

Discovering Rossese di Dolceacqua

23 Sep 2012 by Walter Speller

I am extremely fond of Liguria on the coast of north-west Italy. Not only because of its stunning coastline that is home to so many flowers (it is called Riviera dei Fiori for a reason) but also because it somehow feels more genuine than its French counterpart just across the border. Situated right on the coast, and a stone's throw from Monte Carlo, lies the city of Ventimiglia. Its delectable market halls are so chock full with regional goodies that even the French drive over in droves to take advantage of its exceptional produce. Because of that, the language predominantly heard on the terraces of its many street cafés, especially on a Saturday, is almost exclusively French.

But it was not the prospect of this gorgeous *dolce vita* that brought me here last June, but an invitation I received from Massimo Sacco, whom I had met at the Decanter World Wine Awards this year. A native of Ventimiglia, Sacco started his career at the Dorchester and the Halkin hotels in London, but is now head sommelier at the Fairmont Hotel in Monte Carlo. Sacco is also chair of the local Imperia Chapter of the Associazione Sommelier Italiana, and in this capacity he had sent me an enthusiastic but informal invitation to a tasting of Rossese di Dolceacqua, a rare red wine from the tiny DOC tucked in the Ligurian mountains. It is rarely seen on export markets because of its very limited production, a mere 250,000 bottles annually produced by some 36 estates, and almost wholly consumed in the region itself.

The tasting took place in Bajardo, a beautiful, tiny enclave high up in the Ligurian mountains at 900 metres, and strictly speaking too high for ripening grapes. Like a natural balcony, Bajardo offers impressive vistas of the French Alpes Maritimes on one side and the sea in the distance on the other. It is also a 15 km long, narrow hairpin road away from the town of Dolceacqua, the wine's namesake.

It appeared that Sacco together with Bajardo's mayor, Josè Littardi, has been organising a blind tasting of the latest Rossese di Dolceacqua vintage for the last four years to put the spotlight on the wine as well as on Bajardo. Sacco is clearly Littardi's protégé, and Littardi was clearly responsible for putting him on track for a career in the restaurant trade. Their event, as proper Italian tradition has it, rivals other Rossese tastings in this tiny region. There are producers who apparently turn up for this tasting, while eschewing other similar events and vice versa. It beats me, though, how you can organise coherent marketing for the wines with this, allegedly good-humoured, divide. Having said that, the tasting was attended by quite a few Italian journalists, as well as some international ones, no doubt thanks to Sacco's international connections.

Rossese di Dolceacqua is a monovarietal wine fighting what seems a lost cause against vegetable greenhouses clinging to the steep hills, as shown below and, above left, at Poggio dell'Elmo. Vineyards are planted *ad alberello*, or bushvines on steep terraces, where work can only be done manually. This means hard labour and, together with the low yields the alberello renders, has led to the abandonment over the years of many of the terraced vineyards. Fortunately, there is light at the end of tunnel, as a new generation has come to the rescue of Rossese di Dolceacqua. They are the children of the grape growers who, against all odds, kept tending the alberello terraces, and this is how quite a few of Rossese's crus have survived.

The majority of the tiny cellars where the grapes are vinified are either in the village of Dolceacqua or the village of Soldano, both at quite a distance from the steep slopes where the vineyards are. One needs to have perseverance and belief to continue the production of a wine produced on a mere steep 80 hectares. That comes close to a miracle in my book, not least because the wines rarely retail for more than €20 in Italy.

There is an intricate system of single-vineyard crus divided by two valleys, the Val Nervia and the Val Verbone, and the wines are so highly regarded that even [Alessandro Masnagheti](#) threw his investigative glance over the region, which has resulted in yet another detailed map from him. By the way, he prefers to call the wines 'Dolceacqua', without Rossese, and I agree: it makes matters much easier. The crus, or single vineyards, are organised in an official list, and are responsible for distinctive differences between the wines. Even though I feel too inexperienced to comment on them precisely, having tasted them, I am convinced that the wines are of cru quality.

