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Tasting notes & culinary dispatches

Cor ni chon [kawr-ni-shon] *n.*: 1. a French gherkin, served with pâté; 2. *French slang*: a bumbler, sometimes cranky & annoying but basically harmless e.g. *Quel cornichon!* (What a jerk!) *Ne fais pas le comichon!* (Don't be a silly goose!)

Crisp, crunchy words
typed fresh daily



Dispatches from Collio

Posts on Cornichon.org

December, 2010 & January, 2011

By Ronald Holden



ABOUT RONALD AND HIS BLOG

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Collio: Wine Springs Eternal



[Collio](#) is one of several wine-growing zones in northeastern Italy, a cluster of about 3,500 vineyard acres and 200 wineries producing some even million bottles a year, nestled into the hills along the Slovenian border where the Alps meet the Adriatic. The soil is all marl and sandstone, and the wines, mostly white, have amazing depth of mineral flavor.

We'll tell the stories of some of the wine growers over the next few days. Today, on our visit to the castle at [San Florian del Collio](#), with its panoramic view over the vineyards, our hosts inaugurated their new *fontana del vino*, a wine fountain to celebrate the 2010 vintage.

The wine that gushed forth was once called Tokaj Friulano (or tokay or tokaj, depending), now known simply as Friulano, a variety that resembles sauvignon blanc and has been in these hills for generations. The Hungarians sued (and won) to keep Tokaj for themselves, but theirs isn't remotely related to the Friulano.

There's a lot of talk that Collio should produce a signature "Collio Bianco," a white blend that would showcase the region's unique profile. First, though, they would need to agree on which of the region's grapes should be included (or excluded): friulano, ribolla gialla, pinot grigio, chardonnay, picolit,

malvasia, sauvignon blanc? They've all been cultivated here for over 100 years, even the chardonnay and sauv blanc, brought in during the mid-1800s by a French nobleman.

The results so far are promising: regardless of the varieties that go into the blends, it seems that terror--that bracing minerality--trumps varietal differences. That's the hope, they say, that "Collio Bianco" will become synonymous with "fabulous white wine."

Many thanks to our hosts, the [Collio growers' association](#), for getting the wine to come out of the wall, a true Fountain of Youth!

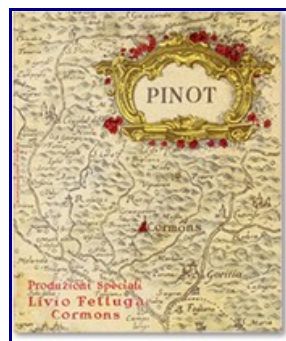


The Lion Kings of Collio



You can't talk about Collio without mentioning the names of the "founding families," [Schiopetto](#) and Felluga. It was Mario Schiopetto who launched the region's reputation in the 1970s with the technique of fermenting white wines at cold temperatures. He died in 2003, but the benchmark set by his wines lives on.

The Fellugas, well, they're like the Kennedys. Endlessly fascinating royalty.



The dean of the clan, Livio Felluga, is now well into his 90s and pretty much stays home. His son, Andrea, runs the [Livio Felluga](#) winery; his daughter, Elda, runs an agriturismo (farmhouse B&B) and osteria across the street. The winery is known for its antique labels, hand-drawn maps of the Friuli wine-growing region. The Livio Felluga 2006 Terra Alta, a blend of friulano, pinot bianco and sauvignon was named the country's top wine by the association of Italian sommeliers. And last year, at the age of 95, the viticulture school in the Friulian capital of Udine awarded him an honorary degree in enology.

The most prominent public face of the Felluga name these days Livio's much younger brother, 83-year-

old Marco Felluga (on the left in the photo), honorary president of the [Consorzio](#) (winegrowers association); his daughter, Patrizia, is the current president, and operates a winery called [Zuani](#) with her children, Caterina and Antonio (also in the photo). They recently bought and renovated a nearby country restaurant called [Trattoria Luka](#) so they could showcase the region's wines with traditional local recipes.



For his part, Marco's son, Roberto, has [two superb wine estates](#), Russiz Superiore and Gradisca. His family bought the properties after losing their original vineyards in Istria, on the Dalmatian coast but on the wrong side of the Iron Curtain. The local grapes back then were tokai (now called friulano), picolit, malvasia and the red refosco. But French varieties like pinot gris, chardonnay and sauvignon blanc had been imported a century earlier, so winemakers had a good palette to work with. The soil, marl and sandstone, imparts a strong minerality to the wines, an intensity that on occasion covers up varietal differences.

