

PRINCE OF THE RIVIERA

IN A SEA OF LIGURIAN WHITE WINE, ONE RED STANDS OUT: ROSSESE DI DOLCEACQUA.

TEXT AND IMAGES: PATRICIA THOMSON

I knew of the ancient bridge in Dolceacqua long before I'd heard of its wine. Claude Monet had painted this graceful arch in 1884 when visiting the medieval hamlet, which lies a stone's throw from the Ligurian coast and just seven miles from the border of France. That's close enough to pick up French stations on the car radio, but I've chosen radio silence as I pass the village and ascend a steep switchback road, snaking along countless hairpin turns on my way to Terre Bianche.

This mountaintop winery made the first Rossese di Dolceacqua I'd ever tasted. It was love at first sip. The rossese grape, one of Liguria's only native reds, makes wine the color of hard cherry candy—as pretty as anything on Monet's palette. Its perfumes are an intense mélange of red berry and black pepper and what wine people call *garrigue*, that savory smell of sunbaked wild herbs and Mediterranean scrub. Rossese is low in tannins and “fresh”—the word Italians use to describe a refreshing level of acidity. It's even more refreshing when lightly chilled, which makes it exactly the kind of red you'd want to drink on the Italian Riviera.

“It's an easy wine, but not a stupid wine. Lightweight, but very intense,” says Terre Bianche's Filippo Rondelli, uncorking his flagship Rossese di Dolceacqua. The label shows an antique map where Nice belonged to

Filippo Rondelli before Terre Bianche's tasting room, once the home of an Italian general who fought in the Italo-Ethiopian war.



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Italy. That old French connection extends to the grape as well, for rossese is a genetic twin of Provence's tibouren. Scholars believe that rossese arrived in Liguria via Marseilles, where it had been brought from the Middle East by Greek colonizers.

"In Provence, it becomes a secondary grape for rosé, while here it becomes the prince of grapes," says Rondelli. Rossese is always vinified pure in western Liguria, the only part of Italy where it grows. It thrives in the rain shadow of the Maritime Alps, where it's significantly hotter and drier than the rest of Liguria.

Terre Bianche is the perfect place to start an exploration of rossese. Not only is Rondelli a local mover and shaker, he's a history buff who has compiled a chronology of this land (found on the Terre Bianche website). Tax records show that wine has been commercialized and exported from Dolceacqua since the 12th century, at the very least. Earlier records went up in smoke as wartime fires successively consumed this borderland, including the Austrian Succession War, the Great War, and WWII.

Rondelli's family tree is deeply rooted in viticulture. Generations ago, wine wouldn't be your primary occupation, but anyone who owned land and had mouths to feed made it. Rondelli's great-great-grandfather worked for the railroad, but also produced *vino sfuso* — in bulk. Before the Rossese di Dolceacqua DOC appellation laws came along in 1972, you could sell your excess to local restaurants, consumers in Genoa, or families without vineyards of their own.

"That's what they did—just like everywhere else in Italy, except those wineries controlled by blue-blood families or monasteries," says Rondelli. His father and uncle subsequently started bottling under the Terre Bianche label, making them among the first to turn professional.

The top wineries of Dolceacqua have a similar story. The Anfosso family—ancient enough to have cofounded the town of Soldano—can count six generations of winemakers leading up to Alessandro Anfosso, who created Tenuta Anfosso in 2002. His patrimony includes vineyards dating back to 1905 and 1888, the latter with pre-phylloxera rossese bianco vines that are still productive. Alessandro's cousin Maurizio Anfosso dei Mancinei started Ka' Manciné in 2000. (The winery name is a play on 'house of the *mancinei*,' dialect for left-handed, in reference to Maurizio's father.

"The name was invented to distinguish one Anfosso from another, since it's a very



Ka' Manciné founder Maurizio Anfosso, son of the left-handed one.

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common name,” says Maurizio.) Then there’s Maccario Dringenberg, founded in 2001, with Giovanna Maccario at the helm. Her family had vineyards around San Biagio della Cima *da sempre*, she says—forever—so she too owns century-old bush-trained vines. These were tended by her great-grandfather, whose main occupation was *cambio dei cavalli*, a stable where long-distance carriages could change horses. One can imagine weary travelers resting with a glass of his rossese in hand.

But passing generations have witnessed a hacking away of the viticultural landscape.

Where once 3,000 hectares (7,400 acres) of vineyards blanketed these valleys—50 percent more than in the Langhe—now there’s just 100 hectares. Wars and phylloxera started the shrinkage. But farmers voluntarily continued it once the flower industry was introduced. Seeing they could make the same amount of money in half the time with half the property, they started ripping out vines and building greenhouses. Now those multistory monstrosities sit empty, for Dutch buyers have turned to cheaper sources in Chile, Kenya, and Tunisia, where flowers cost one-

tenth the price.

