

WINE ENTHUSIAST

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The Volcanic Wines of Italy

What sets apart some of the most exhilarating Italian wines today? New benchmarks for complexity and longevity have one thing in common: volcanic soils.

BY KERIN O'KEEFE



Etna above the town of Milo / Photo by Michael Housewright

Some of the most exciting and intriguing wines coming out of Italy have one thing in common: the volcanic origins of their soils. While the wines of Mount Etna immediately pop to mind, a surprising number of great wines, from the Veneto down to Sicily, hail from volcanic terroirs. And while minerality is one of the most debated subjects in the wine world, Italy's volcanic soils impart undeniable mineral sensations that include flint, crushed rock and saline, lending depth and complexity to the resulting wines.

Additionally, many of these grape-growing areas have extremely old vines, some more than 100 years old in parts of Campania and Sicily. And nearly all of the "volcanic" denominations rely on native varieties that have had centuries to adapt to their growing conditions.

The vineyard altitude, grape varieties and cellar practices all play crucial roles in the final product, but volcanic soils lend structure, longevity and an extra layer of dimension to the final wines. Here's where to find these complex beauties.

Veneto

The volcanic activity that forged the area ended millions of years ago, but Soave, named for the picture-perfect medieval town at the center of production, still offers a great example of wines made from its soils.

Only parts of the Soave denomination claim this volcanic makeup, however, namely select slopes in Soave and Soave Classico (the original growing zone). There, steep hillside vineyards have dark-colored soils consisting of basalt and tuffaceous rocks. The grape-growing areas on the plains consist of silty clay or limestone soils.

Soave's hills demonstrate how soils influence the area's flagship grapes, Garganega and Trebbiano di Soave, and their wines. Generally speaking, Soaves that originate in volcanic soils are more vibrant, precise and full of finesse.

"The combination of volcanic soils and native grapes Garganega and Trebbiano di Soave generates elegant wines, loaded with freshness, mineral and floral sensations," says producer Andrea Pieropan, of the historic Pieropan family winery. Its stunning, single-vineyard Calvarino Soave Classico is made from 70% Garganega and 30% Trebbiano grown in volcanic soils. Pieropan also makes another single-vineyard Soave Classico, La Rocca, entirely from Garganega grown in chalky clay soils. La Rocca is more structured and fruit-driven than Calvarino, but similarly compelling. Vertical tastings show that both wines boast remarkable longevity.

The **Lessini Durello** denomination, home to vibrant, mineral-driven metodo classico sparkling wines, is another testament to the area's volcanic terroir.

Overlapping the Soave denomination to the east of the Classico area and spreading into the Vicenza province, the growing zone comprises high hills of purely volcanic origin. Monte Calvarina, an ancient volcanic cone near the town of Roncà, is the historic growing area for native grape Durella.

"Durella, a unique indigenous variety, grows only in this area, because it needs infertile, volcanic soil, high altitude and southern exposure," says **Antonio Fattori**, owner and enologist of the **Fattori winery**.



From left to right: Pieropan 2015 Calvarino (Soave Classico); Prà 2015 Staforte (Soave Classico); Fattori 2011 Roncà 60 Non Dosato Metodo Classico (Lessini Durello) / Photo by Con Poulos

Pieropan 2015 Calvarino (Soave Classico); \$31, 96 points. Always one of Italy's premier white wines, Pieropan's gorgeous 2015 Calvarino sets a new benchmark. Opening with heady aromas of white spring wildflower, citrus blossom, aromatic herb and crushed rock, the savory palate delivers layers of lemon drop, ripe apple, juicy pear and tangy mineral notes. It's concentrated yet elegant and thoroughly delicious. Drink through 2025. LUX Wines. *Cellar Selection.*

Prà 2015 Staforte (Soave Classico); \$25, 92 points. Creamy, fresh and crisp, this opens with aromas of dried wildflower and ripe orchard fruit. The rounded palate delivers pastry dough, white peach and yellow apple with fresh acidity. A lemon drop closes the lingering finish. T. Edward Wines Ltd. *Editors' Choice.*

Fattori 2011 Roncà 60 Non Dosato Metodo Classico (Lessini Durello); \$50, 92 points. Bread crust, dried fruit, crushed herb and acacia aromas carry over to the enveloping, savory palate along with creamy yellow peach, nectarine zest and a hint of toasted almond. Vibrant acidity and an elegant perlage provide energy and finesse. A honeyed nut note and a touch of salt wrap up the dry, lingering finish. The Wine Company.