

Soave: why producer is key

Northeast Italy's classic dry white has come on in leaps and bounds in the past few decades. Michael Apstein gets to the heart of this hilly region, highlighting six of his favourite producers and selecting 12 of the best wines to try

SOAVE HAS NEVER been better. Ian D'Agata, a world authority on Italian wine, says flatly: 'It's rare to get a bad Soave today.' I'd go even further – it's easy to get a very good one, and at a price that won't break your budget. But that certainly hasn't always been the case.

If your memory of Soave is the watery, bland liquid that Bolla marketed so successfully decades ago (many consumers assumed the name of the region was actually Bolla Soave) then it's time to try it again – even Bolla's (see p48). And Soave's renaissance is a double boon for consumers, because the prices have failed to keep up with the quality.

So how can you take advantage of the bargains that abound? Since the usual Italian hierarchical DOC/DOCG classification is flawed in Soave and the newly adopted cru system is confusing and imperfect, my advice is the same as when choosing Burgundy: producer, producer, producer.

On the following pages are six producers who make outstanding Soaves and dispel the misconception that they are all simple wines to be drunk within a year or so of release.

But first, the reasons why the DOCG and cru categorisations don't help the consumer. Normally, wines from areas awarded DOCG status are better and more distinctive than wines from DOC areas – at least that's the theory. It's not, however, the case in Soave.

The best hillsides, with their limestone-rich and volcanic rock-laden poor soil, defined the

Classico zone (delineated in 1927) well before the DOC was established. The DOCG Soave Superiore, created in 2002, included this Classico area – and here's where the controversy started – as well as other hillside areas, named Colli Scaligeri after the Lords of Verona who owned much of the area in the 14th century.

Classico producers felt the inclusion of these other, less well-situated hillside vineyards diluted the reputation of the Classico area, and have opted to continue to label their wines as Soave Classico DOC instead of Soave Superiore DOCG. Hence, the DOCG designation fails to identify all of Soave's best wines because many of the top producers have decided not to use it.

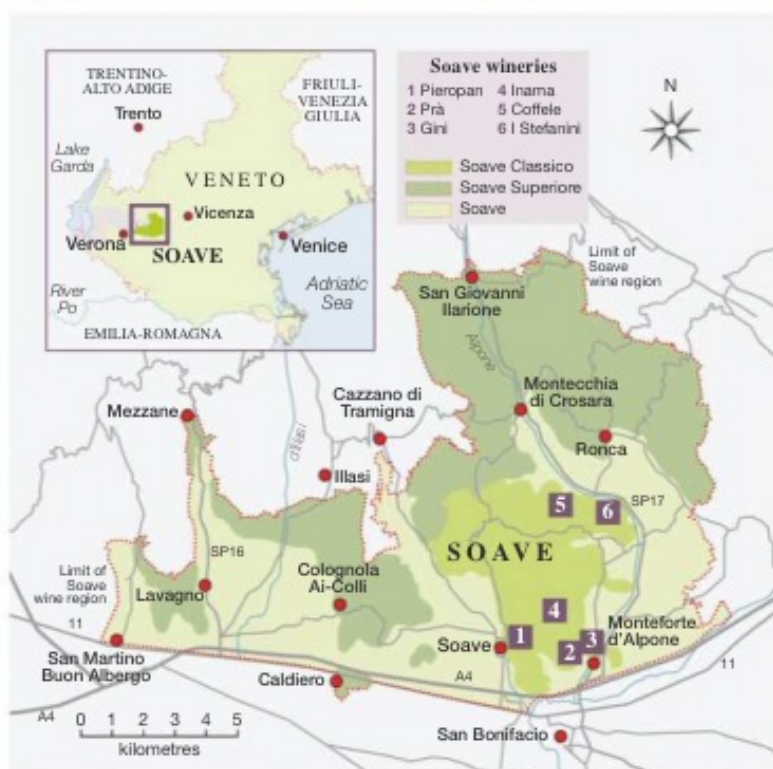
Enter the 'cru' system. Using soil analysis and micro-vinification tests, Soave's consorzio has mapped vineyards to identify the best ones, which they refer to as cru. This makes enormous sense in a place like Soave where the volcanic soil and exposure of the vineyards varies dramatically over small distances.

But Soave's cru system is problematic and confusing for consumers. Regulations governing yields or minimal ripeness levels, for instance, are no more stringent for the crus than for other Soave vineyards. Furthermore, producers can still use non-geographic names on their labels, so consumers don't know whether the name on the label refers to a cru or the producer's grandmother.