Rossese di Dolceacqua was granted DOC status as early as 1972, but a Consorzio uniting all Dolceacqua producers to drive marketing and share experiences has yet to be formed. That certainly says something about the fierce individuality

of the wine's producers, but luckily it doesn't result in a diffuse range of styles.

Stylistically speaking, Rossese hits the nail on the head, showing wonderful freshness and ripe, red fruit without excess alcohol. Most wines range between 13 and 13.5%. On the palate, there is a playful lightness that reminds me of Pinot Noir, paired with a pleasant bitterness, offsetting the abundance of sweet fruit in its youth, but which it sheds after a couple of years of bottle age. And it repays cellaring. Older Rossese can be a complex, mineral wine worth waiting for. I personally don't understand why anyone in Italy, with some notable exceptions, bothers to grow Pinot Noir if there is already Rossese di Dolceacqua.

Rossese appears to be identical to the Tibouren of Provence (read all about it in [Wine Grapes](#)) cultivated just across the border with France but, unsurprisingly, the Val Nervia and the Val Verbone consider it all their own, and I have yet to find an Italian reference to its French counterpart. Allegedly greatly appreciated by Napoleon Bonaparte, it is a late ripener at these heights, rarely harvested before mid October. Vinification is generally in stainless steel, oak casks having been the norm in the past. It does have an affinity with French barriques, when used judiciously, as evidenced by the tasting.

There is also a Rossese Bianco. Apparently, the pale-skinned variety used to be widely cultivated throughout Liguria and parts of Piemonte, but now only small pockets of it are left, notably in San Biagio della Cima. Alessandro Anfosso of the estate of the same name, who cultivates a couple of hectares of Rossese Bianco, told me that the variety has become somewhat controversial recently since Piemonte managed to get it officially registered in the Langhe DOC. Apparently because of that, Liguria is no longer able to use the name Rossese Bianco and Anfosso and others may label it only under the modest *Vino da Tavola* designation. I suggested that he could still try to get it registered as Rossese di Dolceacqua Bianco DOC, but in the absence of an official Consorzio to fight the case, this is unlikely to happen.

BLIND TASTING

Notes are presented in the order the wines were poured.

Rondelli 2011 Rossese di Dolceacqua 15.5+ Drink 2012-16

Just mid ruby and a touch lacklustre. Pretty, sweet fruit nose with spice, even a bit lifted and peppery. Good acidity and freshness and quite light, but with lovely lift and length on the finish. Drink this slightly chilled and not only during summer. Lively. (WS) 14%

Luca Dallorto, Du Nemu 2011 Rossese di Dolceacqua 15.5 Drink 2012-15

From the Crus Arcagna and Tramontina in the commune of Dolceacqua, on an altitude of 400-500 m. Vines are planted ad alberello (bush vines). Four days of pre-fermentation maceration and fermented in stainless steel, where it also goes through MLF.

Just mid ruby and brilliant. Cherry jam nose and herbs, quite light. Good acidity but fruit seems a little astringent and herbal. Quite full bodied on the palate and touch astringent on the finish. Good length, though. (WS) 13%

Kà Manciné, Galeae 2011 Rossese di Dolceacqua 15.5 Drink 2013-16

From the Cru Galaea in the Val Verbone, planted ad alberello (bush vine) and at an altitude of 400m.

Palish violet ruby. Backward, closed nose. Good acidity wrapped up in cherry fruit and bitter liquorice tannin on the finish, but adds real grip. Acidity pulls it up and length it has. Perhaps wait another six months. (WS) 13.5%

Poggi dell'Elmo 2011 Rossese di Dolceacqua 16 Drink 2012-16

The grapes come from the Cru Pini in the commune of Soldano. Yields less than 35 hl/ha. Pale, violet ruby. Fermented in stainless steel and aged in barrique. Warm and initially a little dusty on the nose, but not willing to open up at the moment. Playful red fruit palate with good acidity, keeping it entertaining. Easy and light, and with real personality. 13.5%

Leonardo Taggiasco 2011 Rossese di Dolceacqua 15 Drink 2012-15

Palish, lacklustre violet ruby. little stalky on the nose and at the same time rich undertones of ripe red fruit. Richness on the palate too, but with quite massive, bitter liquorice tannin. Tries very hard. (WS) 14%

Marco Foresti 2011 Rossese di Dolceacqua 15.5 Drink 2012-14

From vineyards in the communes of Camporosso, Dolceacqua, Soldano and San Biagio della Cima. Fermented in stainless steel, and matured in stainless steel for eight months.

