

Northern Italy

Northern Italy produces a wide range of wine styles from the full-bodied tannic reds of Barolo to the delicate white wines of Soave. All this is possible

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because of diverse geography and an incredible number of unique local grape varieties. This chapter will cover the regions of Alto Adige, Trentino, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Veneto and Piemonte.

CLIMATE AND GRAPE GROWING

The vineyard regions of Northern Italy are located in the foothills of the Alps and on the extensive plain of the River Po. Overall, the area has a moderate climate with dry, short summers. The Alps form a barrier that extends the length of the north Italian border, and shelter the vineyards from rain. Local rivers, including the Po, and glacial lakes, such as Lake Garda, provide a moderating influence to inland areas. Areas that lie close to the sea can have higher levels of rainfall, meaning that fungal diseases can be a problem.

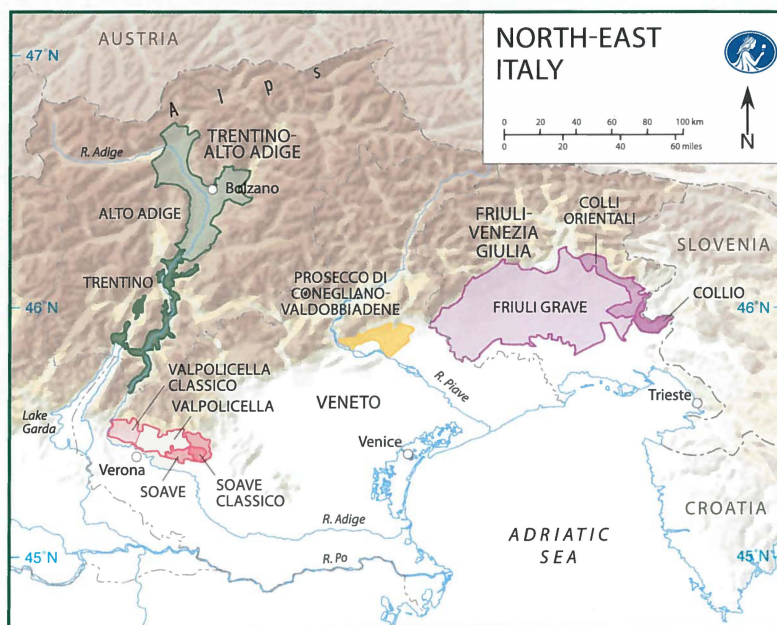
The vineyards in the north of Italy were traditionally planted with high yielding vines at low densities. A complex trellising system called *pergola* was common. In this system the vine canopy is trained high with the fruit hanging down below a horizontal canopy of leaves. This protects the grapes from sunburn as well as allowing air to circulate, minimising the risk of rot. Pergolas are still used when high acidity and low sugar levels are required (such as for sparkling wine grapes) and also when wines are to be made from dried grapes, which need to be free from damage and disease. However, higher density plantings using VSP training are now more common.

TRENTINO-ALTO ADIGE

Alto Adige

Centred around the town of Bolzano in the foothills of the Alps, Alto Adige is Italy's most northerly wine region. The vineyards are planted on terraces on the south-east and south-west-facing valley sides of the River Adige. The region has a moderate climate, with short, dry summers and low rainfall during the growing season. Most of the vineyards experience a large diurnal range due to their altitudes, making them ideal for the production of aromatic whites and elegant, light-bodied reds.

The most notable white wine here is **Pinot Grigio**. It tends to be made in a dry style, with a light to medium body, high acidity and citrus and green fruit flavours (for further details on how this variety is typically produced see section *Pinot Gris/Grigio* in Chapter 8). Gewürztraminer, Chardonnay and Pinot Blanc are the next most important white grapes. Red wine production is dominated by Italian variety Schiava, producing light fruity wines with low to medium tannins and flavours of raspberries and plums. Almost all wines are labelled under the regional name of **Alto Adige DOC**.



Trentino

Trentino is located directly to the south of Alto Adige. The valley is wider here than further north and vines are planted on the valley floor as well as the slopes on both sides of the valley. Trentino has dry summers and low rainfall during the growing season, similar to Alto Adige, but overall the vineyards experience a slightly warmer climate. This is due to Trentino's more southerly latitude, the greater number of vineyards at lower altitudes, and the mountains to the west side of the valley that protect the region from the cooling influences of Lake Garda.

