



A FRESH LOOK AT SOAVE CLASSICO

FORGET SUPERMARKET SOAVE. UP IN THE HILLS, BEHIND THE MEDIEVAL CASTLE OF SOAVE, LIE THE TRUE TREASURES.

By Patricia Thomson

Some of the best cru of Soave Classico, guarding the city walls.

ITALIAN WINE



Left: Volcanic rock found in Inama's newly dug vineyard.
Below: Meri and Alessandra Tessari, of the Suavia winery.



DRIVING AROUND THE HILLS OF SOAVE CLASSICO, I put my groaning Fiat into first gear to coax it up the steep grades. That's my first clue to this land. Next is the basalt. It's everywhere—scattered in fields, stacked into fences, plowed up from vineyards. Basalt is volcanic rock, and I'd just driven up a natural pyramid that rose 50 million years ago from a tropical sea, when underwater volcanos piled on. Sixty percent of Soave Classico is basalt, tufo, and pumice, making it part of an elite league of volcanic wine regions, which in Italy also includes Vesuvius near Naples and Etna in Sicily.

When it comes to white wine, volcanic soil is like fairy dust, sprinkling the magic of minerality. A well-made Soave Classico has it in spades, along with aromas of chamomile, stone fruit, and pear, and a slight almond kick on the finish.

Do I see eyebrows raising? My neighbor Linda was sure surprised when I invited her over for a Soave Classico tasting. "The last Soave I remember buying was in college, by the gallon!" she said.

But if Linda had walked with me on Suavia's Monte Carbonare vineyard and scuffed the carbon-black earth, if she'd known the plain below was considered fit for only wheat and potatoes until Soave's boom and territorial expansion in the 1960s and '70s, then she would have grasped this most important point: Soave Classico and Soave are apples and oranges. While both are made from Garganega, usually blended with a dose of Trebbiano di Soave, the land and viticulture couldn't be more different: Flat, humid plains vs. well-ventilated hills. Fertile soil vs. volcanic rock and limestone. Mechanical harvest vs. selection by hand. Industrial scaled vs. family-sized farms.

The parallel, of course, is Chianti Classico, another victim of its own success. When surrounding territories tried to ride its coat-tails, it put its foot down and created the "classico" denomination to distinguish itself from wannabes. Likewise, Soave Classico refers to the original territory in the hills, whose borders were defined when the DOC was created in 1968. But a generic Soave denomination was concocted at the same

time, and expansion of vineyards onto the plains was approved. Bolla and the cooperatives launched a juggernaut of supermarket Soave. "There was one truck leaving every day for Milano," says Marco Inama, whose grandfather witnessed those days. "They were making the wine, bottling the wine, sending the wine all year round. It was just crazy."

Cooperatives still buy over 90 percent of the grapes, so "classico" by itself doesn't guarantee quality. Instead, look for specific winery names. Here are three of the best.

Pieropan, the pioneer

For benchmark Soave Classico, there's none better than Pieropan, the first winery to prioritize excellence. It started in the 1880s with Leonildo Pieropan, the town doctor in Soave. He didn't mean to start a revolution; he just wanted to make better wine for friends and family. "Because he knew biological processes, he chose to dry the grapes to have a richer wine," great-grandson Andrea Pieropan says, sitting in the homestead on Soave's main street, which is still winery headquarters. The doctor had one important customer: Due Apostoli, the finest restaurant in Verona. "They've been serving our wine for more than 90 years," says Andrea. "The wine was moved in demijohns by horse and bottled at the restaurant whenever it was served." Theirs was the first bottled Soave.

Two sons carried on, but "the real business arrived with my father," says Andrea. Named after his grandfather, Leonildo was the first to seriously focus on wine. After graduating in enology in 1966, he started making changes. His goal: to stop buying grapes and use exclusively their own, guaranteeing



Inama's third generation:
Marco Inama



Pieropan's four Soaves, all wearing the 1920s label design.

quality. But first he had to buy land and plant the vines. His initial purchase was in an area called Calvarino. The grapes were so exceptional that Leonildo decided to bottle it separately. That was 1971, when the concept of single-vineyard wine was brand new in Italy. (The first Barolo cru, Renato Ratti's Marcanasco Barolo, was created just two years earlier.) Leonildo got encouragement from wine critic Luigi Veronelli, who suggested he also put the vineyard name on the label. Thus was born Soave Classico Calvarino, the first single-vineyard Soave.

