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The Oltrepò Pavese: viticultural, oenological, and economic aspects

ENOLOGY IN THE OLTREPÒ PAVESE

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Some enological history

Since records began of Man's presence in the hills of the Oltrepò Pavese we have talked about grapes and wine.

The Etruscans, who dominated the area from the 7th to the 5th century B.C., were already making wine, drinking it, and also using the wine they produced in exchange for other goods.

However, it was only around 40 B.C. that the first concrete data are available on viticulture in these hills. Strabone, and later Plinio, refer to the area and describe it. Their admiration of the huge barrels used to preserve wine is the first reference to the use of large containers made of wood.

At that time, a technique to transform grapes and preserve wine was already being used. It is obvious that the history of the wine press is as old as wine itself. The earliest wine press was the human foot and grapes were pressed like this for many centuries. While we cannot consider this to be a technological innovation for that time, it is also true that a careful selection of grapes was already being made in the vineyard, and those involved in grape pressing had to observe rigorous rules. The "Calcadores" had to have very clean feet with no wounds or skin diseases. Before and during harvest, they kept to a strict diet, almost to the point of fasting, so as not to sweat too much into the must. They often sang popular songs as they worked.

According to the different pressing methods used, the must was drawn off and separated. Reference was already being made to the juice from the first pressing (*mustum lixivium*) and to various sub-products. The liquid obtained was put in containers that were kept in a special room (the modern wine cellar) and fermented through contact with some of the pomace. During this phase, the cellar man, if necessary, adds other substances to enrich or preserve the must: honey, boiled must, resins, etc.

Once the wine has been drawn off the vat, it was important to ensure that the containers were always completely full to the top in order to avoid oxidation.

One usually waited for the spring equinox before tasting the new wine so as to plan any treatments needed and to decide how long the wine could be kept.

It seems strange to us, but already 2,000 years ago some kind of rudimentary filtering was carried out using linen sacks. It was also usual to clarify the wine with milk or egg whites. It was already very common to blend different wines to improve quality.

During the dark ages, grapevines and wine survived above all thanks to the monasteries. The different invaders and the Langobards appreciated the delicate nectar of Bacchus but did not always understand how to use it, together with the often highly inappropriate choice of the vessel used to serve it (e.g. Alboino, who drank from a human skull!).

We do not read of grapevines and wine again until the early medieval period. From a technological point of view, nothing has changed since Roman times. However, different sources talk about the quality of the wines. In the area of Rovescala, in 1192, Count Anselmo paid off one of his debts with high quality "pure Bonarda wine" (*de meliori quod habuerit*).

From the end of the medieval period, we start to find renewed interest in grape growing and wine production, and more and more references are made. By now, the containers for fermentation and preservation are all made of wood. The first attempts are seen to produce wines vinified in white through brief contact with the pomace. The fermentation temperature for red musts is controlled by the addition of old wine. Filtering techniques are being improved and new fabrics are now available to improve cleaning standards both of the musts and the wines.

By this time, wine has been consecrated as a product for human consumption. Spice sellers promote it as a medicine, often making it stronger or more aromatic with the addition of medicinal herbs or spices.

Around the mid-1500s, Andrea Bacci, a doctor from Rome, travelled throughout the Italian peninsula to study Italian wines. When he reached the Oltrepò Pavese, he wrote: “the preferred grape is the Pignola which produces a spicy, sparkling, clear, strong tasting wine with a pleasant pine perfume. This red wine is as good as wines from central Italy”.

Interestingly, between 1609 and 1618, according to the Almo Collegio Borromeo in Pavia, wine accounts for a good 22% of the total money spent on food.

In 1743, the Oltrepò Pavese passes under Piedmontese control, with Voghera being the principal town in the Province. Shortly after (1760), the intendant of the House of Savoy, Perret d’Hauteville, wrote: “around a third of the land in the Province of Voghera is used to cultivate grapevines”. This is quite a lot, considering that the Province included all the area around Bobbio and the Siccomario.