'The DOCG designation fails to identify all of Soave's best wines because many top producers have decided not to use it'



Above: Dario Pieropan is cellar master at his family winery, the fourth generation to run it along with his vineyard manager brother, Andrea



Young Soave has a subtle peachy stone-fruit character buttressed by lively acidity and a hint of almond-like bitterness on the finish. Typically, cru wines are more concentrated and fuller in body and require two or three years of bottle age for full expression and – here’s the surprise – can develop beautifully over a decade or so.

Consumers are lucky to have examples from the 2015 and 2016 vintages in the market at the moment. Both are excellent years, though different in character, with the 2015s being richer and riper, while the 2016s are generally racier. The 2017s, just appearing, resemble the 2015s more than the 2016s.

Pieropan

In 1971, decades before the Soave consorzio began to study the concept of crus, Pieropan started to bottle its now iconic Calvarino. Still a family business, fourth-generation >

winemaker brothers – Andrea, who looks after the vineyards, and Dario, who runs the cellar – are in charge.

All 46ha of its Soave vineyards, which were certified organic in 2015, are in the Classico zone. As befits a viticulturist, Andrea insists: 'The vineyard name is more important than the appellation,' which explains why Calvarino is proudly displayed on the front label, while Soave Classico is relegated to the back label. Pieropan bottles wine from another cru, La Rocca, which has more clay in the soil and translates into a more robust wine compared to the racier Calvarino.

Pieropan consistently makes great wines, from its Soave Classico to its cru, that have precision, reflect their origins and develop marvellously with a decade or more of bottle age. When I visited Pieropan last September, Andrea poured a 1995 Soave Classico Superiore that he had opened three days earlier (prior to the DOCG, 'Superiore' was used to indicate a wine with additional ripeness). It was magnificent, with a Riesling-like nose and a waxy, creamy texture.

Prà

Graziano Prà sums up his impression of Soave's DOCG system when he says matter-of-factly, and without a trace of arrogance: '*Mi chiamo Prà*,' (my name is Prà) explaining that that's enough of a guarantee. He was the one who, in 1983, decided to bottle wines under the family name instead of selling his grapes to the local cooperative.

Prà makes an amazing line of Soave Classico, starting with Otto, named after a favourite (but sadly deceased) border collie. Made entirely from Garganega, it represents 80% of the winery's production, roughly 20,000 cases. Next up the ladder is Staforte, made from a selection of grapes, fermented and aged in stainless steel tanks with occasional batonnage and six months of lees contact to add complexity.

The flagship wine comes from the Monte Grande cru and is made from a blend of about 70% Garganega with Trebbiano di Soave (also known as Verdicchio). Prà says proudly: 'Monte Grande gives you an idea of what Soave is all about. Not the watery wines of the past.' Prà's unique viticulture and winemaking technique is to cut the canes carrying the Garganega grapes and then leave them on the vine for another three to five weeks. He then harvests these partially dried grapes and combines them with normally harvested Trebbiano di Soave to make his Monte Grande cru. Prà's wines dazzle at every level.



Above: all of Pieropan's 46ha of vineyards were certified organic in 2015

Right: Graziano Prà believes his name, not Soave's DOCG system, is the only guarantee of quality his wines need



Gini

The Gini family is one of the oldest, most established wine producers in Soave. Located in Monteforte d'Alpone, the heart of the Classico region, the family has been growing grapes since the 17th century. Documents from the mid-19th century confirm that Giuseppe Gini purchased vineyards there.

Today, brothers Sandro and Claudio Gini are at the helm. They proudly proclaim they've done no plantings – all their vines were put in by their grandfather and great grandfather, which means that, by their estimate, their youngest vines are about 50 years old.

Gini vinifies its Soave cru in oak barrels, most of which are old, and without sulphites (they add a small amount just before bottling). They believe indigenous yeasts result in fewer stuck and better fermentations and, in the absence of sulphites, this results in more refined wines. They emphasise the importance of impeccable hygiene in the cellar to work

Below: Inama's Soave Classico 2016





Above: Sandro (left) and Claudio Gini in vineyards planted by their forebears more than 50 years ago

without sulphites at this stage. The new vaulted, gravity-flow, temperature-controlled cellar dug into the volcanic rock gives them that – it's so clean, you could eat off the floor.