Leonildo created another in 1978, this from a limestone plot called La Rocca. The contrast with Calvarino's volcanic soil led to more iconoclastic moves: Using pure Garganega, he fermented and matured the wine in oak barrels. "For many, many years, not one single bottle of La Rocca was sold in Italy," Andrea says. "And for many years, my father was called a madman." But importers in the U.S. and Germany were paying attention, and gradually the locals did, too. While some started adding chardonnay to their Soave in the 1980s, lured by the siren call of international grapes, Leonildo held firm. "People didn't trust that Garganega could make fine wine, with aging potential, texture, and acidity," Andrea says. "La Rocca showed the potential. It was unbelievable—like arriving on the moon."

Pieropan is now on the fourth generation: Andrea is agronomist, brother Dario is cellar master. It retains certain traditions—the historic blend in the basic Soave Classico and Calvarino cru; the 1920s label design—but it's forward-looking, too. Pneumatic presses, nitrogen for racking and bottling, and screwcaps have all been introduced in timely fashion. And last year they began another major investment in their future, breaking ground on a new cellar. That's a sure sign there's more to come from this pioneering winery.

Suavia, the purist

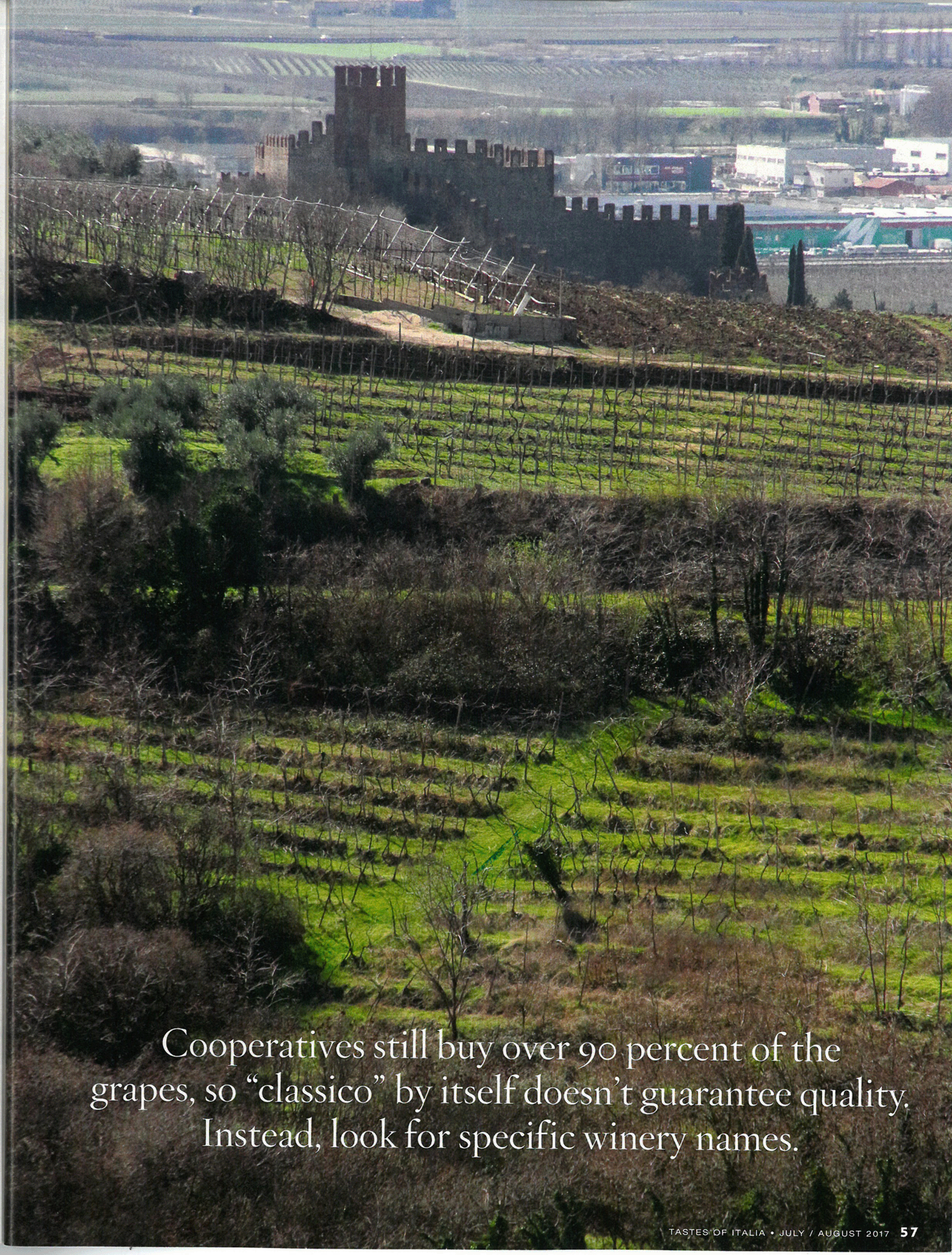
Suavia's Monte Carbonare cru is Soave Classico at its most hedonistic. Intense and concentrated, its flavors can veer towards tropical fruit like mango while always retaining a shimmering minerality.