Pale violet ruby. The deep, rich nose seems quite evolved. Savoury and meaty. Perhaps a little bit jammy, but perfumed. Seems very worked up, compared with the palate, which is much less open and generous. Very appetising acidity but rather bitter coating tannin. For drinking now. (WS) 13%

Kà Manciné, Beragna 2011 Rossese di Dolceacqua 16+ Drink 2012-17

From the Cru Beragna in the commune of Soldano.

Pale violet ruby. Herbal and peppery, with gentle, sweet fresh fruit. Light, bitter finish, without enormous fruit (yet) but appetising showing a real unity on the finish. (WS) 13%

Giuseppina Tornatore 2010 Rossese di Dolceacqua 14.5 Drink 2012-15

Just mid violet ruby. Quite sweet and upfront. Perfumed sweet and long and tries hard, but it works on the finish. Quite bitter tannin gives much needed contrast to the sweet fruit. (WS) 13.5%

Mario Muratore 2010 Rossese di Dolceacqua 15 Drink 2012-14

Very, very pale ruby, more like a deep rosé. Dusty sweet talcum. Elegant cherry and almost a hint of marzipan on the nose. Quite dusty finish with compact fruit and good balance and crunch. Very playful palate weight. Nose a little disturbing. (WS) 13.5%

Poggi dell'Elmo 2010 Rossese di Dolceacqua 15.5 Drink 2012-17

Pale, youthful ruby. Sweet, dusty, crushed raspberry. Very perfumed, almost a little artificial, but changes quickly in the glass. Almost salty, bitter sweet, meaty and savoury fruit palate. Seems much less forward on the palate than on the nose. (WS) 14%

Foresti Superiore 2010 Rossese di Dolceacqua 15.5 Drink 2012-16

Pale ruby. Focused, sweet ripe, savoury, rose petal nose. Great balance and with bitter laurel notes on the finish. Good bite! (WS) 13.5%

Tenuta Anfosso, Luvaira 2010 Rossese di Dolceacqua 16.5 drink 2012-17

From the Cru Luvaira in the commune of San Biagio della Cima, planted ad alberello and produced since 2008. Alessandro Anfosso, against all odds, started to produce this wine in 2008 and this saved the terraced vineyard from being abandoned. Very low yields (around 30hl/ha) and only 3000 bottles produced.

Palish youthful ruby. Ripe raspberry and quite chalky, hint of parmesan. Acidity and bitter tannin supplying great contrast. Playful, savoury finish. (WS) 14%

Rondelli, Migliarina 2010 Rossese di Dolceacqua 15.5 Drink 2012-16

Very very pale ruby. Savoury, sweet nose with hints of talcum powder, but changes so quickly in the glass. Roses, green walnut and cherry. Savoury fruit attack. Could do with a little bit more fruit perhaps, and tannins are a little bit grating at this stage. (WS) 13%

Maccario Dringenberg, Posaù 2010 Rossese di Dolceacqua 16.5 Drink 2012-17

The result of a love affair and consequent marriage between Götz Dringenberg of German origin and without any previous wine knowledge, and Giovanna Maccario, whose family owned, but rented out vineyards. Dringenberg convinced the family to take back the vineyards and vinify the produce themselves. Grapes come from the Posaù Cru in the commune of San Biagio della Cima.