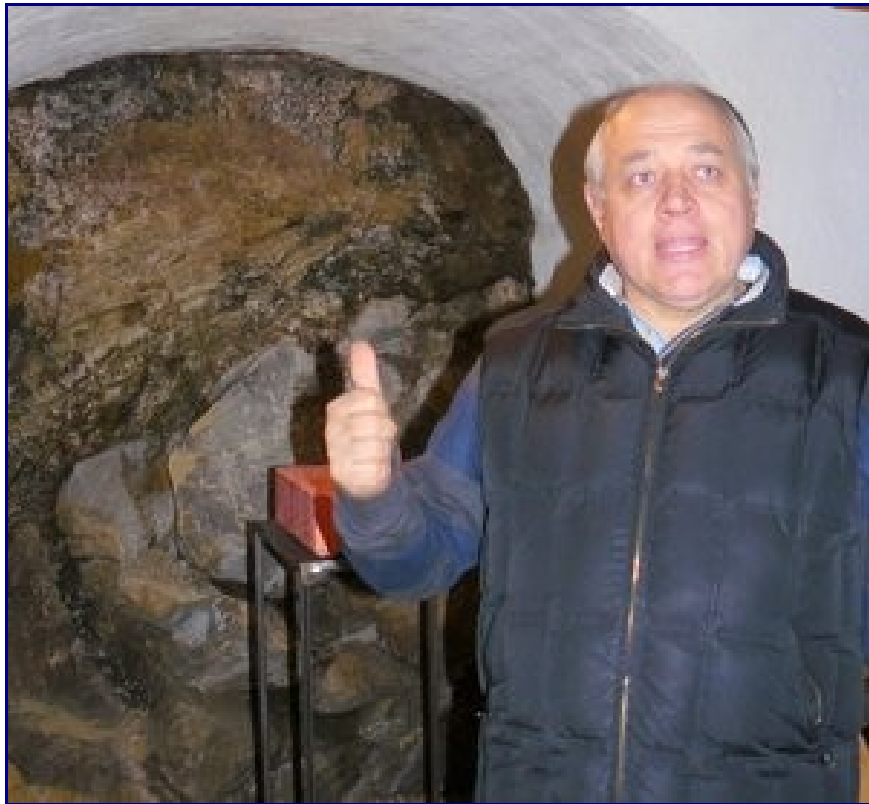
In fact, at Luka one night, we were treated to five "young" whites from Collio and five more "aged"

wines with four or more years of bottle age. They ranged from ultra simple to complex; rich yet with a common thread of minerality. The influence of terroir clearly beats varietal character in Collio.

Russiz Superiore also houses a very elegant agriturismo, where half our group stayed. Roberto received his guests with that combination of courtesy and warmth that no hotelkeeper can duplicate; it really was his home, after all. (And a word here about all those complaints on TripAdvisor about "rude" front-desk clerks in Italy's big-city, tourist hotels. They're working for the hotel owners, not for the customers, so they're not going to treat anonymous little you like a princess. Their job is to rent rooms, not be your babysitter, translator, tour guide and best friend. Get over it.)

Back to the Fellugas: the crest of the Marco Felluga winery is a lion; the crest of Russiz Superiore is twin eagles. Two proud beasts that don't always get along, which might be said of any extended family, Italian or otherwise. But there's a strong sense of loyalty nevertheless. You can taste it in the wines.

The Commoner-King of Collio



Let's be clear: Edi Keber is not a "gentleman farmer" like some of his fellow wine makers in the Collio region of Friuli, on northeast Italy's border with Slovenia. He's a rough and ready working man, proud of his wines, full of good humor, and with a surprisingly good eye for modern art. He's also the genius behind those [yellow Vespas](#) that tourists rent to scoot around the Collio hills.

But no website. Email, yes. One suspects this will change before long; Edi has children. On the other hand, he says, "In this winery, I command." And only one wine, period. A white blend called, simply Edi Keber "Collio." He won't tell you what's in it; that's beside the point, he insists. (For the record, it's mostly friulano, with malvasia, ribolla gialla and pinot grigio thrown in.) Twelve hectares on the marl and limestone soil called *flysh*, 50,000 bottles, and not a stainless steel tank in sight. He ferments in glass-lined concrete tanks.

"Steel has no soul," Edi says, and who's to contradict him?

Far from being a hidebound traditionalist, though, Edi is forward-thinking. He's designed a new bottle for Collio's signature whites, with the name Collio stamped into the neck of the bottle, made by a "green" manufacturer located in Milano (because it's important to keep as much business as possible local). His wife made a lush bean and barley soup for our visiting delegation, and his neighbor, winemaker [Roberto Picech](#), brought some homemade salami.



Picech, by the way, currently serves as president of the [Collio DOC](#), the quasi-governmental organization responsible for administering the *disciplinare*, or production protocol.

Picech's 2004 white blend was remarkably complex, but Keber's Collio from 2007, served in magnum, was simply stunning, odds-on favorite wine of the trip. A trip, we hasten to remind readers, that was sponsored by [the Collio winegrowers](#) to acquaint American audiences with these remarkable wines.

