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Rossese di Dolceacqua: An Unusual Ligurian Red



As I have often noted, Italy boasts an astonishing variety of very distinctive indigenous varietals, many of which are graced with extraordinary bouquets. One of the most distinctive in this regard is Rossese di Dolceacqua, which is both varietal and wine.

It's from Liguria, and more specifically the parts or all of 14 Communes in the Val Nervia and the Valle Crosia (Province of Imperia, west of Genova towards the French border), and is a pale enough red that one might mistake it for a rosé. Until the first sniff, which, in young wines, displays an unmistakable mixture of sandalwood-laced spice and fruit.

Exactly when Rossese was first planted is not known, though it has been planted for centuries; the Comune di Rossese's [page on the wine](#) notes that the Alberello, or bush pruning one finds in many vineyards supports the assertion that it may have been introduced by colonists from Ancient Greece. Moving forward, they also note that under Admiral Andrea D'Oria (1466-1560), the Genoese Fleet celebrated its victories with Rossese, and that when Marchesa Doria served it to Napoleon in he liked it enough to have several casks shipped back to Paris.

Rossese grows well in rugged terrains and on slopes steep enough to make hand cultivation a necessity even now, and as a result making the wine is as much a matter of love as a business venture; yields tend to be low, and though the Disciplinary would allow a maximum annual production of about 8800 quintals of grapes (90 per hectare) for the entire appellation, actual production is much lower, on the order of 3300 quintals (figuring a yield into wine of 70%, this comes

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out to a total production of about about 307,000 bottles of Rossese per year), in part because winemakers do farm to lower yields to increase concentration, and in part because many of the vineyards are old, and therefore naturally produce less.

The Disciplinare states that Rossese di Dolceacqua must contain at least 95% Rossese, with up to 5% non-aromatic indigenous varieties. Alcohol levels are 12 and 13% for the Vino D'Annata and Superiore, respectively, and while the Vino D'Annata can be released in the spring following the harvest, the Superiore must be held until November 1.

I stopped at the Regione Liguria's stand at Vinitaly and asked to taste through all of their Rossese di Dolceacqua (there is also a Rossese della Riviera Ligure di Ponente) and they kindly agreed, beginning with the lighter (and younger) wines and working through to the older Rossese Superiore, for a total of 14 wines.

It was both interesting and enjoyable; I especially liked the freshness and rich aromatic makeup of the younger Rossese. The older Superiore wines change in character, becoming more brooding, and while pleasant are less invigorating and less approachable.

In terms of accompaniments, Rossese combines rich fruit and intense aromatics with relatively light tannins, and in this respect brings to mind a couple of the more aromatic Piemontese wines, in particular Pelaverga di Veduno and Ruché. Like them, it will be versatile and in addition to working well with white meats (Rossese's Assessorato al Turismo suggests rabbit, and I would also venture grilled fish) it will work well with some foods that are harder to pair, including bell peppers, and I would expect it to go nicely with mild Chinese, Thai and Indian dishes whose spicing would clash with more tannic reds.

The wines, tasted in Verona early April 2011

F.lli Gaiardo Rossese di Dolceacqua DOC 2010

Pale cherry ruby with pink rim. The bouquet is rich, with floral accents and sandalwood supported by berry fruit and some greenish vegetal notes. Intriguing, and there is also some wild cherry. On the palate it's light, with bright sour cherry fruit supported by sandalwood laced spice and pleasant mineral acidity that flows into a clean sandalwood laced finish with mineral underpinning.

2 stars

Azienda Agricola Terre Bianche Rossese di Dolceacqua DOC 2010

Pale pink ruby with brilliant reflections and pale rim. Elegant bouquet with delicate sour cherry fruit supported by violets and sandalwood, quite harmonious and very pleasant to sniff. On the palate it's light, and fresh, with rich sour cherry fruit supported by sour berry fruit acidity and sweet slight tannins that flow into a long warm lasting finish with slightest hints of sandalwood to provide depth. Extremely

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IWR uses a simple Three-Star Rating System

NO STAR goes to wines that are correctly made but nothing to get excited about.

