Italy’s north-eastern corner, close to the Collio hills, is home to some of the country’s finest white wines, yet it does not enjoy widespread fame. **CARLA CAPALBO** traces its history and celebrates its individuality.
Italy may have won the battle of territorial specificity for many of its red wines – Tuscany’s Chianti, Sicily’s Nero d’Avola, Piedmont’s Barolo – but its white wines tend to be better known for their grape variety than their provenance.

So it’s not surprising that an area that makes some of Italy’s greatest white wines has a relatively low profile beyond national borders. Within Italy, however, Friuli’s Collio and its vini bianchi are legendary.

Collio’s estates are mostly small, family-run affairs. At harvest, several generations pick and press the grapes. Their intimate relationship with the vineyards is reflected in the divergent approaches to making wine you find here. White wines go from pale and ephemeral to amber-orange liquids whose structures are closer to reds.

The Collio hills rise out of the Isonzo river plain, north-west of Trieste, before climbing towards Slovenia’s Julian Alps. Once part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, the hills were one of the bloodiest frontlines in both world wars. At the end of World War II, the hills were split between Italy and Yugoslavia.

Throughout the Cold War, the borders were closely patrolled, with armed guards in vineyards that were then half in Italy, half in what was later to become Slovenia. ‘We were allowed into the Slovenian side during the day,’ explains Renato Keber, a winemaker whose estate at Zegla is just inside the Italian border, ‘but at night a curfew forced us to return to Italy.’ Since Slovenia’s entrance into the Schengen area...
in January 2008, the border sentries have been removed and you no longer even have to show a passport to cross.

After the Second World War, things developed differently on either side of the border. Yugoslavian growers were obliged to take their grapes to a communal centina sociale, prevented by the country’s agricultural policy from setting up as individual estates. Meanwhile, the Italians got a headstart, thanks to a handful of pioneers, including Mario Schiopetto, Livio and Marco Felluga, Count Attems and Miro Gradnik, who began bottling origin-specific wines in the 1960s. Collio’s reputation was launched. ‘In 1964, the Collio Consorzio was founded to safeguard and promote the DOC wines of the Italian Collio,’ says Patrizia Felluga, current president and daughter of founding member, Marco Felluga.

After Slovenia declared independence in 1991, some of its producers began bottling their own wines. The Slovenian side, called Brda, has also recently formed an association of growers and wineries, the Brda Consortium. Despite open exchanges and a few EU-sponsored cross-border projects, however, the two sides do not yet appear ready for trading unity. Some Italian producers maintain they have spent 40 years building the Collio’s reputation and want to preserve its Italian identity.

Yet many of the best-known wineries in the Italian Collio are owned by families of Slovenian origin, who lived here before the borders changed. These tend to be small to medium estates, with an average of 13ha (hectares). Most have been modernised with the arrival of the young generation. Branico winery’s Igor Erzetic tells his story: ‘My grandfather and father were contadini, or sharecroppers, who sold their grapes to a noble estate until the 1960s. The farms then were mixed, with cows, vegetable and fruit orchards, as well as vineyards intent on producing as much as possible. Inspired by the successes of some of the pioneering producers here, my peers and I pleaded for change.’

Orchards were planted to vines, grape yields drastically reduced, new cellars were built. Older generations, used to war and poverty and believing quantity assured survival, looked askance at methods that required pruning away half of the vines’ yields before the grapes were mature.

SLOVENIA: BRDA PATROL

Two-thirds of the Collio hills are in Slovenia, including some of the most important areas. They have been known for their wines since Roman times, and were catalogued under the Austro-Hungarian empire. The Slovenian hills are unspoiled and the winemakers have small, family estates with parcelled vineyards. However, the full potential of this patrimony, known as Brda, has yet to be exploited.

‘In the early 1990s came the first push by producers in Slovenia and, at that time, the gap between the two countries’ wines was very wide,’ says Josko Sirk, who runs Collio restaurant La Subida. ‘Recently, the Slovenian have started to catch up, thanks to a new generation of winemakers. They have aimed high, trying to match the best wines by the best producers: not just Jermand but Vintage Tunina; not just Livla Felluga, but Terre Alte; not just Gravner but his amphor-aged wines.’

In winemaking, there’s no shortcut, but the Slovenians have made strides quickly. ‘They are having to learn how to position themselves in the global market with prices that are not out of reach,’ says Sirk.‘Of the Slovenian winemakers, Ales Krstanic of Movia is the best-known personality. His biodynamic, unfiltered wines have led the way for exports to the US and UK. Miran Sirk at Bjana winery makes pure metode classico sparkling wines from indigenous varieties; Edi Simic at Vipolza produces complex barrique-aged wines; Marijan Simic is working on whites with great price/quality ratio. Watch closely over the next few years to find idiosyncratic wines from a great European terroir.’
But that investment in quality paid off; there are now 119 producers bottling their own wines in the Collio’s consortium.

