

7 views | Jul 11, 2019, 11:26am

In Friuli, A Newly Proposed DOCG With Roots In Recent History


Susan H. Gordon Contributor @

Dining & Drinking

The what, where, when of wine, with special attention paid to Italy.

f



in



A view of Oslavia's hills and ponca soils, with the Ribolla Gialla vineyards of local estate winery Primosic. PRIMOSIC

The move is both a step forward and a return to generations past. Late last year, six winemakers from the Friulian village of Oslavia, today a slip of land at Italy's border with Slovenia and which for most of the 500 years before the 20th century began had been part of east-west crossroads under Austrian rule, proposed a new DOCG for their village's Ribolla Gialla wines.

The six-member group is the [Associazione Produttori Ribolla di Oslavia](#): Fiegl, Il Carpino, La Castellada, Promosic, Princic, Radikon. Of Oslavia's seven producers, Josko Gravner is missing. Biotype to Slovenia's Rebula and unrelated to Greece's Robola, Ribolla Gialla (the color mention is important: Ribolla Verde which is written about invariably as both clone and unrelated grape is considered lesser either way) has been grown in the hills of the Gorizia province, of which Oslavia is a *frazione* and home to a few hundred people, for centuries. An "ancient white from the Italy-Slovenia border" reads



Shock. È stato scoperto l'antidoto all'obesità!



I dietisti confermano: questa è una vera bomba dimagrante. Grazie ad essa la pancia flaccida e i fianchi spariscono già dopo 2 ore. Basta 1 porzione a digiuno. **Controlla>>>**

the subhead in the Jancis Robinson–led *Wine Grapes* of 2003. White-wine grapes vinified on their skins are traditional to both sides of the national border here, a small area that is the reference point for what outside markets call *orange wine*. The proposed Collio Ribolla di Oslavia/Ribolla di Oslavia DOCG would cover an area of about 300 hectares (about a third of which are now planted to Ribolla Gialla at an output of 200,000 bottles a year) included in the Collio Goriziano/Collio DOC which the proposed DOCG refers as the authority on anything not made explicit in its own pages, which currently number six. If it's approved, many Oslavian bottles would jump in label from IGP to DOCG, though a few are released under the Collio DOC, whose Ribolla Gialla wines can legally contain up to 15% other white grapes, must run from *straw yellow* to *golden yellow* in hue and be followed up first with a nose described as *characteristic* and then with a taste that's *dry*, and *fresh*. The DOCG proposal would result in wines that must be deeply golden (the word *gialla*, yellow, does not appear under mandated wine traits here) enough that they run from *amber* to *Pantone 159/c*, while nose and flavor are called to be characteristic *tipico*, a word better served by thinking of *this place* instead of the wine-homophonic *typical*. The proposed 12 abv minimum is a degree higher than Collio DOC's.

Measure of the grape in its territory: rigorous in youth, four, five bunches from one cane are not uncommon, Ribolla Gialla tends to calm down with age. It is best met in all stages by the famous *ponca* soils here, irregular layers of marl and sandstone formed 45 million years ago during the Eocene epoch and that manifests in vineyards as in low-fertility, mineral-rich crumbly schistose marl. Once it's harvested from this land, confidently chewy-skinned with flesh so savory and dense it was a covetable table grape for centuries, Ribolla Gialla answers diligently to each of its producers' ways of thinking. Their heels are after all, we'll see, digging into the *ponca* here just as firmly. The wines from the seven producers differ wildly in style: the thinking behind the new DOCG is not to change that, but to define and protect the traditions they're all working in. As the proposal stands today, here's what you'd get in any bottle of Oslavia DOCG: 100% Ribolla Gialla, at a yield of no more than 9 tons per hectare, juice no more than 70% of harvest weight; at least two months of skin contact with no temperature control during that time, save for emergency measure should the must reach more than 28 degrees celsius during its conversion to wine. At least a year in wood barrels larger than five hectoliters, at least six months in bottle before release.