ONE STAR goes to wines that are good.

TWO STARS go to wines that are very good to excellent.

THREE STARS and a POINT SCORE (90-100) go to wines that are superb to extraordinary.

And I will give pairing suggestions, which I consider much more important than the scores.

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Rossese di Dolceacqua: An

pleasant, and a wine that you won't forget easily.

90-91

[Azienda Agricola Kà Mancineé Beragna Rossese di Dolceacqua DOC 2010](#)

Pale pinkish ruby; it's lighter than some, and has brilliant reflections and pink rim. The bouquet is moderately intense, with brooding sandalwood and minerality supported by some berry fruit; it's more massive than some. On the palate it's light, with bright sour cherry fruit laced with minerality and some sandalwood, and light sweet tannins that flow into a clean fairly tart finish. It's fairly direct, and a bit more powerful than some, working more with solidity than finesse. 1 star

[Maccario Dringenberg Rossese di Dolceacqua DOC 2010](#)

Pale ruby with brilliant reflections and white rim. The bouquet is moderately intense, with dusky red berry fruit supported by sandalwood and some savory notes, and also hints of camphor. A touch blocky, but it is recently bottled. On the palate it's light, with moderately intense sour cherry fruit supported by bright acidity and by tannins that are slight and have some sandalwood spice to them. A simple, direct interpretation of Rossese that's a touch less acidic, and therefore a touch less brash than some. 1 star

[Specchio di Vitae Gheneffuse Rossese di Dolceacqua DOC 2009](#)

Dusky pale cherry ruby with some brick accents and white rim. The bouquet is pleasant, with dusky cherry fruit supported by some sandalwood and slight greenish accents. On the palate it's light, with sandalwood laced cherry fruit supported by fairly bright berry fruit acidity and light tannins that flow into a clean fruit laced mineral finish with graceful sandalwood accents. Pleasant and enjoyable to drink. 2 stars

[F.lli Maccario Azienda Il Bausco Rossese di Dolceacqua DOC 2009](#)

Fairly deep pale cherry ruby with white rim and brilliant reflections; it's darker than some. The bouquet is pleasant, with brandied sour cherry fruit that has some jammy accents and pleasant spice with an underpinning of sandalwood; it gives an impression of greater ripeness of the grapes. On the palate it's bright with fairly rich cherry fruit supported by spice and sweet tannins, and to a greater degree than in others minerality more than acidity; the impression of greater grape ripeness on the nose is perhaps confirmed by the lesser acidity. It's pleasant in a less aggressive and more easygoing key, and does have a willowness to it. 2 stars

[Mauro Antonio Zino Rossese di Dolceacqua DOC 2009](#)

Unusual Ligurian Red

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Slightly darker ruby with hints of brisk in the rim; it's the first of the 2009s. The bouquet is intense, and herbal, with some petroleum and red berry fruit and considerably less in the way of bright sandalwood. A year makes a difference. On the palate it's bright, with fairly rich sour cherry fruit supported by sandalwood laced sour berry fruit acidity, and by smooth sweet tannins that flow into a clean sour cherry finish with sandalwood underpinning. Pleasant, and quite approachable, though a touch blocky.

1 star

[Maixei Cooperativa Riva dei Fiori Rossese di Dolceacqua Superiore DOC 2009](#)

Pale almandine ruby with brilliant reflections. The bouquet is moderately intense, with some sour cherry fruit supported by delicate spice and minerality. On the palate it's delicate, with moderately intense sour cherry fruit supported by warm minerality and hints of sandalwood that gain depth from slight tannins and flow into a long warm mineral finish. It's pleasant in a rather soft key, and though I might have liked a little more richness overtones the fruit it is harmonious.