Wine critic Gianpaolo Gravina puts the region’s quality down to a far older influence, however: the mineral-rich soil formed 56 million years ago. ‘Collio is a tiny crescent of land, just 15km long, but it is one of Europe’s great terrains for white wines,’ he says. ‘The Collio terrain allows for different sub-zones that favour a range of grape varieties,’ he says. And while Collio does produce reds, it is the whites that drive its reputation.

‘Collio also produces reds, but it’s the whites that drive the area’s markets and reputation’

Wines are made from Pinot Grigio and Pinot Bianco, Sauvignon and Chardonnay, as well as some French red varieties. There is a strong showing from indigenous varieties Ribolla Gialla, Malvasia Istriana and Tocai Friulano. Many are vinified separately and labelled for their varietal; others are blends united under the title Collio Bianco.

Representative are the steely pure-mineral whites of Venica, Tores and Villa Russiz; elegant, Burgundy-inspired whites matured in oak, exemplified by Borgo del Tiglio and some of Jermann’s wines; complex Collio Bianco blends that bring out secondary aromas, such as Zuan or Edi Keber; and wines made with lightly macerated grapes to enrich and intensify the fruit, as in certain wines by Renato Keber, Tercic, Terpin and Primari.

A controversial style question is being played out in Collio: what colour should a white wine be? Long maceration creates wines with hues from pale gold to deep amber. These can take some getting used to, but the best offer unique voices with remarkable complexity. ‘In this kind of vinification,’ explains Mila Gravner, son of the pioneer Josko, ‘the grapes are destemmed and placed in open-topped containers to macerate and ferment at their own pace, following a natural process that has been used for millennia.’ Starting with Gravner and Radikon, the conversion to these back-to-the-future wines has spread to others around Oslove, San Floriano and the Cusio hills. Implicit in this type of winemaking is a commitment to the environment, with production methods that go from organic to biodynamic and beyond.

Another contentious issue, now settled, is the renaming of the grape variety Tocai Friulano. Since the EU ruled in favour of Hungary’s claim for Protected Designation of Origin status for Tokaji, all Friuli wines made from that variety will be labelled Friulano. Except for Stanco Radikon’s Jakot, that is. He was quick to invent a Du Vino Code-style name that maintained Tokaji’s content: Jakot is Tokaj backwards.

If some see Friulano as too generic (it is the adjective used to describe anything from Friuli), Andrea Felluga, for one, is enthusiastic. ‘For me, what matters is the wine quality. If Friulano can produce fine wines and offer a specific link to our territory, I’m in favour of it.’ Frulich has a long way to go in establishing a unified image as a great wine region.’ Collio is certainly doing its bit.

Carla Capitelli’s book, North by North East: The wines and foods of the Collio (Palas Athena, London) is published in March.

**CARLA’S COLLIO**

Gravner, Ribolla Gialla 2004
Attractive floral and herbal notes; very mineral, it starts quietly before releasing its energy for a turbo finish. 2009–2012. £39.25; Pas

Venica, Ronco delle Mole Sauvignon 2007
Delicate nose that whispers of sage and white peach, juicy, full and flinty with saline minerality to its long finish. 2009–2012. £22.04; Dec, Fo5

Zuani, Collio Bianco 2006
Floral Sauvignon nose, filled out in the mouth with the minerality and verve of Pinot Grigio, Chardonnay and Tocai Friulano; only the tightest touch of oak. 2009–2013. £13.95; lt&5

Torcol, Tocai Friulano 2006
Crystal clean and well balanced, with crisp fruit, long minerality, pears and bitter almonds. 2009–2015. £24; Ast

Damijan Podversic, Kaplja 2005
Green tea nose. Dried grape skins, herb notes, minerality on the palate. 2009–2014. N/A UK; +39 0481 78 217

Edi Keber, Collio Bianco 2007
Elegant and dynamic, with characterful rock-salt and fruit. Fine grip and a complete finish. 2009–2014. £17.26; Cib

Roncalli, Vecchie Vigne 2004
Minty nose with fennel deeper in the mouth; mineral finish. Will develop with age. 2009–2013. £20.43; Pas

Livio Felluga, Rosonplatz Collio Bianco 2006
Buttery aromatic nose with notes of gooseberries and lychees. Balanced. 2009–2012. N/A UK; +39 0481 60 203

Renato Keber, Tocai Friulano 2006
Dry with lively fruit, good structure and minerality. Subtle bitter-almond notes on the finish. 2009–2011. N/A UK; +39 0481 639 844

Villa Russiz, Friulano 2007
Delicate perfume of autumn fruit; good balance. Great with food. 2009–2011. £15.42; Bib

For UK stockists see p100 of main issue.