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On the trail of Rossese

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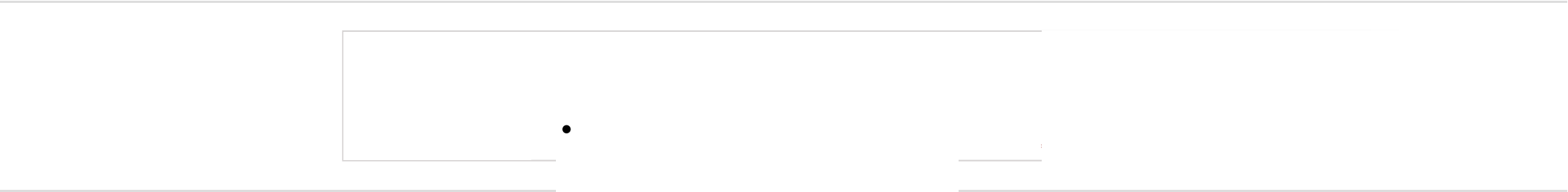
Terre Bianche vineyard in Rossese, Dolceacqua DOC

“Wear comfortable shoes,”

instructs Giovanna Maccario when I call to confirm my visit at her estate, Maccario Dringenberg. I feel a rush of excitement. Walks in the vineyard are surprisingly all too rare.

I am headed to Liguria, which is often referred to as the Italian Riviera. This crescent- shaped, small slip of a region connects France to Tuscany. The last time I made it to this part of Italy, I was barely 20 years old and cycling my way around Europe. Given the steep slopes that rise immediately from the sea, I didn’t explore the interior and instead hugged the coast.

A couple of decades later, my mode of transport is a car. And rather than the beach, wine is my motivation; specifically, Rossese di Dolceacqua. Named after the picturesque village of Dolceacqua, the region is so close to the border that I can still hear French echoing in my ears. Located at the western edge of Liguria, Maccario Dringenberg is essentially equidistance between Monaco and Sanremo, extending over two mountain valleys.



I meet Maccario in my runners. My heart sinks when I spy her sporting stylish summer sandals. But my disappointment quickly dissolves as I spend the next couple of hours trying to keep up as she leaps around the stone terraces holding up vertiginous slopes. She is as nimble and light on her feet as her wines. She takes me to her plot in the cru of Luvaira, which boasts bush vines well over 100 years old. Where necessary, Maccario has propped them up with inventive arrangements of sticks and stones. Beyond that, she does little else to control them. “The plant should grow freely,” she declares. “It is like an English garden.”

The vines in question are predominantly Rossese di Dolceacqua. Note, the grape variety bares the same name as the denomination. It is often simply referred to as Rossese, though for clarification, there are other genetically distinct grapes called Rossese something-or-other. Considered superior among these, Rossese di Dolceacqua is nonetheless very limited in plantings and little known. It is, however, one and

the same as Provence's Tibouren variety. There, it is vinified exclusively as a rosé and typically blended, giving distinct nuances of garrigue or wild Mediterranean scrub. Here, in Liguria, it is mainly crafted as a thrillingly low-tannin, light- to medium-bodied red with captivating scents of various herbs, flowers and pure summer fruit.

“Rossese should be weightless but with great intensity,” pronounces Filippo Rondelli at Terre Bianche. Much less mobile than Maccario, he is hobbling around on crutches, not from scrambling around his precarious vineyards, but instead due to a simple yet fateful misstep in his storeroom. Despite this injury, he is clearly itching to show me around his breathtakingly beautiful property. At 400 metres above sea level, it offers vistas of the penetratingly blue Mediterranean as well as the imposing Alps, depending on which direction you look.

Confined to his tasting room, Rondelli gives me a terroir intensive as I sample through his wines. Dolceacqua is one of the driest places in Italy. The mountains encircle the region to Sanremo, protecting the area from bad weather. While the climate is Mediterranean by the coast, it becomes subalpine near the mountains. “Usually this change occurs over 100 kilometres, but here you reach 2,000 metres in just 20 kilometres,” Rondelli explains. Vineyards can be found at elevations up to 800 metres. As a result, the wines exhibit a salty quality, which is Mediterranean, as well as the vibrant acidity associated with a continental influence. “I love this dual nature because only here is it expressed by our varieties,” he continues, referring also to white grapes Vermentino and Pigato.

Beyond varying altitudes and exposures are multiple soil compositions. Though all of marine origin, they run the gamut from blue marl to flysch and galestro to red clay with large stones similar to Châteauneuf-du-Pape. “This gives the possibility for a very sensitive variety like Rossese to demonstrate the differences quite radically in the wines,” Rondelli maintains.

Rondelli believes so firmly in this that he is one of the key producers to spearhead legal registration of the region's crus. As in Barolo and Barbaresco, these Menzioni geografiche aggiuntive (MGA) are essentially geographically defined subzones, which can be included on a label if 85 percent of the grapes hail from the named MGA. He approximates there is potential from more than 2,000 distinct MGAs, but assures me that this wide range has been rationalized into a more realistic 33.

MAIXEI ROSE ROSSE SE..., VINO ROSATO (\$25)

The respectable local cooperative offers a non-traditional expression of Rossese as a rosé. Slightly darker than its Provençal counterparts, this wine is more intense in its scrubby dried herb and wild flowers.