Collio: The Triumph of Time



GORIZIA, ITALY--From the top of Mount Sabatino, a 2,000-foot land mass that straddles the border between Italy and Slovenia and dominates the Isonzo valley, you look down on the verdant hills and vineyards of [Collio](#) as if you were in a hot-air balloon. To the north and east, the snowy Alps seem close enough to touch, to the south, at the end of the valley, lies the Adriatic. Except for cheerful parties of hikers and picnickers, all is tranquil.

Yet Sabatino was the site of the fiercest fighting in World War I, the subject of Hemingway's *"Farewell to Arms."* The conflict cost the lives of 120,000 Italian and Austro-Hungarian soldiers and left half a million combatants permanently maimed. Every house and tree was destroyed; yet, after two years of bloodshed, the battle lines remained essentially unchanged..

After the war the Italians built an imposing ossuary to house the anonymous remains of 60,000 soldiers in Oslavia, a village on the outskirts of Gorizia, but the name Oslavia today is known primarily for its wine. This particular corner of Collio is devoted to ribolla gialla, a thick-skinned white grape, full of flavor and tannin, that the local producers treat like a red.

And ribolla gialla appreciates the respect it gets from these growers. What grape wouldn't enjoy growing in an ancient vineyard of marl and sandstone? Or a 45-day fermentation in open-topped wooden vats surrounded by carefully nurtured native yeasts, or the luxury of two months of skin contact? It's like a spa treatment for wine.

Stanislas ("Stanko") [Radikon](#) and his son, Sasha, produce 30,000 bottles a year from their 30-acre vineyard, and explain that the long fermentation and skin contact early-on means less manipulation is needed later; the spa treatment keeps the wine young. Stanko poured a 2000 ribolla at lunch today that tasted rich and youthful and showed not a trace of oxidation. Had it been a red, the press would

have swooned. Whites, especially older whites, get much less respect from the outside world. Fortunately, the wine growers of Collio, and especially Oslavia, know better.



Postcard from Trieste



Quick, name a multicultural city at the center of international trade that loves coffee? Name a prosperous city with a working waterfront that loves shellfish? And a big university town as well? Understandable if you said Seattle, but the answer is Trieste.

The intersecting cultures are Italian, Slavic and Germanic, and Trieste's strategic position along trade routes from the Adriatic into Central Europe have made it Italy's most rapidly growing economic success story. The central square, the [Piazza dell'Unità d'Italia](#), celebrates the union of Italy's 20 regions into a single country (in 1851) with magnificent classic architecture; it's the largest public square in Europe that opens directly onto the sea.



The Collio [wine producers association](#) brought us here for a final dinner to celebrate the white wines of their production zone. Chef Emilio Cuk, owner of the [MonteCarlo](#) restaurant, put together a menu composed entirely of shellfish and seafood from local waters, including clams and sardines seasoned with lemon and pepper, a great match for wines made with one of Collio's indigenous grapes, ribolla gialla.

Thinking Yellow

We've been visiting wineries and vineyards in [Collio](#) these past few days, an appellation in the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region of northeastern Italy, on the border with Slovenia. Our little band of wine writers was invited by the local *consorzio*, the association of Collio wine producers. Their numbers are relatively modest a mere 100 or so wine-producing members, another 80 growers, a production zone of only 3,500 acres (one tenth the Napa Valley). Still, they produce seven million bottles a year, and the first thing you learn about marketing is that it isn't the number of acres you harvest or cases you ship but bottles you have to sell, one by one.

Seven million times a year, someone in the world has to forsake all others and drink a wine from Collio.

So Collio has done what many others have: hired advisers to supplement their own marketing efforts. On the domestic side, the campaign for one indigenous variety, ribolla gialla, was simple: "Think Yellow." The yellow Porsche belongs to [Marco Primosic](#), vice-president of the Consorzio. Big success.



What can else we do, they wondered, to make the vineyards themselves a more enticing destination for Italian and nearby European visitors? Germans, Austrians, Slovenians, Swiss. Once they're here, they'll drink our wines and become ambassadors for the region, the thinking goes. One suggestion, championed by chef Josko Sirk of [La Subida](#) (the region's best restaurant) and winemaker Edi Keber (a bluff gent with fabulous wine and a taste for avant-garde art, but no website): "self-drive" scooters that would allow tourists to zip around these picturesque hills.



The *consorzio* sponsored the project, and over the past year five dozen Vespas, painted bright yellow, have been parked at wineries and *agriturismos* (farmhouse B&Bs) around the Collio production zone. "Collio on a Vespa" has its own website and multilingual maps, collioinvespa.it It's a terrific site, by the way.

The scooters have been a big hit, and the concept has been imitated in other wine regions. The *consorzio's* agency hired a famous photographer and art director, [Oliviero Toscani](#), who'd done the (controversial but successful) Bennetton campaign to create an ad for Collio. The image would also be used to brand the new Vespas.

Toscani didn't disappoint: his ad is simultaneously witty and whimsical, sexy and scandalous. What the headline says is: "The only white I love."