Gini's iconic wine comes from the Frosca vineyard, a cru. A vertical tasting of Frosca in 2009 of wines dating back to 1990 was eye-opening: tasted blind, the wines could easily be mistaken for white Burgundy.

Inama

Stefano Inama is emphatic as we stand on Monte Foscarino, the major hill of Soave Classico: 'Soave is not a winemaker's wine. This is the winemaker,' as he points to the vineyard. He continues: 'The less interference in the cellar the better.'

The lava soil – the Classico area is a series of ancient volcanic cones – makes the wines floral and minerally, rather than fruity, says Inama. He explains that Garganega is well adjusted to the volcanic soil and, when it is planted elsewhere, it produces a very different, far less distinctive wine. Garganega has very little varietal flavour itself, which means it transmits the unique flavours of tufa-volcanic soil beautifully. Hence, it will never be a variety that is planted all over the world.

Soave's problem in the past, Inama explains, is that, in response to its popularity, growers planted Garganega in the plains around Soave, where it produced a characterless wine. With Inama's focus on place, it is not surprising that its Soaves come only from the Classico area: a Soave Classico plus two wines from different areas of the Monte Foscarino cru: Vigneti di Foscarino and Vigneto du Lot.

Coffele

One important reason Coffele excels is simply its willingness to experiment and admit when it has made a mistake. Thirty years ago, Giuseppe Coffele added Chardonnay to >

Apstein's pick of the region



Gini, La Frosca, Soave Classico 2014 94

£13 (ib)–£19.85 **Hallsham Cellars, Justerini & Brooks, Tannico, Winedirect**

La Frosca ranks with Calvarino, Monte Grande and a few others as Soave's grand cru sites. Wines from vineyards of this nature, regardless of country, need time. This 2014, rich with nutty undertones, has started to show development while maintaining the freshness characteristic of the vintage.

Drink 2018–2023 Alcohol 12.5%



Pieropan, Calvarino, Soave Classico 2015 94

£17.50–£23 **widely available via UK agent Liberty Wines**

A blend of Garganega and Trebbiano di Soave, this delivers more stone fruit and less spice than the regular Soave Classico (see p48). Nonetheless, it still has gossamer

elegance and invigorating freshness. A substantial wine that cries out for chicken in a creamy sauce. **Drink 2018–2023 Alc 12.5%**

Inama, Vigneto du Lot, Soave Classico 2016 93

£22.87 **Bernabel**

This bottling comes from a 'modern' 2ha trellised vineyard, in contrast to the usual pergola planting traditional to the area. Weightier and more complex, with floral as well as stone fruit notes, it maintains Inama's signature vivacity, despite coming from a riper vintage.

Drink 2018–2023 Alc 13%

I Stefanini, Monte di Fico, Soave Classico 2016 92

N/A UK **www.istefanini.it**

Reminiscent of Burgundy, this bottling is vastly different from the Monte de Toni, despite the close proximity of the sites, just 10

metres apart. Denser, but not heavier, it maintains the bright racy character of top Soave. It also has a seemingly never-ending finish.

Drink 2018–2023 Alc 12.5%



Ca' Rugate, Monte Fiorentino, Soave Classico 2016 91

£15.12–£18.73 **Corking Wines, Exel, GP Brands, Hallgarten, Wineman**

This cru delivers a slightly waxy texture that underpins its stony essence. From dark volcanic soil, it's a concentrated wine that, like many youthful Soaves from top sites, needs time in the glass for its raciness to show. **Drink 2018–2023 Alc 12.5%**

Prà, Staforte, Soave Classico 2016 91

£22 **Ann et Vin, D Byrne & Co, Highbury Vintners, Taurus Wine, The Clifton Cellars**

Not a cru, but rather made from a selection of Prà's best Garganega grapes, this is fermented and aged in stainless steel tanks with six months of lees contact to add complexity. With a seductively creamy texture, it delivers an extra dimension without sacrificing energy and verve. Wonderfully elegant, the acidity prolongs its finish. **Drink 2018–2020 Alc 12.5%**



Coffele, Castel Cerino, Soave Classico 2016 90

£9.50 **FortyFive10°, The Wine Society**

With the 2014 vintage, Coffele's vineyards were the first in the Classico zone certified organic. This current Castel Cerino bottling, a cru, balances subtle stone fruit and mineral-like flavours. Lively, with a hint of bitterness on the finish adding to its appeal.

