

SOAVE'S *Volcanic Revival*

Special Report by STEPHANIE JOHNSON

Unless you're a Baby Boomer, you've probably never seen the TV ad campaign run by Italy's Bolla wine company in the 1970s and '80s, but you can still catch it on YouTube. They show a nattily dressed Franco Bolla living *la dolce vita* and saying things like, "Why do so many people prefer my Soave Bolla? . . . Taste." The ads may have elicited howls of hilarity from Spanish speakers, who had their own interpretation of *suave bola*, but the persistent pleas to enjoy Franco's Soave Bolla met with considerable success and helped propel Soave into becoming America's best-selling Italian DOC wine, surpassing even sales of Chianti.

The Soave production zone lies about 15 miles east of Verona and was one of Italy's earliest officially recognized wine zones, first mapped in 1927. The original zone occupied hillside vineyards around the towns of Soave and Monteforte d'Alpone, and roughly corresponds to today's Soave Classico subzone. But in 1968, when the Soave DOC was created, the hot export market prompted officials to expand far beyond those hillsides. They added thousands of acres on the flat, alluvial plains where yields could be pushed ever higher, giving precedence to quantity over quality. By the 1990s, Soave had become a victim of its own success, churning out too many thin, insipid wines and giving pinot grigio an opening to take over the top spot for Italian whites in the US market.

Now the tide may be turning again, as pinot grigio runs into resistance from sommeliers and adventurous consumers seeking out terroir-driven wines with compelling stories. Soave, which has undergone a quiet renaissance since those early ad campaigns, can offer both, and tremendous value to boot.

In 2000, the Soave *consorzio* initiated a vineyard zoning project that culminated last June with the release of a new map identifying 33 geographical units, unofficially referred to as 'crus' and officially called *Unità Geografiche Aggiuntive*, or UGAs. Producers using grapes grown within a particular UGA may include the name—as well as the name of an individual vineyard within it—on their bottles. All of the UGAs are located in hillside sites, including 29 in the Soave Classico subzone, the historical heart of Soave production.

Soils in the hillside vineyards are primarily dark basalt or tufa from volcanic origins, with some pockets of white, chalky limestone from the ancient lagoon that once covered the region. Those soil types can give wines with distinctly different characteristics, a phenomenon that John Szabo, MS, refers to as "Soave's split geological personality" in his 2016 book, *Volcanic Wines: Salt, Grit and Power*. Although volcanic activity here ended some 25 million years ago, wines grown in volcanic soils are increasingly fashionable today, a fact that is helping to fuel

renewed interest in Soave.

Producers like Pieropan, one of the region's oldest family-owned estates, were paying attention to terroir differences long before publication of the new UGA map. During the years that many Soave producers were chasing quantity, Leonildo Pieropan remained firmly in the quality camp. In 1971 he released Calvarino, Soave Classico's first single-vineyard wine, made with grapes grown on basaltic slopes. A few years later, Pieropan produced La Rocca from late-harvested grapes grown on chalky, calcareous soils on the hill below Soave's medieval castle. La Rocca's rich texture and honeyed flavors offer an extreme contrast to Calvarino's firm austerity, demonstrating Soave's split geographical personality and the range of wine styles that are possible in the hands of a quality-minded producer.

The Gini family has been cultivating grapes around the town of Monteforte since the 17th century. They have the distinction of owning some of Soave's oldest vines, rooted in Salvarenza, a vineyard with volcanic soils and veins of limestone in the Frosca UGA. The family first bottled Salvarenza as a single-vineyard wine in 1990, and it is their most intense Soave, gaining complexity during one year of aging in used French oak barrels and large casks.

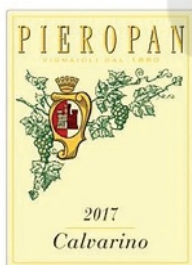
The Tessari family is also in the Soave Classico zone, producing wines under the Suavia label. Rosetta Tessari and her daughters, Valentina, Meri and Alessandra, farm organically, tending 62 acres of vines, including their single-cru Monte Carbonare in the Carbonare UGA, grown in dark basaltic soils. Inama also produces a Soave Classico from Carbonare, and two Soaves from the Foscari UGA.

The Filippi family is based just outside the Soave Classico zone, in Colli Scaligeri. They farm vines in the Castelcerino cru, which boasts the highest elevations (up to 1,250 feet) in the entire Soave zone. Windy conditions and a pronounced diurnal shift preserve acidity in the garganega grapes, and Filippo Filippi emphasizes that freshness by vinifying all of his wines in stainless steel, while adding textural richness and density through extended lees contact.

Of the more than 4.2 million cases of Soave produced last year, much of it remains simple, swillable and forgettable. Buyers who want to experience characterful, terroir-driven Soaves should seek out producers who have established quality track records. In the face of competition from native Italian white wines like verdicchio, fiano, carricante and timorasso, which have begun to capture attention from wine drinkers looking for authenticity, Soave may be overlooked because of an outdated view of the wine. Yet the best Soaves have a great story to tell and plenty of authenticity to offer. They deserve a place at the table and on every well-curated Italian wine list.