In a small way, the tables are turning yet again. Some winemakers are buying and recuperating old, abandoned vineyards. “Now there’s double the hectares from the time I started as a 22-year-old,” says Alessandro Anfosso. But it’s not easy. Stone-walled terraces need repair as much as vines do. In these steep valleys, where inclines can be 70 percent, terraces are the only thing that permit land to be farmed; here they’re as ancient as agriculture itself. “It’s a continuous work, always doing walls and more walls. It’s our desperation,” says Anfosso.

“It’s not easy to make a dry-stone wall without cement so that it won’t collapse.” He learned that skill from his father and is passing it on to his son, so the patrimony continues.

A site-sensitive grape

“It’s a good year for wild fennel. This year there was an invasion,” says Giovanna Maccario as we walk to a vineyard under the warm October sun. We pass a mango tree and hedges of heat-loving lavender, used in French bouillabaisse. She plucks some sage. “See how strong the aroma is? The soil is calcareous, so that accents the perfume very much.” The same is true for rossese; calcium-rich soil ups the spice on the nose.

Rossese’s site sensitivity is why Maccario makes six *cru*, or single-vineyard bottlings.

“It’s a grape variety that expresses the terroir as much as pinot noir or nebbiolo,” she says. This vineyard is two miles inland and at medium elevation. She points to two further up the mountain, called Curli and Brae. The higher altitude results in cooler microclimates. But even these vineyards make completely different wines. Brae is lithe and lyrical, while Curli offers firm tannins and longevity.

Alessandro Anfosso got empirical proof of the difference terroir makes when he took a massal selection from his 1888 vineyard and planted those cuttings in some newly purchased property. “The new plants came from old vines in Poggio Pini”—plants he considered genetically stronger than the commercial stock available in nurseries these days. “Nonetheless, their comportment is completely different,” he states. “The color, the bouquet. And they’re the same identical plant.”

“When producers talk about their wine, they talk about place, not the grape: Arcagna, Terrabianca, Tramontina, Pozzuolo,” says Rondelli, rattling off some *cru* names. When speaking in broad strokes, winemakers



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Above left: The antique map of Liguria, when Nice was part of Italy. **Above:** Vineyards as steep as this one, owned by Maccario Dringenberg, require stone terraces and hand harvest. **Left:** The flagship wines of four Dolceacqua producers, on an old vineyard terrace.

categorize their vineyard plots as either “Mediterranean” or “Continental.” Ka’Mancinè color codes its bottles to signal the difference: blue for sea, yellow for earth. The Bergana (blue) and Galeae (yellow) vineyards lie just 150 meters apart, but face different directions and have contrasting soil types: calcareous marine rock versus earthy clay.

“So Beragna has more sapidity and is fresher, almost like a sea breeze or when you’re on a rock beside the sea, and boom! a wave arrives,” says Maurizio Anfosso. “Blue is also more traditional, in the sense that it has less alcohol—12.5%. It’s simpler; it gives pleasure. The yellow is 13.5% and a bit more ‘important,’ with greater concentration in the red fruit, rose petal, and savory notes.

Vigne Storiche

Most wineries make a basic Rossese di Dolceacqua—their flagship and the bottle most likely to reach U.S. shores—plus various cru. Despite the minuscule amounts, it’s these single-vineyard rosseses that producers get most jazzed about. That enthusiasm led Filippo Rondelli to initiate an endeavor to have the historic cru mapped and legally recognized as *Menzioni Geografiche Aggiuntive* (MGA)—the same status enjoyed by Barolo and Barbaresco cru. Supported by the chamber of commerce, the research took three years and involved a deep dive into documents dating back to the 12th century, topographic maps since the 18th century, aerial photographs going back to 1954, Google Earth surveys and more.

The project was an outgrowth of a winemakers’ association that Rondelli also spearheaded. Called Vigne Storiche, or Historic Vines, it’s a way for its 15 members to grapple with the big picture.

“We have roundtables about the common problems we face,” says Rondelli. “We’ve held blind tastings to see the average quality of the wine. Sometimes in a blind tasting, you find out your wine is not performing well. As a result, quality increased. We also share old bottles, which helps evaluate aging and old versus new techniques.”

Alessandro Anfosso says, “We talk of Dolceacqua as a whole, not individual estates.” He believes the group has helped carry the banner of Rossese di Dolceacqua onto an international stage. In the decade since its founding, Vigne Storiche has invited journalists to visit, which led to inclusion in the wine guides. Awards and ratings followed, which in turn attracted more attention from wine writers and sommeliers. Now Dolceacqua can be found at restaurants like the Bastianich Hospitality Group in the U.S. “I would say in the last five or six years, something has changed,” Rondelli attests.

Meditatively swirling a Bricco Arcana cru, he says, “It’s not easy to find a wine that’s so young and gives you all of this. It’s a cross between exuberance and elegance.” Giovanna Maccario notes that Rossese from Dolceacqua has always been easy to love and easy to sell. “It’s a pleasing wine to drink, tied to the freshness and the fruit. One glass makes you want two.”



A centurion grapevine in Tenuta Anfosso’s vineyard.

Splitting her time between Italy and Brooklyn, Patricia Thomson (@dolcetours) writes about Italian wine and leads wine tours with La Dolce Vita Wine Tours.