Drink 2018–2020 Alc 12.5% >



Above: Chiara Coffe manages the family Soave estate with her winemaker brother Alberto

Garganega – a practice still allowed by the regulations – in an effort to bolster its Soave Classico. But he abandoned the project quickly because it destroyed the character of the wine. Coffe achieved better results by reducing yields of Garganega, delaying the harvest until it was fully ripe but not overly so, and blending it with Trebbiano di Soave, which, he is quick to note, is distinct from Trebbiano Toscano, a grape that is no longer allowed in the blend.

Coffe's Soave Classico, Castel Cerino, named after the hill of the same name, is made entirely from Garganega grown in vineyards with both light (limestone) and dark soils. Its cru, Ca' Visco, from a limestone-rich area on the same hill, contains 20% to 25% Trebbiano di Soave. Experience has shown that the wines from the limestone are more refined, elegant and need time to evolve, whereas those from the darker soils are more exuberant and ready sooner. Coffe's Ca' Visco develops beautifully with five or more years of bottle age, while its Castel Cerino is consistently delightful at an early age.

I Stefanini

Though founded only in 2003, the Tessari family, owners of I Stefanini, have been grape-growers since the 19th century. (The name comes from a nickname of an ancestor, Stefano, by which the family has always been known locally.)

Francesco Tessari, the winemaker, works with his father Valentino, who runs the vineyards. I Stefanini has quickly become a leading producer in the region,



Apstein's pick of the region (cont'd)

Pieropan, Soave Classico 2017 90
£12-£17.50 widely available via UK agent Liberty Wines

Garganega with 15% Trebbiano di Soave, this is floral and lacy yet its persistence belies its delicacy and a hint of white pepper enhances its appeal. A fresh and vibrant wine that would go well with shellfish or other simple seafood. Pieropan's wines have all been certified organic since the 2015 vintage. **Drink** 2018-2020 **Aic** 12%

Inama, Soave Classico 2016 89
£14.99-£16.99 (2015) Connolly's, Direct Wine Shipments

Fermented and aged in stainless steel tanks to capture its fruity essence, this is quintessential Soave Classico. Inama selects grapes from a variety of its vineyards in the Classico zone to produce this fresh and lively wine. Delicate stone fruit character, with vibrancy in the finish to amplify its appeal. **Drink** 2018-2020 **Aic** 12%

Prà, Otto, Soave Classico 2016 89
£11.95-£14.49 Amps Fine Wines, Field & Fawcett, James Nicholson, Palmers Wine Store, Purple Foot Wine, Raffles, T Wright, Talking Wines, Vin Neuf

Otto, which takes its name from a much-missed pet border collie, comprises 80% of Prà's production. Made entirely from Garganega, it is

clean and bright, delivering subtle stone fruit characters intertwined with mineral-like notes. Tightly wound, it opens beautifully in the glass. Bracing acidity keeps it lively throughout a meal. **Drink** 2018-2020 **Aic** 12%



Bolla, Tufaie, Soave Classico 2016 87
£11.99 Bucktrout & Co, Conviviality Group, LA Drinks Co, Ocado, Venus Wine & Spirit

You're not likely to find this Bolla Soave on supermarket shelves. Tufaie is proprietary name, not a cru, and reminds customers of the tufa-volcanic soil of Soave Classico. Shining acidity complements its apricot character. It shows how far the entire Soave category has come. **Drink** 2018-2023 **Aic** 12.5%

I Stefanini, Il Selese, Soave 2016 87
£8.93 (2015) Oddbins

From vineyards outside the Classico zone, this shows why consumers should not rely on the official DOC/DOCG categorisation. Less concentrated than I Stefanini's other Soaves, it nonetheless has an appealing zesty raciness and more character than many Soave Classicos from less-talented producers. **Drink** 2018 **Aic** 12.5%

making distinctive wines at all levels, even a notable DOC Soave. The pair prefer to rely only on Garganega, which they vinify and age in stainless steel tanks, with five or six months of lees ageing, giving an exhilarating raciness with density and length.

I Stefanini is one of the few Classico-based producers to have opted to use the DOCG designation for one of its crus, Monte di Fice, a vineyard sited directly behind the winery. Another cru, Monte di Toni – a blend from their oldest vineyards, though located on the same hill as Monte di Fice – is very different on the palate and shows the incredible uniqueness and diversity of Soave even within a small area. It's reminiscent of Burgundy. **D**

Michael Apstein is an awarded US-based wine writer, educator and judge