The main varieties are Chardonnay and **Pinot Grigio**. The wines made from grapes grown on the valley floor tend to be medium-bodied with medium acidity and ripe stone fruit flavours. Those made from grapes grown at higher altitudes are more similar to the whites from Alto Adige. Merlot and the Italian variety Teroldego are the two most planted black grapes, grown mainly on the mid-slopes and valley floor. The latter grape produces wines with a deep colour, medium to high tannins, high acidity and a medium to full body with aromas of black fruit. The wines are normally matured in oak, and the

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1500 m+
1000–1500 m
500–1000 m
200–500 m
100–200 m
0–100 m

Vineyards in Alto Adige set against a mountainous backdrop.



best examples have the ability to age. Most wines are labelled under the regional name of **Trentino DOC**.

FRIULI-VENEZIA GIULIA

The wine region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia is located in northern Italy's eastern corner. The most northerly vineyards in the region are located in the foothills of the Alps. The climate is moderate and continental, cooled by cold air from the mountains. The vineyards in the south of the region are based on the flat plain near the Adriatic Sea and experience a warm maritime climate. A large number of grape varieties are planted, producing rich, ripe white and red wines, the most prevalent being **Pinot Grigio** and Merlot. Friuli-Venezia Giulia produces some of the richest Pinot Grigio in Italy, the medium- to full-bodied wines displaying juicy peach and tropical fruit flavours. Merlot is the most planted black variety, making medium-bodied wines with medium acidity and tannins and ripe red fruit flavours, often with a hint of spice from oak. The native white Friulano is also widely grown giving wines with medium to high acidity, medium body and aromas of pear, red apples and herbs.

Wines from the plain are labelled **Friuli Grave DOC**. They tend to be white, and made in a simple, fruity style. The regions of **Collio DOC** and **Colli Orientali DOC**, both located in the hills, are known for premium, more concentrated white wines with Colli Orientali also noted for its reds.

VENETO

Veneto is one of Italy's largest wine-producing regions and home to some of its best known wines, Soave and

Valpolicella. The region extends from the southern end of Lake Garda in the west to Venice in the east and ranges from the foothills of the Alps in the north to the flat plains of the Po in the south. The climate is warm with moderate rainfall. Cooling influences come from altitude, exposing the vineyards in the foothills to a large diurnal temperature range, and breezes from Lake Garda cool the vineyards in the west of the region. The flat plain is affected by moist air and fog from the River Po, increasing the number of sprays needed to combat disease and rot.

The flat fertile plain is a source of fruit for inexpensive, high volume brands growing international grape varieties such as **Pinot Grigio**, Chardonnay and Merlot and Italian grapes like Corvina, Garganega and Trebbiano. High yields mean that these wines are usually simple and fruity. They are labelled **Veneto IGT**.

Prosecco is a sparkling wine DOC, the greater part of which is in Veneto, although some of the vineyards are located in Friuli-Venezia Giulia (for more details see Chapter 42 *Sparkling Wines of the World*).

Soave

Soave is east of Verona and has two distinct parts: foothills to the north and a flat plain in the south, near the River Po. The soils on the foothills are made up of limestone and clay with some volcanic rocks. These soils are naturally cool, and this together with the influence of altitude, slows down ripening, leading to grapes with full flavour ripeness yet high acidity. The wines are capable of maturing for a number of years. The vines on the plain are planted on sandy, alluvial soils that aid ripening so

the grapes are fruitier with medium acidity and the wines are meant to be drunk young. The main variety is the Italian white grape **Garganega** but small amounts of other white grape varieties can be added to the blend. The wines typically have medium to high acidity levels, a medium body and display aromas of pears, red apple, stone fruit and sometimes white pepper. They do not typically display any aromas or flavours of new oak. The best examples can age, developing aromas of almonds and honey.

Wines made using grapes from the entire region can be labelled **Soave DOC** but wines made using grapes from the foothills can be labelled **Soave Classico DOC**.

Valpolicella

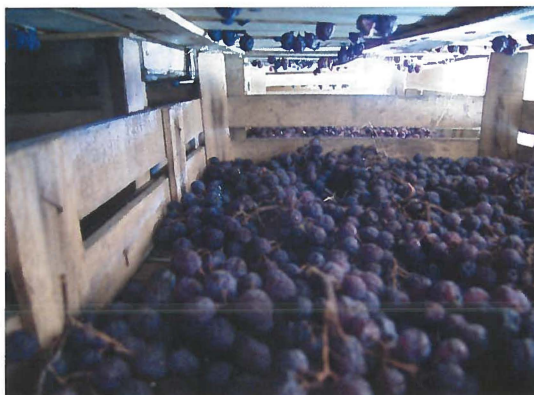
Valpolicella is north-west of Verona, and has a similar topography to Soave. The foothills in the north have limestone, clay and volcanic soils, which slow down ripening so the grapes have more acidity. The soils in the flatter south of the region are gravel and sand, which is warmer, so the grapes are fruitier with less acidity. The main grape in Valpolicella is **Corvina**, an Italian grape native to the region, which has a thin skin, moderate colour, low to medium tannins and high acidity. In order to increase the colour and tannins of the wine, local grape varieties can be added to the blend. Wines made using grapes from the entire region can be labelled as **Valpolicella DOC** and wines made using grapes from foothills can be labelled **Valpolicella Classico DOC**. The wines are simple and fruity, with light tannins, and display red cherry flavours; they are rarely oaked and are made to drink immediately.

