



L'Antica Quercia

THE BARREL TASTING ROOM NEAR THE ANCIENT OAK TREE THAT GAVE L'ANTICA QUERCIA ITS NAME. THE CLOUDY WINE, CLAUDIO FRANCAVILLA'S "A," IS BOTTLED WITH ITS LEES IN THE NEW PROSECCO SUI LIEVITI BRUT NATURE CATEGORY.

PARTLY CLOUDY, *fully dry*

Sui Lieviti Transforms Traditional Prosecco Col Fondo

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In the hills of Conegliano Valdobbiadene, there's a new take on the origins of Prosecco.

CLAUDIO FRANCAVILLA TRUDGED STEADILY ALONG THE ROAD AS MY CAR passed him on the way back to the cellar. The owner of L'Antica Quercia had come out to greet me in the vineyards on this brisk, windy day in May, but declined a ride back due to COVID restrictions. His modesty seemed indicative of a man of the land. It was only later I learned that Francavilla was not a lifelong farmer; instead, he had left a career as a global business executive to devote himself to an agrarian life.

"Mine is not a family of winemakers for generations," Francavilla admits. His father, Luigi, left his home village in Puglia to seek opportunity in northern Italy, and eventually became the director of Luxottica, the luxury eyewear company that counts Ray Ban, Oakley and Oliver Peoples among its brands. Francavilla followed his father, Luigi, into the business world, working at Luxottica for a quarter century and traveling the world as head of product development for emerging markets.

In 2001, Luigi Francavilla bought a 20-acre property in the Scomigo hills north of Conegliano, at the eastern edge of the Prosecco DOCG zone. The property is framed by two ancient oak trees that overlook the vineyards as they flow down the steep hillsides, and offers stunning views of the Dolomites to the northeast, the source of constant winds that freshen the vines. He bought it as a real estate investment and a reminder of his roots in the southern Italian countryside, but it turned into something more. Claudio began visiting the estate once a month, then once a week. Finally, in 2015, he felt the irresistible "call of the old oak" and decided to leave his high-flying career and change his life completely.

The estate had begun producing Martinotti method Prosecco, "following the market demand," Claudio Francavilla says. Under the Martinotti method (also called Charmat), still white wines gain their sparkle from a second fermentation in large, pressurized stainless-steel tanks called autoclaves. In the mid-20th century, this became the standard production method for Prosecco. But Francavilla had a different idea; he wanted to produce a wine according to the old traditions of the region, and his first project at L'Antica Quercia was to make a Col Fondo wine. "Col Fondo is the heritage of our hills," he notes. "In every vine family of Conegliano Valdobbiadene, the production of Col Fondo frizzante was a must, a rule followed by every farmer."

Before the advent of autoclaves, growers in the Conegliano Valdobbiadene hills produced sparkling wines in a low-tech way. Cold winds would sweep down from the Dolomites after harvest, chilling down the cellars and stopping fermentation in the vats before all of the sugar in the must was consumed. When the wine was bottled in the spring and the temperatures began to rise, the residual sugar and yeasts in the bottle would react, creating a natural carbonation. The spent yeast cells would then settle at the bottom ("fondo") of the bottle, creating a slightly cloudy wine that became known as Col Fondo.

Col Fondo wines tend to be rustic and bone dry, smelling more of bread crusts than flowers, with tangy lemon flavors wrapped in a yeasty texture. And while most Prosecco is all about predictability and immediacy, every bottle of Col Fondo can be slightly different as the wine continues to interact with the yeasts after bottling. If you love the softly

fruity, lightly sweet Prosecco that you can sip at the beach or mix with orange juice, Col Fondo wines would probably not be your thing. But if you're a fan of hazy, unfiltered craft beer, Col Fondo might be right up your alley.

"I decided to approach Col Fondo because I strongly believe in the power of the terroir," says Francavilla, "the power of wines that can express the characteristics of the place the grapes come from." His first Col Fondo wine, called Su Alto, was fully dry and frizzante, "a sort of 'wilder' wine compared to our other classic wines, an outsider but simple and honest," as he describes it. The yeast cells, which remain in the bottle after the second fermentation, are the natural preservatives for the wine, but the amount of sugar available at the beginning of second fermentation is relatively low, limiting the population of yeasts and generating only 2.5 bars of pressure (frizzante). So, Col Fondos are typically closed with a crown cap to prevent any ingress of oxygen.

Francavilla produced 3,000 bottles of his first Su Alto in 2015; the wine now accounts for 18,000 of the winery's 70,000-bottle annual production. Like a number of other producers, Francavilla began to look for a way to push the Col Fondo style further, to create a wine with greater complexity that would result if the population of yeasts grew robust enough to achieve a spumante level of pressure.

