

The SOIL of Goriška Brda

The soil of Brda is marked by a rare phenomenon. It is the bringing together—in a single place—the Sub-Mediterranean and the more temperate continental climates, which have been turning sedimentary rocks into flysch for millions of years. It is in these rocks that, many centuries ago, the courageous and tenacious people of Brda started planting Rebula—the vine variety still used today to produce the most famous and exclusive wine of this region.

The time and the effort spent in growing the grapes and producing wine tells a lot about the winemakers' commitment to this variety, which they have adopted as their very own sort and even come to identify their region with Rebula. The grape had managed to drive its roots deeply into friendly soil thanks to a supporting climate and a favourable topography. Rebula grows well in not overly cold winters and springs and with no excessive summer heat. The hills in Brda are mostly exposed towards the south and that may be another element of the favourable growing conditions. The locals have always known that Rebula grows best in flysch on the eastern slopes and higher altitudes, so that the vine is woken up by the first rays of sunshine and its berries warmed up by the rays from above and the ones reflected the light flysch ground.

Flysch undoubtedly plays an important role in producing Rebula, as the complex soil structure of alternating layers of sand, sandstone and marl enables the vine to drive the roots between them and find supplies of water and minerals, which make their way into the grapes and wine.

Rebula, as a variety, has been popular in Brda for centuries and it can be told by the mere number of plants. The large number of the Rebula biotypes in Brda and unmatched in any other region, is a considerable contribution to biodiversity.

As far back as 1884, Matija Vertovec described the following biotypes of Rebula in his book *Wine-growing for Slovenians*:

- Zelenika, a Rebula with slightly larger grapes and sound yields;
- Rebula with somewhat smaller and sweeter grapes;
- Semi-shattering Rebula with smaller berries and only 2 to 6 larger ones per cluster;
- Shattering Rebula with considerable leaf mass that has longer and thicker wood, with up to 3 large berries per cluster;
- Rebula 'nora' that does not bear fruit;
- Rebula with smaller and sharper leaves bearing medium-quality grapes.

The biodiversity of Rebula may still be preserved in the vineyards of Brda, although the winegrowers have always been selecting biotypes with only yield in their minds. Let us not forget that the inhabitants of Brda do not claim exclusive ownership over Rebula, but rather see it as a living organism stretching beyond national borders, which played a major role in shaping the local soil and turning it into a unique environment. Rebula thus became a local asset here, after having been disregarded or rejected from other cultivation areas, as the decimated vineyards clearly prove. People from Brda have relied heavily on Rebula from the very beginning and this is why it has taken a special place in this region.

Training systems are not used until the third year, as Rebula needs an efficient root system to supply its lush foliage and high yields. This is even more important particularly in dry flysch high in calcium), since this element prevents magnesium and iron from being efficiently absorbed and transferred to the leaves, causing them to become yellow. The residents of Brda are used to this phenomenon, which occurs every year in terraced vineyards, but typically does not affect Rebulas growing in heavy soils on plains. Up to two canes are common for this sort and in the past, they used to be fastened to the wire with twigs from basket willows, which were traditionally planted near vineyards solely for this purpose. Rebula also has strong tendrils that prove helpful in resisting the bora cutting through the terraces in

winter and spring. The buds were usually not pruned after blooming, but only wrapped around the top wire. Due to continuous greening of vineyards and limited use of mineral fertilisers, Rebula was rarely thinned, as it produces moderate, but steady yields.

During the ripening phase, the berry grows slowly but surely, accumulating sugar and reducing acidity, while the skin gets thinner and acquires a golden or reddish glow on the side that is exposed to sunlight, which is why it is so mouth-watering and makes the children eat it up in a flash. The ripening of the berries depends on the location, the exposure, the biotype, the training system and soil conditions, which is why Rebula is usually harvested at different times in Brda and the situation in the vineyard needs to be closely monitored. Because of such a specific ripening process, Rebula can only be picked by hand, as the berries are quite easily damaged despite their thick skin.

After being brought to the cellar, Rebula is processed quickly, depending on the producers' intentions and on the type and quality of the wine they want to make. The settlers here soon discovered that due to the anatomical and biochemical characteristics of the berries that have developed in Brda, Rebula may turn into an array of different types of wine: from sparkling wines to light or full-bodied and orange still dry wines or even sweet wines with residual sugar.