The first specialist publications in the sector started to appear at this time, and the first real ampelographic description of the grape varieties cultivated in the Kingdom of Piedmont was produced in 1799 by Count Nuvolone.

At the beginning of the 19th century, Professors Carlo Verri and Filippo Re wrote about the importance of the grape variety on wine quality. They believe that the most important factor in producing good quality wine is the grape variety.

The world of wine making is in continuous evolution. Producers start to carry out fermentation in closed cisterns and to experiment on selected yeasts, and careful evaluation is made of the use of high and low temperatures.

The first prototype of the wine press appeared in 1796, but was very limited in its use. We had to wait until 1823 to see the first machinery that could successfully press grapes, created by Prof. Ignazio Lomeni.



Early 19th century grape press (care of the Montelio Estate).

Towards the middle of the 19th century, various producers of the Oltrepò Pavese started to bottle their wine and some of them also started to export it, with some success. The laboratories that carried out the analyses also started to widen their knowledge of local wines. Research carried out in 1872 on some wines produced in Mairano (Casteggio) confirmed their good quality.

In 1870, in the Oltrepò Pavese, approximately 1 MLN hl of wine were produced; production in the whole of Italy was 25 MLN hl.

In 1873, Carlo Giulietti listed the most important grapes in his book on the grape varieties cultivated in the Oltrepò Pavese. The red grape varieties were: “Pignola”, “Moradella”, “Ughetta di Canneto”, “Croatina”, “Dolcetto”, “Barbera”, etc. The white grape varieties were: “Malvasia”, “Trebbiano”, “Cortese”, “Muscat”, etc. The presence of these grapes fully justifies the descriptions of the wines of that period: lively, delicate, clear, harmonious, perfumed, etc.

The 19th century was full of initiatives and innovation in the world of viticulture but this period will pass into history for much more unpleasant reasons. The powdery and downy mildew from north

America created huge problems for grape growers. But worse was to come. At the turn of the 20th century, a small insect, the Phylloxera, destroyed all the European grape varieties.



Old cellar equipment

These enormous new problems obviously had a negative impact on wine production. With the planting of new vineyards, with the introduction of rootstocks that had not yet been experimented, with the ups and downs of the socio-political situation, along with economic problems, at the beginning of the 20th century, wine production in the Oltrepò Pavese was in stagnation. The re-establishment of the ampelographic platform led to, among other things, many changes in the local situation. The grape growers focused on grape varieties with a constant medium-abundant yield, also in response to market demand. In this way, the “Barbera” grape variety began to dominate until it covered over 50% of the land under vines. This was the beginning of hard times for the wine of the Oltrepò Pavese.

The Oltrepò Pavese today

The Oltrepò Pavese is grapevine, the Oltrepò Pavese is wine. One could say that this is an old story, but it is also and above all a current reality.

Many people, perhaps too many people, are cultivating grapevines on the pleasant hills that characterize this corner of Lombardy between Emilia and Piedmont. This is a unique area in Italy, made up of its people, who still have a down to earth and genuine approach to life, who transmit their character and energy to their wine. An area of rolling hills that continues for 40 km, a green landscape colored by the vineyards that cover approximately 15,000 Ha.

In 1970, grape growing in Oltrepò Pavese began to be regulated. Since then, much has been done to take advantage of the best characteristics of the land, and grape growers today have understood the importance of having a viticultural sector that is almost all covered by the Italian appellation-based regulations (DOC). Approximately 10,000 Ha under vines have been registered as DOC vineyards. The current situation is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 – Surface area registered as DOC vineyards.