Just mid ruby. Fragrant, sweet and quite peculiar, and with a full-bodied feel to it. Bitter liquorice tannin and savoury finish, but much more complex than this sounds. Could open up further. Quite big tannin but doesn't pull the whole off-balance. (WS) 14%

Maccario Dringenberg, Luvaira 2010 Rossese di Dolceacqua 16.5 Drink 2012-17

From the Cru Luvaira in the commune of San Biagio della Cima.

Palish violet ruby with lots of residue in my glass - unfiltered, I suspect. Full-blown, deep red fruit nose - has this seen oak? Talcum powder and very perfumed. Great fruit impact without being heavy. Acidity on the finish leaves a whole, clean impression. (WS) 14%

Tenuta Anfosso, Poggio Pini 2010 Rossese di Dolceacqua 17 Drink 2012-20

From the Cru Pini in the commune of Soldano.

Just mid ruby with violet tinges. Sweetly perfumed and perhaps a little bit oxidative. Very chalky and dusty. Great tactile interplay between acidity and grating tannin, but aromatics do need a little getting used to. But with aeration it all looks different again with marzipan and marasca cherry. Real crunch and with great length. Very young. (WS) 14%

TWO MORE

These samples were submitted in London by the UK importer Winetraders of Oxford.

Terre Bianche 2011 Rossese di Dolceacqua 16 Drink 2013-17

Just mid ruby. Compact nose, but with alluring sweet dark fruit underneath. Hint of sweet rose petals and mineral notes. Quite complex! Black pepper too. Pretty red fruit palate of medium weight. Bitter, austere finish, and a tad backwards. Just enough acidity, so I would serve this a little bit chilled. Could do with an additional year in bottle. Lots of *tipicità*. (WS) 13.5%

Terre Bianche, Bricco Arcagna 2010 Rossese di Dolceacqua 17 Drink 2014-20

Just mid ruby and younger looking than the straight 2011 Rossese. Very serious and still young, there is an opulence of sweet raspberry and cherry fruit here and flattering, sweet, creamy, spicy oak. The same abundance of sweet red fruit with a bitter laurel and liquorice finish to balance it. Ends completely dry and perfumed. Looks like this needs to be tucked away for another year, to absorb the oak. Perhaps even two. And the bottle is closed with a seriously long expensive cork, suggesting as much. (WS) 13.5%

MORE, OLDER ROSSESE DI DOLCEACQUA

The day after the tasting we drove up to meet Alessandro Anfosso to taste the rare white Rossese as well as older vintages of the red. But instead of tasting in situ, Anfosso took us into the hills of Soldano to *Kà Manciné*, run by the amiable Maurizio Anfosso dei Mancinei (left). Although he is related to Alessandro, we were not taken up the hill out of nepotism, but because Maurizio also makes some pretty serious Dolceacqua. It was here that I was taught that the best single crus need age to unfold their complexity.

Tenuta Anfosso, Antea 2011 Vino da Tavola 16.5+ Drink 2012-16

From pre-phylloxera Rossese Bianco vines, which used to be part and parcel of any Rossese vineyard, as, like rose bushes, they were the first to show the appearance of oidium. Pale straw, very mediterranean with notes of wild herbs and pear. Fantastic structure and acidity. Great mouthfeel and balance. Lemon peel and and mandarin and cammomile. Could do with another year. Cedro (thick-skinned Sicilian lemons) ! 13%

Kà Manciné, Tabaka 2011 Vino da Tavola 15.5 Drink 2012-14

70% Massarda, 20% Vermentino, 10% Viognier. Quite intense yellow. Reductive and quite grubby with nutty notes. Probably just reductive at this stage. High-tuned acidity, and with air more lemon peel, and cedro (thick-skinned Sicilian lemons), but I don't see the aromatic lift from Viognier. Compact and structured and much better on the palate than on the nose. Certainly not short of personality. Acidic snap on the finish. Very good, aromatic length. Needs a little fine tuning. (WS) 12%

Tenuta Anfosso, Sciacau 2011 Vino da Tavola 15.5+ Drink 2012-15

Palest onion skin, not unlike a *Côtes de Provence rosé*. Candied white fruit, candied melon above all. Seems closed, needs time to open up, almost a bit waxy. Much more expressive palate with great acidic structure. Pretty precise and more a white wine than anything else. Very long with phenolic mouthfeel. Needs food! (WS) 13%

Kà Manciné, Sciakk 2011 Vino da Tavola 16 Drink 2011-15

Rossese di Dolceacqua running wild. 20 days of appassimento of the grapes on the vine and fermented by indigenous yeast.

