

# It's Rossese Time

A vibrant red blooms on the Italian Riviera



Photo by: Robert Camuto

Most vineyards in Rossese di Dolceacqua are inaccessible to tractors; vintner Goetz Dringenberg navigates his way up the Posaù cru.

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I spent much of this summer in the south of France and—heresy alert!—drank no rosé.

Instead, I explored the joys of summer-friendly reds—fresh, fruit-driven wines that lend themselves to a bit of chilling and pair beautifully with summer salads, fish and grilled foods.

My new favorite warm-weather red comes from just across the Italian border, in Liguria, in one of Italy's tiniest and most heroically farmed appellations: Rossese di Dolceacqua.

Though it was a thriving wine region in the 19th century, with its own vineyard classification, today a mere 200 acres of Rossese di Dolceacqua vines cling to steep, rugged mountainsides rising from the Mediterranean Sea to the Alps, with altitudes peaking at close to 2,000 feet. These vineyards are spread among three valleys around Dolceacqua, a charming, riverside medieval burg (population about 2,000) with an impressive castle ruin—subject of a Monet painting.

The best examples of Rossese—the grape and appellation share the name—are savory, marked by bittersweet red fruit, salinity, pepper and spice. Think of it as a stylistic cousin of Pinot Noir. “Rossese has always had drinkability,” says acclaimed producer Giovanna Maccario, 51, of Maccario Dringenberg. “It invites you to finish the bottle.”

Maccario, petite and dark-eyed, agilely bounds up narrow steps of stacked stones in her steep, old vineyard of head-trained vines on schist soils; called Posaù, this site produces her most exuberant wine. Less than five miles south—down a jagged valley accented with wild fennel, sage, lavender and caper bushes—lies the shimmering sea.

Rossese di Dolceacqua—identical to the rare, old and temperamental Provence variety Tibouren—can certainly produce simple quaffing wine. But it can also be more interesting, reflecting vintage and *terroirs* in vibrant, Pinot-hued wines. In the last decade or so, their quality has improved exponentially.

“Rossese is sensitive to everything,” says Filippo Rondelli, 39, the fifth-generation producer at his family’s Terre Bianche winery, housed in an Italian army barracks from World War II.



Robert Camuto

*Filippo Rondelli, who researched the area's prior vineyard classification, stands in his Bricco Arcagna cru.*

Rondelli, tall and broad-shouldered, with greenish eyes, spent years researching the area’s historically important vineyard delineations. As a result of his study, in 2011, the appellation approved 33 *nomeranze*, or official *crus*, with varied soils (schist, blue marl and red clay) and climes that range from Mediterranean to sub-Alpine.

“You may have different shapes in the expression of *terroirs*,” Rondelli says, “but they are all honest.”

Winegrowing around Dolceacqua stays at the small to “micro” level, as the vineyards are largely inaccessible to tractors and require intensive hand work. Today about 30 winemakers produce only 25,000 cases of Rossese di Dolceacqua, though in recent years, exports have bloomed. In the United States, prices range from less than \$25 for most entry-level versions to \$30 to \$50 for the top *crus*.

“You need to love your birthplace, because it’s not easy to work here,” says Rondelli. “In the vineyard, you have twice the work of the Langhe [in Piedmont], and you sell the wine at half the price.”

Rondelli and Maccario share similar stories and deep roots in the region, with both of their families' connection to wine dating to Rossese’s heyday.

In his youth, Rondelli, an only child, studied music and languages. But both of his parents died within two years of each other, and he left university at 20 and returned home to join the family winery, founded in 1870.

“I tried to find my way,” says Rondelli, who farms 20 acres of vines and now produces seven wines—three whites and four reds. More than one-third of his nearly 4,600-case production is Rossese, including two Rossese *crus*, topped by his cool, elegant Bricco Arcagna (2014, 90 points, \$59).



Robert Camuto

*Goetz Dringenberg changed careers to marry Giovanna Maccario and help make wine from her family's Rossese holdings.*

Similarly, Maccario, whose father had been bottling Rossese since the early 1970s, studied to be an architect, but returned home after his sudden death because “I didn’t want the vineyards to die.”

She took over in 1991, and three years later, she met her future husband, Goetz Dringenberg, a strapping young cardiologist on vacation from Germany.

Dringenberg—in love and looking for a life change—traded his medical career to join Maccario in the vineyards. The couple now produce about 2,000 cases per year, including one white and six Rosseses, five of them *cru* bottlings—topped by Posau and the more elegant, ethereal Luvaira—released a year after harvest with no wood aging.

The couple has only one full-time vineyard helper for their 16 acres, which they supplement by buying grapes from Maccario’s cousins, and the work still includes walking miles daily at harvesttime to carry out grapes case by case.

“When I arrived people said, ‘The German will last two years here,’” laughs Dringenberg, now 55 and in his 25th vintage.

Luckily for wine lovers who enjoy snappy reds, he and a generation of Rossese producers are succeeding.

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