Layered and schisty, *ponca* is easily dug into by roots searching downward for water which its soils do not hold. It is just as appealing for soldiers to dig into in their quests to build trenches and foxholes. In August of 1915 in the Battle of Gorizia on the Isonzo Front, Italian and Austro-Hungarian troops fought for control of that city. For twelve days, they faced each other across the tiny village of Oslavia, its south-facing slopes vineyard-terraced with the Ribolla

Gialla that had been cultivated here for centuries, and loaded the weapons that this newly technoindustrial age had made, machine guns, mortars, mines, with millions of rounds sent to rip through where the entrenched sides huddled, killing 51,000 Italian soldiers and 42,000 Austro-Hungarian ones and leaving most of the hill town a sulfur-yellow mound that rose barely one meter from where footsteps had once been taken. Among the ruined buildings and hills once rich in native grapes, a disembodied wall stood, painted white as the rest of it, a home, had been and still flanked by two trees, horror made everyday domestic, an unflappable white cover needlessly and pointlessly held taut. With the macabre humor that marks life in trenches and funeral parlors, the grotesque was turned to memorial, the pretty landscape there now carries the name Lenzuolo Bianco, *white sheet*.

If surviving can be thought of as overcoming, what survived those days were twin facets of the Oslavian character: determination and Ribolla Gialla vines. After the war, Oslavians returned, and with power to match the forces that had tried to erase it, rebuilt the village with what it was before in mind as guide, soils carried back to be deposited in barer amounts at hilltops, more deeply mid-slope, terraces restacked and in them new vineyards planted from cuttings of the old Ribolla Gialla vines that had survived as well. Today, among the vineyarded hills, local place names mark that the interruption happened. There's Lenzuolo Bianco. There's the *Ossario*, a stone monument built under Mussolini that houses a series of crypts filled with the bones of almost 57,000 Italian soldiers alongside a few hundred from the Austro-Hungarian side. In stark difference with other villages here, there is, Gigi Brozzini writes in a [promotional book](#) sponsored by the Associazione, no church, no piazza, no *campanile*.

YOU MAY ALSO LIKE

Grads of
Life **BRANDVOICE**
**How The Second
Chance Business
Coalition Powers
Second Chance
Employment**

Grads of
Life **BRANDVOICE**
**How The Second
Chance Business
Coalition Powers
Second Chance
Employment**

Capital
One **BRANDVOICE**
**Top Independence Day
Fireworks
Extravaganzas Of 2019**

To Oslavian's talisman words *ponca* and *Ribolla* add *Bora*, the gustful drainage wind from the east that rushes down both sides of the Adriatic coast and descends continually here, keeping the grapes dry and rot-free while 1,400 millimeters of rain fall annually, the greater half during growing season. Ribolla Gialla resists oidium and peronospera more convincingly than many other grapes do, but it does not hold its ground against other kinds of mildew. Helping the Bora, sun that strikes the Adriatic sea 20 km south of here reflects back on these marly hillsides and onto the sunlight-loving Ribolla Gialla vines, whose back the Giulia prealps have against the winter's cold northern winds.

Today, the DOCG proposes, the village's "winemaking philosophies and typologies find their top expression in the yellow Ribolla grape . . . which time has made synecdoche of the Oslavian territorio." Ambient yeasts only, the DOCG insists, no chemical herbicides, a maximum of 90g/l total sulfites, all in the name of the long-lastingness that maceration grants wines of Ribolla Gialla grown well. There's another story told about how Lenzuolo Bianco got its name: for the linen hung there as truce during the war, so that the Oslavians could work regardless while the shells fell. The proposed disciplinare includes those cool heads in the Oslavia territorio's human factors. Their willfulness was stronger, it seeks to make official, than even the war's attempt at obliteration. Armed with it, the villagers remade by hand what had formed over the millions of years that came before 1916. No other ties between a place and its people, those pieces we go in search of when we decide to drink a wine, can be taken this literally.