MACCARIO-DRINGENBERG BRAE 2016, ROSSESE DI DOLCEQUA DOC (\$25)

It is almost impossible to choose a favourite among Maccario’s wines. From the north-facing cru of Brae, located at 480 metres above sea level and surrounded by forest, this represents the very light end of the spectrum. All crunchy red fruit like cranberries and red currants with a black-pepper snap, it is fine-boned and delicate.

MACCARIO-DRINGENBERG CURLI 2015, ROSSESE DI DOLCEQUA DOC SUPERIORE (\$30)

A historic cru that was tragically abandoned but nursed back to life by Maccario, this is one rare and intriguing Rossese. Quite dark in colour and shy on the nose, it is relatively full with blueberry and black raspberry framed by firm grape tannins and finishing with lavender and liquorice.

TESTALONGA DI ANTONIO PERRINO 2015, DOLCEACQUA DOC (\$35)

Established in 1961, this is one of the region’s most historic wineries but its wines aren’t for the faint of heart. Initial reductive notes blow off to reveal savoury hints of anchovy and olive. The palate is light but vibrant with strawberries, slight shoe polish, ashy minerality and a salty tang. It sounds weird but actually works.

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At first glance, establishing subzones may seem a bit premature for this relatively obscure region. However, viticulture here dates back to ancient Greek times and the crus have historic origins. Alas, vine growing was largely abandoned over the last century following the ravages of war and phylloxera. “There were 3,000 hectares of vineyards at the beginning of 1900; today there are only 90 hectares,” recounts sixth-generation grape grower Alessandro Anfosso of Tenuta Anfosso. When people returned to the land, viticulture was replaced with less onerous and more immediately remunerating floriculture. Massive greenhouses have encroached on vineyards throughout the hillsides.

Anfosso established his label in 2002 after piecing back together most of the parcels that had been divided up between his relatives over the years. His modest 5.5 hectares includes a plot in the Poggio Pini cru planted by his great-grandfather in 1888. Terre Bianche is slightly bigger, encompassing 8 hectares. It was in the 1980s that Rondelli’s father decided to return to viticulture as his primary occupation. “At that time, there was no electricity, water or telephone lines in our area of Arcagna and only two or three people were living from winemaking,” recalls Rondelli. As for Maccario, she took over from her father when he passed away in 2001. He had been bottling wine since 1972, the year in which the DOC of Rossese di Dolceacqua was established.

Like many of the region’s producers, all three offer cru bottlings and recognize the added value of MGAs. However, they are equally aware that, above all, it is the name Dolceacqua that needs to be disseminated. As a result, they belong to a group of 14 producers working together to establish greater awareness of the region.

One of their associates is Alessandro Anfosso’s cousin, Maurizio Anfosso, who makes wine under the brand Ka Mancinè. His label captures the essence of the region and its wines like no other. It depicts a man tiptoeing delicately on clouds while balancing a heavy basket of grapes on his back. Rossese di Dolceacqua is a wine that trips lightly and cheerfully across the palate. Yet producing this wine is gruelling work. In the vineyard, it goes without saying that everything must be done by hand. Furthermore, thin-skinned Rossese is a finicky grape sensitive to temperature and mildew among other things. In the winery, it is prone to reduction, which may produce off-aromas. “A high concentration of sulphur molecules can render its marine-like aromas overly fishy,” admits Rondelli. It requires careful handling and oxygen at just the right time. Preserving Rossese’s gorgeous perfume is of the utmost importance.

When Rossese is good, it’s very good and the very best may even be cellared for a decade or more. However, its youthful exuberance is difficult to resist, especially when served with a slight chill of 14 to 15°C. Refreshing to drink on its own, Rossese is equally food-friendly, complementing everything from vegetables and fish to poultry, lamb and cheese. It can even handle tricky ingredients like artichokes and tomatoes and is just divine with exotic cuisines.

Italy is simply heaving with fascinating wines that fly under the radar but I would absolutely put Rossese di Dolceacqua at the top of my list of reds to discover. And if you can get to the region, even better.

TERRE BIANCHE 2016, DOLCEACQUA DOC (\$25)

Rondelli standard Dolceacqua is a gorgeous textbook example of Rossese. Light yet penetrating, it is an explosion of red cherry and flowers accented by thyme and apricot. Juicy and dry with brisk, fresh tannin, this finishes with a pleasant bitterness.

TERRE BIANCHE TERRABIANCA 2015, DOLCEACQUA DOC (\$30)

The Terrabianca cru is characterized by blue marl rich in marine fossils. This is a rather austere and linear expression yet demonstrates tons of energy and length. It hints at balsamic herbs, cocoa and violets and finishes with a distinct saline note. It could do with a couple more years in the bottle.

TENUTA ANFOSSO POGGIO PINI 2014, ROSSESE DI DOLCEACQUA DOC SUPERIORE (\$25)

2014 was a cool year but Dolceacqua was spared the copious rainfall experienced in surrounding regions. The Poggio Pini cru boasts a high percentage of sand, typically giving round, elegant wines. Generous and concentrated, it offers red currant, mineral and black pepper with fine tannins.

KA MANCINÈ BERAGNA 2016, DOLCEACQUA DOC (\$30)

Ka Mancinè crafts two equally delicious cru bottlings but the northeast calcareous-rich Beragna is pure charm. Chockfull of pretty rose petals and pomegranate, it is lithe, graceful and succulent with barely-there tannins and a lovely modest 12.5%.