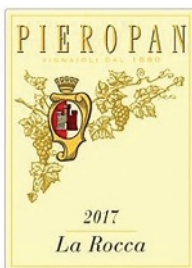
| Gini

2015 Soave Classico Contrada Salvarenza Vecchie Vigne The Gini family selects fruit for this wine from Salvarenza, a vineyard with volcanic and limestone soils that harbor Gini's oldest vines, some up to 140 years of age. Sandro Gini matches the old-vine intensity of the fruit by aging the wine for a year on the lees in a mix of barriques and large barrels, where the wine gains subtle spice notes and a rich texture that complements deep flavors of golden apple and pear. Despite its density, the wine feels firm and fresh, capable of aging well for at least five years. *Skurnik Wines & Spirits, NY*



| Pieropan

2017 Soave Classico Calvarino The dark volcanic soils of Pieropan's Calvarino plot yielded a beautifully floral and fresh wine in the 2017 growing season. Aged for one year in cement tanks, the wine shows flavors of lime and green papaya that ride a zip line of acidity through a long finish, picking up notes of citrus zest along the way. Its finely etched flavors and taut acidity suggest good aging potential. *LUX Wines, Modesto, CA*



| Pieropan

2017 Soave Classico La Rocca La Rocca is a plush counterpart to Pieropan's firm, floral Calvarino, also recommended here. Made from late-picked grapes briefly macerated before fermentation, this 2017 rested on the fine lees in wooden barrels (500 to 2,000 liters) for one year. It's rich and honeyed, with gingery flavors of baked apple and yellow pear. *LUX Wines, Modesto, CA*

| Inama

2016 Soave Classico Vigneto Du Lot This is a rich and honeyed rendering of garganega, fermented and aged in barriques (30 percent new). Its deep golden color matches weighty flavors of spiced apple and praline, and the wine takes on notes of white chocolate and licorice as it opens with exposure to air. Match its robust flavors with pasta in a creamy pancetta sauce. *Dalla Terra, Napa, CA*

| Inama

2017 Soave Classico Vigneti di Carbonare Carbonare offers a lively contrast to Inama's oak-aged Vigneto du Lot (also recommended here). Its scents of white blossoms and lemon curd lead into brisk flavors of kiwi and lime, the wine propelled by mouthwatering acidity. While it's enjoyable now, the taut structure might benefit from a year or two of cellaring. *Dalla Terra, Napa, CA*

| Suavia

2017 Soave Classico Monte Carbonare The Tessari family owns just under 20 acres in the Carbonare cru, the vines on a northeast-facing slope directly across a valley from the winery. True to the cru's name, Carbonare's soils are volcanic basalt, a fact echoed by the wine's stark, matte-black label. The family vinifies the wine entirely in stainless steel to give full expression to the site, yielding a wine that is bright and floral, with chiseled flavors of green apple and salty lime. *Leonardo LoCascio Selections/Winebow Imports, NY*

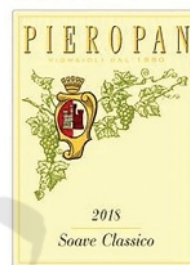


| Filippi

2018 Soave Colli Scaligeri Castelcerino Filippo Filippi and his partner, Paola Giagulli, tend 37 acres of vines surrounded by forest, at high-elevations in the Castelcerino cru, just outside of the Soave Classico zone. Filippi ferments this wine with ambient yeasts and pumps the juice over frequently in the first few days of fermentation to introduce oxygen; the result is a plush, honeyed wine with a hint of cider that contrasts nicely with the crisp lemon and apple flavors. *North Berkeley Imports, Berkeley, CA*

| Gini

2018 Soave Classico (Best Buy) Gini's Soave Classico is a fantastic value, combining the concentration given by old vines (averaging 70 years of age) with a buoyant, floral freshness from the moderate 2018 growing season. A blend of fruit from five crus, each vinified separately in stainless-steel vats, the wine offers flavors of pear, yellow apple and green almond propelled by mouthwatering acidity that invites another sip, and then another glass. *Skurnik Wines & Spirits, NY*



| Pieropan

2018 Soave Classico (Best Buy) Scents of orange blossom and jasmine lead into flavors of juicy pear, crisp apple and clementine in Pieropan's Soave Classico. Its soft, fresh flavors and cool acidic lift make it a versatile partner for delicate white fish dishes as well as spicy stir-fries. *LUX Wines, Modesto, CA*

| Filippi

2018 Soave Colli Scaligeri Vigne della Brà The 70-year-old vines at Vigne della Brà, rooted in volcanic basalt and clay, yielded a taut, zesty 2018. Scents of orange blossom merge with flavors of mandarin, golden pear and honey, with hints of toasty lees and salinity. *North Berkeley Imports, Berkeley, CA*

| Suavia

2018 Soave Classico (Best Buy) From vines grown in volcanic soils at elevations nearing 1,000 feet, this 2018 is fresh with pale flavors of fig and green almond edged in mild spice, and a mouthwatering finish. *Leonardo LoCascio Selections/Winebow Imports, NY*

| Inama

2018 Soave Classico Vin Soave (Best Buy) This is a nice introduction to Soave Classico, with fresh, floral flavors of white peach and yellow plum. Notes of lemon zest balance the creamy texture. *Dalla Terra, Napa, CA* ■