That's what drew me up the hill to Fittà, a village of 40 families. Here the Tessaris have been growing grapes for four generations. In 1982, Giovanni Tessari got fed up with seeing his quality grapes mixed in with the cooperative's hodgepodge and started his own label, Suavia, using the ancient name for the walled city of Soave. He, too, was branded a madman. Locals couldn't understand why anyone would want to build a brand from scratch.

Presently three of his daughters run the show—Meri, Valentina, and Alessandra—with dad, now 72, looking over their shoulder. Unlike many Soave wineries that have branched out into red wine production, Suavia makes only whites. "Why do they do this, when we have a unique appellation?" Mari asks rhetorically. "As guardians of the Soave Classico appellation, we say no. We're in Soave and we produce only Soave! We don't go to Valpolicella to produce wines that don't belong to our identity."

Suavia's Soaves are glorious, but a new project is attracting attention: resurrecting the indigenous Trebbiano di Soave grape. It started disappearing during the boom years, when Soave producers were pursuing volume. (Garganega is better for that.) Interest revived in the 1990s, but by then nurseries had lost track of the local variety and were selling other types of Trebbiano that were more productive—and more dilute.

Valentina wrote about the grape for her enology thesis at the University of Milan. She and her professor, the renowned Attilio Scienza, then began some field research: With the help



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The medieval city walls of Soave, once part of the Republic of Venice.

of old-time growers, they located stray vines in the hills, then in 2004 planted a pilot vineyard at Suavia with six genotypes. Two years later, two biotypes were planted in a larger vineyard for commercial use. Now it all goes into Massifitti, the first 100 percent Trebbiano di Soave.

Nervy and brimming with the acidity, Massifitti has been a raging success since its debut in 2010. “We were shocked,” says Alessandra. “We ourselves were convinced, but weren’t sure it’d convince others. But from the beginning, everyone was very curious about this revival. Many knew about the grape, but had never tasted it alone.” The positive feedback has inspired them to plant another vineyard in 2018; here they’ll experiment with alternative trellising systems. The work goes on, and the forward-looking energy of Suavia does Soave proud.

Inama, the perfectionist

To go with Matteo Inama into his vineyards is like getting a crash course in advanced viticultural technology: New pruning techniques that throw out decades of bad cutting practices. Soil analysis that relates to tannins. Methods of analyzing phenolics in the berries. Reducing copper in vine treatments to preserve microflora in the soil. Micro-parceling and double harvests. Perhaps science is in Matteo’s blood; his father, after all, got his start in biotech. The Inama winery is another story of multiple generations reflecting their moment in time. Grandfather Giuseppe Inama bought land as an investment, snatching up vineyards at bargain prices after damaging hailstorms. The enologist sold his grapes to other producers, including his employer, Anselmi. It was his son, Stefano, who started the label in 1991. But Stefano kept his day job, selling enzymes and yeast to wineries, until production at Inama hit 150,000 bottles in the

late ’90s. Meanwhile, Stefano’s son Matteo studied economics and was living in London. Undecided about a career in banking, he went to work for a wine bar—and got bit by the bug. He plunged headlong into wine studies until 2009, when he got an unexpected call from his father: Matteo’s brother had died of pneumonia, and he was needed back home.

Flash-forward to 2017: Matteo now heads operations in Soave, while his father manages their red-wine property in the Colli Berici. Matteo has learned by doing. After firing their vineyard manager for stealing, Matteo did that work for several years. “I learned viticulture by calling friends and wineries, and through the internet,” he says. “We started to plow, take out rocks, go organic, get better tractors that don’t compact the soil.” This year he’s happily handing that job over to a new hire from the cutting-edge pruning company Simonit & Sirch.

Inama’s meticulousness is evident in the wine, both the Soave Classico and the two single-vineyard bottlings, Vigneto du Lot and Vigneti di Foscari. Fermented in barrique with six months of batonnage, the crus showcase the rich, round style of minerality that’s possible with pure Garganega.

For your own crash course in Soave Classico, compare samples from all three. The basic Soave Classicos run around \$15, the crus \$25–35. As Mari Tessari rightly says, “If you compare price and quality, it’s one of the best wines you can buy.”

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