Fourth-generation Oslavia producer Marko Primosic shared a tasting of his Ribolla Gialla wines, vintage 2009 to 2015 and for now anyway marked Riserva, in Manhattan earlier this year. The grapes, he explained are harvested at the end of October, after the reds. The idea is skin and pip maturation, not sugars. Then spontaneous fermentation, no temperature control, at least four weeks maceration; before a minimum of six months in bottle come at least one and a half years in large barrel. Slavonian oak, as per tradition, he said. Per history, in Oslavia, Italian, Slovenian, German are all spoken. The smells that drift out from the houses are clues into this tiny, ancient, junction of ethnicities and cultures: they'll tell you about pork from the German households, Primosic said, fish inside the Adriatic-minded Italians', soup's warm earthy mix within Slovenian ones. At home Marko speaks a blend, mixing Italian words with Slovenian grammar, stirring together German and Italian. The latter language took over from German in schools after the second world war, but his grandparents never spoke it. The Primosics have been in Collio for 700 years.

In 1982, food and wine philosopher, there is really no other way to describe him correctly, [Luigi Veronelli](#) told Oslavia producers: work on Ribolla Gialla, it's the real story of this part of the world. As part of that mission, "we are still working on protocol," Primosic said. For those with general orange-wine worries that the winemaking technique might mask or destroy any tale of territorio, Brozzoni writes: "The ideas of the 'School of Oslavia' are simple and intriguing: grapes are composed of skin, pulp, and seeds; each and every part contains unique and indispensable elements for the definition of the character of the variety and its territory. The entire berry, therefore, must be put to use, and used completely."

"We know the skins say important things," said Primosic. "Grappa makers knew the importance of the skins, too. [Nonino](#) knew." Twenty kilometers to Oslavia's west, in the 1970s [the 1897 Friuli distillery](#) already knew it made

sense to lean on their native grapes, and on the specific vineyards where those grapes grew best. Their 1973 single-vineyard Picolit grappa was followed one year later by one made from Ribolla Gialla, both grapes then in danger of extinction. In 1975, [Nonino](#) created the Premio [Nonino](#) Risit d'Aur-Barbatella d'Oro in support of Friuli's local grapes and appointed a six-judge panel which included Veronelli to award it. "Part of the winemaker's skill is to unlock the flavors in the skins," Primosic said. In 1964, his father founded the Collio denomination, which would become DOC in 1968, one year after the current Italian DOP system kicked in. No-skin-contact was the fashion then, maceration was from *his* father's time and was set aside as the twentieth century ticked past its halfway point with visions of pale-and-clear white wines built on the tastes of markets outside the village's borders and on a new crop of technoindustrial creations: the tanks made of that between-world-wars development, stainless steel, and the new wine styles those introduced, led by new possibilities like temperature control and greater volume.

It took the fourth generation, Marko's son Nicola, to bring skin contact back into his family's thinking. It's the fashion again though this time what's popular is a reclaiming of what came before that other vision and not just a quest after disintegrated style, so the new wines differ from those of Marko's grandfather and come with a thought-through accounting of the years since he'd made his. To plant vineyards, Marko's father had had to clear mines from the hillside. It's hard to not see the rebuilt hills, created in mourning and with the hope of resurrection, embedded in what the proposal excludes in its ban on flatlands and valley bottom for vineyards: vines located on the flatter land that's come about through hills settling, adjusting, are allowed.

In the proposed DOCG, winemaking and aging must take place in Oslavia, "however, taking into account the traditional situations, it is allowed that these operations are carried out in the entire territory of the Municipalities of Gorizia and San Floriano del Collio even if only partially included in the defined area." Oslavia's seven producers line the SP17, the small strada provinciale that leads to Lenzuolo Bianco, where it takes on the temporary name of Località Lenzuolo Bianco and intersects with other Località roads called Ossario, Oslavia, Madonnina di Oslavia. Along the 18-minute walk from [Il Carpino](#) to [Primosic](#), lie, north to south, [Radikon](#), [Gravner](#), [Fiegl](#). Another 9 minutes on foot south to [La Castellada](#), from there another 14 minutes walk to [Dario Princic](#).

"The story of orange wine is still very young," said Primosic. Should it be approved, the Robolla di Oslavia DOCG might set the village's interruption as where the knot that ties Oslavia's tradition to its future lies, and let Oslavian Ribolla Gialla grow whole and old again.

Follow me on [Twitter](#).