The passito method – The *passito* method is widely used in the Veneto to increase structure and flavour concentration (and colour in the case of red wines). The grapes are picked early when they are still high in acidity and dried indoors, concentrating the sugars and flavours. The fermentation does not get underway until the winter months. There are two types of *passito* wine in Valpolicella. Wines labelled **Amarone della Valpolicella DOCG** are dry or off-dry in style. They are full-bodied, with high alcohol, medium to high tannins and intensely concentrated red berry and spice flavours. These wines are usually aged in large oak casks. Wines labelled **Recioto della Valpolicella DOCG** are made from grapes that are so sweet the fermentation stops naturally. These sweet wines have intense red fruit flavours, high alcohol levels, a full body, and medium to high tannins. The Soave region makes a sweet white wine by the same method, labelled Recioto di Soave DOCG.

The ripasso method – The *ripasso* method uses grape skins from a fermenting Amarone della Valpolicella. Shortly before fermentation finishes the Amarone is drained off the skins. The skins remain unpressed and are added to a vat of Valpolicella that has finished its fermentation. Yeast, which are also transferred in this



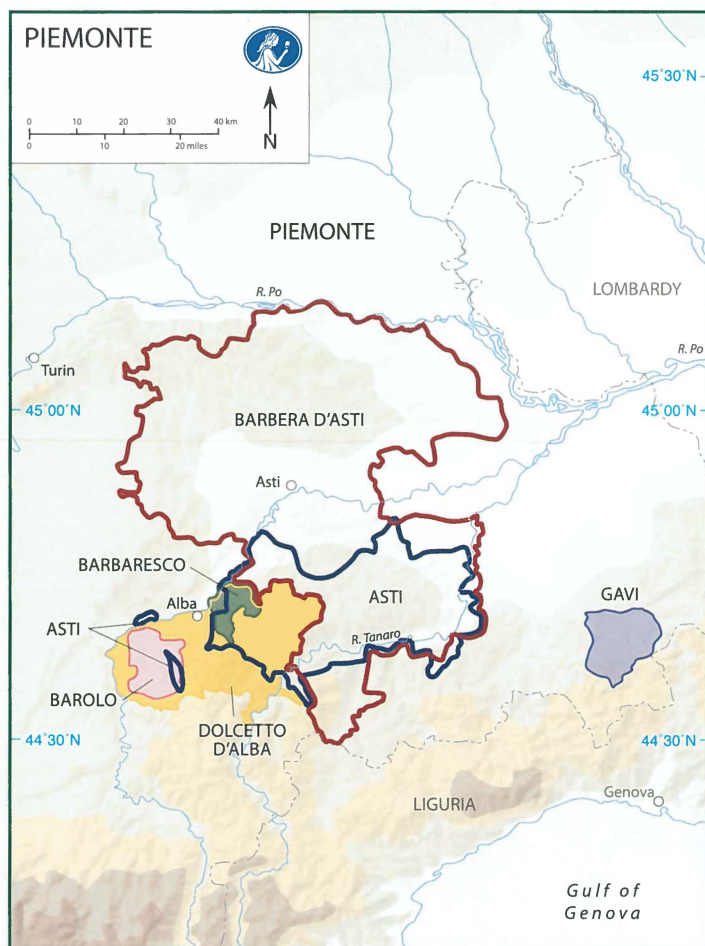
Grape drying in Valpolicella.
The grapes are stored indoors in very shallow stackable crates to keep them free of rot as they shrivel.



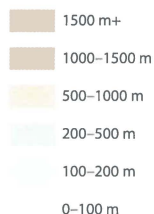
process, ferment the remaining sugar on the Amarone grape skins, during which time the grape skins give more colour, flavour and tannins to the wine they have been added to. Wines made in this method can be labelled **Valpolicella Ripasso DOC** and are medium to full-bodied with medium to high tannins and flavours of stewed red cherries and plums.