"The wave started from the base," he told me, "mostly from small wineries led by passionate people that grow their own grapes and produce wine from them."

In August of 2019, the Conegliano Valdobbiadene Prosecco Consortium announced the creation of a new category of Prosecco DOCG wines—Sui Lieviti (on the lees). According to Innocente Nardi, president of the Consortium, "In the last years, there was a growing interest towards ancestral wines in different countries, especially by the sommelier community and by all the people interested in natural wines." He believes that, even if the production of Col Fondo only amounts to 200,000 bottles—a drop in the bucket of the 9.2 million DOCG bottles produced in 2019—"it represents a really interesting

niche inside our DOCG." The new Prosecco category, Sui Lieviti, must be refermented in bottle up to spumante level of pressure (4.5 to 5 bars), and must be Brut Nature, with zero residual sugar. The idea of this spumante version of Col Fondo, according to Nardi, is to enhance the traditional Col Fondo style and give it more complexity.

Francavilla named his newest Col Fondo spumante "A," which might stand for Ancestrale, Anarchist, Ancient or Avant-gardist, all terms he uses to describe it. The grapes for A are the last harvested by his team, and they come from vines planted on a steep, limestone-rich, west-facing slope, an exposition that concentrates the sugars. He says the grapes must be very ripe because they need to supply all of the sugar to generate a spumante wine in one long, two-step process, a modified version of the *metodo ancestrale*. Compared to Su Alto, a frizzante wine, A generates more spent lees in creating the spumante level of pressure, and those lees remain in the bottle, enhancing the wine's flavors of tangy lemon, tangerine and green apple with notes of bread crust, an effect that increases when the bottle is agitated. "It's a recipe that plays with ingredients, time and temperature in a different and more complex way compared to Su Alto," Francavilla has found. First produced in the 2017 vintage, A will be labeled under the DOCG's new Sui Lieviti Brut Nature as of the 2019 vintage.

EIGHTEEN MILES TO THE WEST OF L'ANTICA QUERCIA, IN THE STEEP hills near Valdobbiadene, the Adami family has been making Col Fondo frizzante wines for more than 100 years.

"That kind of wine always existed here in Valdobbiadene and never disappeared, really. It's actually very common locally," says Franco

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—CLAUDIO FRANCAVILLA,
L'ANTICA QUERCIA



Adami

FRANCO ADAMI AND HIS SON FABRIZIO ARE THE THIRD AND FOURTH GENERATION AT ADAMI. THE FAMILY HAS MADE COL FONDO WINES CONTINUOUSLY FOR MORE THAN A CENTURY.





Ca' de Zago

CHRISTIAN ZANATTA, AN ARTISANAL PRODUCER, MAKES A FRIZZANTE COL FONDO AS HIS GRANDFATHER DID. FARMING HIS 16 ACRES OF VINES BIODYNAMICALLY, HE KEEPS COWS, CHICKENS AND BEES ON HIS FAMILY'S ESTATE.



Adami, a third-generation proprietor of Adami. He notes that when his grandfather Abele Adami founded the winery in 1920, most Prosecco was made either as Col Fondo (sparkling) or *tranquillo* (still). Franco's father, Adriano, took the family into the modern phase of Prosecco production in the 1950s, bringing his base wine to other producers for the second fermentation in autoclaves. By the 1980s, Franco and his brother, Armando, had modernized the cellar and brought in the technology to make Martinotti-method Prosecco in their own facility.

Still, Franco Adami says, "The success is in the Martinotti method Prosecco. The *tradition* is in the Col Fondo wine." In fact, Adami's Col Fondo wine reflects the evolution of wine classification in the Valdobbiadene hills: It became a Valdobbiadene DOC in 1969, when the DOC was first created; then Valdobbiadene DOCG in 2009 when the Prosecco zone was expanded; and now, with the 2019 vintage and the creation of the new DOCG category, it becomes Sui Lieviti Brut Nature, which Franco sees as a step forward from the traditional (frizzante) Col Fondo style, combining bottle-fermented wine with the quality and complexity that comes with spumante wines.

The Adami team waits until the end of harvest to pick glera for Sui Lieviti, as they hope for more alcohol, body and lower acidity in the base spumante. The goal, according to Franco Adami, is to make a wine that can age a bit and that will benefit from resting in the bottle with the yeast. The cloudy appearance and aromas of freshly baked bread are distinctly different from Adami's six other Prosecco wines, yet his attention to detail and precision show through in the wine's lovely balance between leesy richness and the fresh lemon and crisp apple flavors.