2 stars

[Azienda Agricola Dallorto Luca Du Nemu Rossese di Dolceacqua Superiore DOC 2009](#)

Fairly rich cherry ruby with black reflections and white rim. The bouquet is fairly intense, with petroleum and red berry fruit supported by hints of tar and minerality; nice power in a delicate key, though not as fresh as the younger wines. On the palate it's light tending to medium bodied, with fairly bright berry fruit supported by moderately intense acidity that is more mineral than fruit, and by tannins that have a slight burr, and flow into a fairly direct finish. It's more concentrated, but lacks acidity and brightness, and is therefore a little more settled than I might have liked.

1 star

[Ramoino Fabiana Serra de' Becchi Rossese di Dolceacqua Superiore DOC 2008](#)

This is a little older, and is a deeper ruby tending more towards garnet. The bouquet is moderately intense with delicate berry fruit supported by minerality and spice, and pleasing warmth. On the palate it's delicate, with fairly rich sour cherry fruit supported by some herbal notes and hints of sandalwood, and by fairly bright berry fruit acidity, while the tannins are rather slight and smooth, and flow into a clean warm sour cherry laced finish with some bitter sandalwood accents. Pleasant, and will be fairly versatile.

2 stars

[Azienda Agricola Altavia Rossese di Dolceacqua Superiore DOC 2007](#)

This is a 2007. Fairly deep cherry ruby with black reflections and some almandine in the rim. The bouquet is dusky, with sour cherry

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fruit and warmth mingled with some heather. Not much in the way of spice. On the palate it's fairly rich, with rather languid cherry plum fruit supported by moderate by moderate acidity and minerality, and by some up peppery spice that derives from the tannins, and flows into a clean slightly bitter finish. Graceful in a light languid key, and shows that Rossese can hold well for a few years. Pleasant and quite easy to drink, in a less brash key than the younger wines.

2 stars

I also tasted a few more reds from Imperia, all Ormeasco, which is the local name for Dolcetto. I confess I am not tremendously familiar with Ormeasco, but Jeremy Parzen says, " Ormeasco wine has a more intense floral bouquet and a brighter color than Dolcetto from Piemonte but preserves the pleasant dark chocolate like bitterness found in Piemontese Dolcetto." (From How to Pronounce Italian Wine, where [Jeremy also gives an interesting account](#) of how Dolcetto got to Pornassio.)

[Azienda Agricola Cascina Nirasca Ormeasco di Pornassio Superiore DOC 2009](#)

Deep cherry ruby with violet reflections and pale cherry rim. The bouquet is moderately intense at first swish, while further swishing brings up some violets and cherry fruit supported by slight bitter almond. On the palate it's bright, with lively sour cherry fruit supported by deft sour cherry acidity and smooth sweet tannins that have a slight bitter almond cast to them and flow into a lastingly warm finish. Pleasant and will drink quite well with a variety of foods. Light.

2 stars

[Azienda Agricola Durin Ormeasco di Pornassio Passito DOC 2009](#)

This is a dessert wine; it's deep black cherry ruby with black reflections and dusky cherry rim. The bouquet is elegant, with sweetness and hints of brown sugar mingled with cherry fruit that has some sweet accents and jammy brandied overtones, with hints of bell pepper jam and spice as well. Takes a while to open, and gives an impression of being rather shy. On the palate it's fairly rich, with dusky rather bitter cherry fruit supported by sweetness and bitter accents, and tannins that have a cool rather brooding burr to them and flows into a dusky tannic finish. I'd have liked a little more richness to the fruit, which ends up surrendering to the tannins more than it might have.

1 star

[Lupi Le Braje Ormeasco di Pornassio DOC 2006](#)

Deep black cherry ruby with black reflections and cherry rim paling to white. The bouquet is moderately intense, with sour cherry fruit supported by delicate acidity and some vegetal notes. On the palate it's medium bodied and smooth, with fairly rich berry fruit supported by smooth sweet tannins and moderate mineral acidity that flow into a clean fresh sour cherry finish. Pleasant, and quite approachable, though a touch more acidity would have been nice, and will likely be

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there in a vintage that wasn't quite as hot.

2 stars

Posted by Kyle Phillips at [11:29 AM](#) 

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