PIEMONTE

Piemonte is located in the north-west corner of Italy. Mountains to the north provide a rain shadow protecting the region from northern winds and precipitation. The climate is moderate and continental with long, cold winters and summers that can be subject to thunderstorms, hail and fog. Some moderating influences come from the Po River in the southern part of the region and Lake Maggiore in the north. The area is noted for its foothills, ranging from 150 to 600 metres,



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which provide different aspects and altitudes for viticulture. The main grapes for Piemonte are the black varieties of Nebbiolo, Barbera and Dolcetto and the white varieties of Cortese and Moscato (Muscat).

There are many designated wine regions within Piemonte, but the more famous wine areas are located south of the main city Turin, around the towns of Asti and Alba. Barolo DOCG and Barbaresco DOCG are the most prestigious appellations in the region, but a number of other DOC and DOCG wines are made in the wider area around the two towns. There is no IGT or IGP for the region with all wines achieving either DOC or DOCG status.

Barolo

The wine region of Barolo is a horseshoe-shaped valley spanning several villages each having steep (300 to 500 metre) south-facing slopes. **Barolo DOCG** must be made entirely from **Nebbiolo**, a black grape with high levels of acidity and tannins but little colour. The grapes ripen slowly at these altitudes developing perfumed aromas of sour cherries, herbs and sometimes dried flowers. In the best years the wines are full-bodied with high acidity

and tannins and they have the ability to develop in the bottle.

The wines are often made from grapes sourced from different villages. A village name may appear on the label if the grapes are sourced purely from that area, for example Barolo Serralunga d'Alba DOCG. The best wines come from named vineyards or *crus*, which may appear on the label, such as Barolo Cannubi DOCG. The region does grow other grapes, mainly Dolcetto and Barbera, which are labelled using the generic Alba DOC.

Barolo DOCG must be aged for three years before release, of which 18 months must be in oak. Traditionally, Barolo was aged for several years in large oak barrels to soften harsh tannins. Today, improvements in vineyard management and gentler methods of extraction result in wines with smoother, riper tannins, and mean that many producers now choose to mature their wines for shorter periods of time. Oak maturation may take place in small barrels (often including some new oak) or larger casks depending on the style that the producer wants to achieve. All Barolo wines tend to benefit from further bottle ageing. This continues to soften the tannins and adds further complexity, giving the wine aromas of truffles, tar and leather.

Barbaresco

The smaller region of Barbaresco is also renowned for Nebbiolo. It has south-facing slopes at lower altitudes than those of Barolo (200 to 400 metres). The lower altitude and influence from a local river means that Nebbiolo ripens earlier here compared with Barolo and is fruitier and less perfumed. It has similar acidity and tannin levels, which gives the wines the ability to age in bottle. By law, **Barbaresco DOCG** must be aged for two years before release, with nine months in oak. As the region is smaller than Barolo, there are fewer mentions of villages on the labels but higher quality wines will be from a single named vineyard or *cru*.

Asti and Alba

The wider area around Asti and Alba is home to a number of DOCs and DOCGs. The majority of these appellations are named after a grape variety followed by their nearest town. The black **Barbera** grape is the most widely planted variety and is used to produce Barbera d'Alba DOC and **Barbera d'Asti DOCG**, the latter often regarded as higher quality. It is a late ripening grape, with medium to deep colour, low to medium tannins and high acidity, displaying aromas of red cherries and plums and sometimes black pepper. The wines are typically made in two styles: youthful and fruity with no oak influence, or barrel-aged to give spicy flavours.

Dolcetto is also widely planted. It is earlier ripening than Nebbiolo and Barbera and therefore can be planted in the coolest sites. **Dolcetto d'Alba DOC** tends to produce many of the finest wines. The wines have a deep, often purple, colour with medium to high tannins and medium acidity. They display aromas of black plums,

red cherries and dried herbs. Both Barbera and Dolcetto can be drunk young but the best examples can age for several years.

Nebbiolo is also widely planted throughout this area. Asti is also famous for its sparkling wines made from Moscato (see Chapter 42 *Sparkling Wines of the World*).

Gavi

The white wine region of Gavi is located in south-eastern Piemonte. The vines are grown in hills where the altitude and sea breezes result in long, slow ripening of the white grape **Cortese**, emphasising its natural high acidity and floral character. The wines are labelled as **Gavi DOCG** or Cortese di Gavi DOCG. If the grapes come from the town of Gavi itself the wines may be labelled Gavi di Gavi DOCG. The wines are pale and light-bodied, with high acidity and aromas, and flavours of citrus, green apples and pears. Protective winemaking is the norm with cool fermentation in stainless steel but some producers use



old oak vessels for fermentation and lees stirring to add complexity to the wines. Most of the wine is ready to drink on release from the winery but wines from the best producers can age well in bottle.

Wines maturing in Barolo. Note that here the producer is using both large and smaller oak vessels.