FRANCESCO DRUSIAN, A THIRD-GENERATION WINEMAKER, BROUGHT his family's business into the modern era, expanding the holdings from 39 to 198 vineyard acres and bottling their first Martinotti-method Prosecco in 1986. He now makes about 1.5 million bottles of Prosecco a year, the vast majority of it in the Martinotti method, but he continues to make a bottle-fermented frizzante wine as his grandfather had since the late 19th century, calling it Colfondo (in fact, he registered that name in 2002).

Drusian has developed his own method to produce a new wine for the Sui Lieviti category: After the grapes are pressed and the juice is going through the first fermentation, he sends the pomace to a lab at the *Istituto Agrario San Michele* in Alto Adige, where they extract the natural tannins and yeasts. He uses the yeast extract to start the second fermentation, which he says "gives us the opportunity to obtain a wine with indigenous characteristics, which reflect the terroir and its peculiarities." He also adds a very small quantity of the tannin extract, which is a natural antioxidant and allows him to limit the amount of sulfur dioxide he uses. Drusian's 2019 Sui Lieviti, the first vintage of this wine, is luminous and lightly cloudy, with fresh lemon flavors and brisk saline notes. He associates the wine's character with its prolonged interaction with the yeasts.

THE VALDOBBIADENE HILLS HAVE THEIR TRADITIONAL ARTISANS AS well. Christian Zanatta is a member of what Claudio Francavilla calls "the new wave of young passionate winemakers" who have advanced the Col Fondo style and helped keep the tradition alive.

Zanatta's great-grandfather bought the property on the outskirts of Valdobbiadene in 1924, and the vines now average 50 years of age, with some as old as 90. Until recently, when Zanatta added a metodo classico wine in 2010, Col Fondo frizzante had been the only style of wine his family made since 1929. According to Zanatta, that adherence to tradition created difficulties as the market for Prosecco moved toward Martinotti-method wines. By the mid-1990s, the family saw their sales to bars and restaurants plummet. "Nobody wanted the Col Fondo wine



A VINEYARD NEAR THE DRUSIAN WINERY, WHERE SOME OF THE GLERA VINES ARE 100 YEARS OLD

with the golden color anymore," he says. Around that time, his grandfather, Giuseppe Zago, visited a modern winemaking facility to investigate the Martinotti method and taste the wines. When he came back, according to Zanatta, his grandfather was not impressed, saying, "As long as I'm here, I will never do the wine in this system." Giuseppe continued to sell his wines little by little until he passed away in 2008.

Zanatta has maintained his grandfather's traditional practices, with some modifications. He keeps cows, chickens and bees on the property, and farms his 16 acres of vines biodynamically. In the cellar, his approach is more hands-off than the tightly controlled conditions of the Martinotti method. His grapes are mostly old-vine glera, with small amounts of perera, verdiso and bianchetta Trevigiana; he allows his wine to ferment spontaneously in cement tanks, then leaves them on the skins for two days. That skin contact allows the wine to gain structure and proteins that help him clarify it without fining. He keeps the wine in cement all winter, where it undergoes malolactic conversion spontaneously—a process that Zanatta admits is somewhat unorthodox for Prosecco, but essential for his approach. "For me, the malolactic fermentation is a question of stability in the wine. We don't refrigerate to stop the malolactic or use sulfur dioxide for a stuck malolactic fermentation. It's a question of making the wine do what we want, or letting the wine make its way, logically protecting it from the air." A second alcoholic fermentation takes place in bottle and he leaves the lees intact, creating a hazy, golden-hued wine that is bone dry yet packed with complex flavors of green apple and orange marmalade couched in a rich, creamy texture.

When asked if he will adapt his Col Fondo frizzante wine for the new Sui Lieviti category, or perhaps make a new wine in this style, Zanatta demurs. "*Prosecco di Valdobbiadene frizzante a rifermentazione naturale in bottiglia* has been written on the label of our bottles since 1929," he points out. He has kept this original label, except to add his and his sister Marika's signatures. The wine has always gone into a lightweight bottle with a straight cork rather than the mushroom cork and cage required for the higher-pressure spumante wines. "This is for me the origin, the present and future of the wine," he says.

For Zanatta, and for others who make Col Fondo wines, classifications are not the point. Nor are consumer tastes—even if those tastes are tending toward dryer wines with links to tradition and terroir. Growers don't produce Col Fondo wines for commercial reasons. As Zanatta notes, "I think it is important to believe in this kind of wine that is not made just for trade." ●