Palest of ruby - rosé. A little bit of that same grubbiness/reductiveness like the Tabaka with brooding sweet white rather than red fruit underneath. Succulent and quite vibrant on the palate. So much more convincing than on the nose. Great length and energy. Needs food! (WS) 14%

Kà Manciné, Galeae 2010 Rossese di Dolceacqua 16.5 Drink 2012-18

Made of young vines. Medium concentrated dark ruby. Concentrated lifted, perfumed dark fruit, quite Mediterranean and a little bit Pinot Noir like. Great focus and concentration with lovely acidity and crunch. Aromatic red fruit and spice finish. Wonderful personality. (WS) 13.5%

Kà Manciné, Beragna 2010 Rossese di Dolceacqua 17 Drink 2012-19

Quite pale ruby. Brooding, spicy dark fruit. Seems a little reductive. Much less forward than the Galeae, but laden with the same energy. Fine tannin and acidic lift on the finish. Minerally and quite spectacular on the finish 12.5%

Kà Manciné, Beragna 2008 Rossese di Dolceacqua 17+ Drink 2012-20

Mature looking mid ruby. Beautiful ripe nose hinting at forest floor. Savoury and sweet with hints of beetroot and cherry. Such crunch and bite and energy! Real breed and great balance. (WS) 14%

Tenuta Anfosso, Poggio Pini 2009 Rossese di Dolceacqua 16.5 Drink 2012-18

Quite dark, mid concentrated ruby. Almost creamy sweet fruit nose. Mediterranean herbal streak. Seems like there is a little bit of oak involved, but it is only stainless steel. Sweet, ripe full attack, with good acidity, which melts into the fruit on the finish. Crunchy, bitter tannins. Not for eternity but great introduction to Dolceacqua. This would benefit from decanting. Long! (WS) 14%

Tenuta Anfosso, Poggio Pini 2008 Rossese di Dolceacqua 16.5+ Drink 2012-22

The first year in which part of the grapes (30%) were fermented without being destemmed. Just mid concentrated dark ruby. Camphor, wild herbs. Very slowly red fruit emerges. Sweet, full, ripe attack with great balance and wonderful grip. Fine bitter note on a very long finish. Need to open up more. Cellar this! (WS) 14.5%

Tenuta Anfosso, Poggio Pini 2007 Rossese di Dolceacqua 16.5 Drink 2010-18

This was the last year the wine was fermented without stalks, and hence, according Alessandro Anfosso, the reason it is much more orange in colour (tannin tends to fix the pigments). Pale, mature looking ruby with broad orange rim. Immediate cherry and dark cocoa powder although no oak has been used. With air, more and more complex. Fine, sweet full fruit attack. Gripping but ripe tannin and acidity. Very good length. (WS) 14.5%

Tenuta Anfosso, Poggio Pini 2006 Rossese di Dolceacqua 17+ Drink 2009-22

Mature looking mid ruby with orange rim. Fine, sweet spicy cherry and thyme. Red fruit with lively acid vein running through. Sweet and full on the attack and lifted with succulence and crunch on the finish. Could do with a little decanting beforehand. Serve slightly chilled. Very tactile wine. (WS) 14%

Tenuta Anfosso, Poggio Pini 2005 Rossese di Dolceacqua 17 Drink 2008-20

Mature ruby with broad watery brickstone rim. Incredibly fine, mature smoky nose with forest floor and red fruit and hint of beetroot. Minerally too. Lively, fine ongoing acidity and sweet tannin. Very composed and restrained on the palate, more perfume and aroma than full throttle fruit. Fine! It is that acidity again! (WS) 14%