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The 1,000-year-old Abbazia di Rosazzo is a perfect starting point to my tour of Colli Orientali to appreciate the views across the Friulian plain towards the Adriatic.

There are four DOCG (controlled designation of origin) zones across the mainly hilly, terraced vineyards. After phylloxera had taken its toll on the vines and pre World War I, there was a trend to plant French grapes such as Chardonnay and Cabernet Franc. Most of the vineyards had to be replanted after World War II as they were destroyed. That planting trend continued and now both international grapes and around 10 native varieties are grown.

This led to a chat about how long it takes for a grape to become native as Merlot has been in the region for more than 300 years and I had always assumed it would have been a more recent introduction. The soil is a calcareous marl known locally as 'poncha' which gives both minerality and body to the wines. At nearby Moschioni Estate we meet and taste with a number of local producers and as in Slovenia, the white Friulano grape is a highlight.

There are also a couple of interesting local red grapes which are well worth exploring in the form of Schioppettino which has notes of spice, pepper and red fruit and Refosco with its structure and high levels of acidity. For a great taste of the region, look out for wines from Bastianich (available in UK via Bibendum Wines), Dorigo, Rodaro Le Due Terre and also Meroi for their delicious sweet Picolit.

That afternoon saw a change of terrain as we move to Vie di Romans estate in the DOCG zone of Isonzo bordering Collio and Colli Orientali as the rolling hills disappear giving way to flat, mainly gravelly soils on either side of the Isonzo River. We stroll through the vineyards and are given a detailed introduction to the climate and the geology of the region. White wines dominate.

Close to the sea, Tenuta di Blasig was founded in 1788 and is now in the heart of the town of Ronchi Dei Legionari. The old winery predates the town that has since built up around it. There is a range of wines on tasting from a number of producers including an expressive Pinot Bianco 2013 from Tenuta Luisa and a fragrant Pinot Grigio 2013 from Borgo SanDaniele who are in their second year of organic conversion.

Our final Friuli stop is in Collio Goriziano, often shortened to simply Collio. We are back in the rolling hills which are shared with neighbouring Slovenia between the Julian Alps and the Adriatic. The area is home to grapes such as Friulano (the grape formally known as Tocai Friulano), Malvasia, Ribolla Gialla and Picolit which is sometimes used to produce sweet wines.

Our first tasting is at Enoteca di Cormons, a tasting room in Cormons. Carlo Di Pradis, Toros and Raccaro all show very good Friulano and there are some interesting blends including a mix of Friulano, Ribolla Gialla and Malvasia from Edi Keber. Later, at Radikon Estate in Oslavia, I meet a group of producers from the Associazione Produttori Ribolla Di Oslavia. Ribolla Gialla is an important variety around Oslavia and there is documentation relating to its presence in the area since 1300.

They are specialising in producing 'orange' or extended skin contact white

OVER THE HILLS...



View from Abbazia di Rosazzo



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