DOC	Registered surface area (Ha)	%	Potential grape yield (kg)	Potential wine production (kg)
Oltrepò Pavese	2,121	21.4	23,331,000	15,185,100
O.P. Barbera	2,006	20.3	24,072,000	16,368,900

O.P. Bonarda	1,868	18.9	16,812,000	10,928,700
O.P. Buttafuoco	118	1.2	1,239,000	743,400
O.P. Sangue di Giuda	75	0.8	787,500	472,500
O.P. Cortese	51	0.5	561,000	364,600
O.P. Riesling	1,068	10.8	10,680,000	6,942,000
O.P. Muscat	895	9.0	9,845,000	6,891,150
O.P. Pinot	1,686	17.0	10,959,000	7,123,300
TOTAL	9,888	100	98,286,500	65,020,000

These data refer to grape varieties already in production on 31st December 1985. The vineyards established over recent years have, for the most part, been dedicated to grapes for the production of white wines such as “Pinot Noir” and “Cortese”, the latter in the western area of the Oltrepò Pavese. This means that, over the next few years, local grape growers will want to increase the production of grapes for the production of white wines to the level of those for the production of red wines.

However, the quantity of wine produced registered over recent years show that not many wine producers really use the guidelines (*Disciplinare Oltrepò Pavese*) to improve the quality of their products (Table 2).

Table 2 – Quantity of white and red wine produced (1983-1985).

	1983 (hl)	1984 (hl)	1985 (hl)
Table wine			
-white	59,396	52,002	50,634
-red	472,151	354,751	342,685
TOTAL	531,547	406,756	393,319
Table wine IGT			
-white	105,295	86,363	89,423
-red	235,085	167,023	164,545
TOTAL	341,010	253,386	253,968
DOC wine			
-white	123,837	95,288	104,395

-red	174,376	125,425	129,524
TOTAL	298,213	220,713	233,919

IGT= *Indicazione Geografica Tipica* (classification of region of origin)

As seen from Table 2, overall wine production in the Oltrepò Pavese averages around 1 MLN hl/year. These figures have not changed in the last 200 years, and are evidence of the long-established viticultural tradition of the area. This situation should reinforce the conviction of the local producers and their awareness of the fact that if they focus on quality it will be easier to re-launch this area once and for all.

Perhaps, given the current market demand and subsequent production requirements, it would be advantageous to see the reappearance among the Oltrepò Pavese wines of some small enological treasures that are only a faded memory. “Moradella”, “Pignola” or “Ughetta di Canneto” could help us relive fascinating and pleasurable tastes of a recent past. It would also be interesting to produce wines that could create a more international profile for local producers. The careful introduction of “Cabernet Sauvignon” or “Merlot” could provide pleasant alternatives to those traditional wines that are already consecrated on the local scene.

Consorzio Vini DOC Oltrepò Pavese

The ever growing need to create an up-to-date image for the wines of the Oltrepò Pavese has aroused local interest in setting up the *Consorzio Volontario dei Vini DOC*. Founded in 1977, replacing the by then outdated consortium to promote the wines of the Oltrepò Pavese hills, it has enjoyed the strong and constant support of the Assessorato Regionale all’Agricoltura, the Assessorato allo Sviluppo Economico of the C.C.I.A.A. (Chamber of Commerce).

The new consortium, in accordance with EU regulations, is made up of a council of 21 members: 7 for the co-operative wine growers’ associations, 5 for the producers, 5 for the dealers, and 4 for organizations and authoritative bodies in the sector. The chairman is Antonio Denari, a man of tenacious, unrelenting and qualified commitment. Working with him are the vice-chairmen and the hard-working director Edgardo Rovati.

The two fundamental objectives of the *Consorzio* are to guarantee the quality of the wine carrying its quality label through careful analytical and organoleptic analyses and to organize marketing campaigns so that the wine produced by the associated members is more widely known.

The organizational energy and the completely democratic process by which the *Consorzio* is run have in themselves made for a management approach that has, so far, hugely improved production quality, continued to increase the number of associated members and the number of bottles carrying this quality label.

A total of 42 hill town councils are involved in the production of DOC grapes and 9 wines are regulated by the guidelines of the *Consorzio*.



