation proprietor of the Terre Bianche winery, relates, the Rossese grape has always had a particular affinity with the local *terroir*. "When some of the best oenologists and agronomists first decided to plant in Dolceacqua, they originally thought that the international grapes were the best choice for the soils. Now, they have changed their mind. I think they found that Rossese and Dolceacqua fit in a unique way, that there is no way to separate them".



winemaker Filippo Rondelli of Terre Bianche

Good as these wines are, vineyard ownership in the region has been far too fractured for commercial-scale winemaking. This situation was further aggravated by World War II, when the post-war shortage of manpower and funds led to vines being uprooted to make way for cash crops, except for those in the steepest, most inaccessible areas. The end result is a logistical nightmare; hairpin bends on narrow single lane tracks abutting against a sheer cliff face aren't the easiest roads for trucks to negotiate, either for bringing wine down from the hills or transporting new equipment up to the wineries.

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The region's typical narrow, twisting roads

Today, some thirty producers produce 300,000 bottles per annum from their combined productive land of a hundred hectares. Even Antonio Perrino of Testalonga, an old-school winemaker long hailed as one of the region's finest, barely produces 3,500 bottles in a typical vintage.

By tradition and necessity, winemaking in Dolceacqua has thus been a family pursuit, with relatives providing manual labour whenever it was needed. Selling the wine was a similarly local affair, with few bottles leaving the region until the turn of the millennium.

A Renaissance

The quality renaissance of Dolceacqua was driven by a confluence of factors. Firstly, pioneering landowners such as Nino Tornatore laid the groundwork for the establishment of the D.O.C. in 1972. Secondly, recent enforcement of employment laws required all vineyard owners to register their workers as employees and pay them accordingly. Overnight, the use of free family labour vanished, on the pain of punitive fines. "Sometimes, you could see the government planes flying over the vineyards", Rondelli recalls. "They counted the number of workers in the fields against how many employees are registered to work with the winery!" Thus were the winemakers of Dolceacqua presented with that ultimatum which has confounded winemakers over the centuries: acquire more land to make your operation financially viable, or perish.



Pioneering landowner and winemaker Nino Tornatore

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the "Gen X" winemakers of Dolceacqua were no longer content to have their wines remain a well-kept secret. Armed with the experience of working in and tasting wines from some of the world's best wine

regions, younger mavericks such as Rondelli and Luca Dallorto from Du Nemu sought new investment and expertise to ensure they were not being held back by outmoded equipment and questionable hygiene practices. New oak, an expensive luxury, started making its influence felt on the fresh, savoury Rossese wines.

What this new generation shared with the old was skill and no little pride; what set them apart was the former's burning commercial ambition. They sought approbation from wine authorities beyond the Alps; indeed, Terre Bianche's 2008 and 2009 Bricca Arcagna (a chalky-soiled *lieu-dit* recognized as one of the D.O.C.'s best *climats*), garnered the highest "*tre biccheri*" (three glasses) rating in the venerable Italian wine guide Gambero Rosso. A prominent Italian wine writer, so moved after seeing Dolceacqua's vigneroni working their deadly-steep hills and tasting their wines, affectionately christened them "those crazy angels".



The steep Cru Galeae vineyards of winery Ka Mancine

In the late 2000s, the quality revolution received its final boost, with the formation of a growers' association dedicated to promoting the local wine and exploiting economies of scale to help its members reach new markets. Laggards were forced to march to the new beat, as the association hosted blind tastings to spread knowledge amongst its members. "The best way", Rondelli calls it, "to look at new things or to see their produce next to others. A producer may say 'my colleague made this wine better than me this year, I'll do it better than him next year', or 'I'll see how my colleague works in the vineyards'. The result? Quality increased suddenly".



1986 Testalonga - almost three decades old and still going strong!

A Future?

Only time will tell whether the new wave wines of Dolceacqua will surpass the

benchmark set by the likes of Perrino. They have their work cut out for them. I had the opportunity to taste Perrino's 1986 Testalonga Rossese di Dolceacqua, still going strong after almost three decades and slightly reminiscent of an aged Burgundy, with its faded garnet rim and a tantalizing hint of *sous-bois*. Now don't get me wrong - Rossese di Dolceacqua is not a Chambertin on the cheap, but for not much more than a bottle of Robert Mondavi's Woodbridge at Cold Storage, you can get an intriguingly delicious, interesting, light-bodied red which simply cries out for the companionship of white meat or a more assertive seafood preparation.

The world seems to be taking notice; the Japanese, Hong Kong and Singaporean markets imported their first shipments of Rossese di Dolceacqua in 2012. But there is still a long way to go. As Rondelli admits, "consistency is the first goal we need to achieve".

Authentic Wine Explorers is currently the only importer of Dolceacqua wine into the Singapore market. It currently imports ten labels of Dolceacqua wine, generally costing around S\$40 nett. Orders and enquiries via sales@awexplorers.com

Posted by [Julian Teh](#) at 00:24 

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