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The Morning Claret

A not so daily dose of the wild and wonderful in wine

[Fulvio Bressan – Taking the long-term view](#)

By [Simon Woolf](#), 14/07/2012



“Better that you have wine in your heart and soul, or you change business.” **Fulvio Bressan, June 2012**

Winemaking has developed significantly in the last few decades. Winemakers now routinely draw on a vast canon of research, learning and technology to help ensure that they produce consistent wines and harvest fruit in prime condition, year in, year out. Vintage variation, of the sort that wrote off most early 90's Bordeaux, is almost a thing of the past.

Modern viticulture (growing the grapes) tends to focus on getting a good return-on-investment, a defined yield (which could be high or low depending on the ambitions of the winemaker), and physiological ripeness – in other words, the point where every component of the grape, from tannins, to pips, skins and flesh, is ripe and not green or bitter tasting.

A little knowledge can be a dangerous thing though – our supermarkets and wine merchants have shelves lined with fault-free wines, but there is ever-increasing homogeneity, with “correct” but

bland wines dominating sales. What if the winemaker wants to attain uniqueness, excitement and daring in their products? Perhaps there's a need to look back to more traditional practices.

[Fulvio Bressan](#) is a ninth-generation winemaker from Friuli Isonzo who does precisely that. Not that he has any lack of up-to-date winemaking knowledge. Trained in Bordeaux, Bressan has been making wine at his family's property since the mid-1990s. But his approach is rather different to accepted practice.

Farming methods

Fulvio is passionate about nurturing the land that his family have inhabited for centuries. That means organic or biodynamic farming methods (Bressan was certified organic until 2001, but in the face of almost wholly absent inspectors could not see any value in renewing his certification). No fertilisers or synthetic products are used, with copper being reserved as a last resort.



130 year old Schioppettino vines

Fulvio and his wife Jelena (herself an inexhaustible font of knowledge on the family's winemaking methods) tend their vines (20ha spread across Friuli Isonzo and Collio), with a view to future generations – not just the next decade. For the Bressans, it is important to limit the vigour of their vines not just to keep yields low (and they are *very* low, at around 3.5 tons per hectare), but also so that the plants are not worn out after 30 years. Fulvio wants his vines to be capable of producing for a century or more. As living proof, they have a prized plot of 130-year-old Schioppettino in Corona, which contributes much of the complexity and depth to the Bressan Schioppettino blend.

Interestingly, the Bressans do not green harvest. Fulvio's view is that mature vines are self-regulating, at least if they are tended with respect. Green harvesting as a modern practice has become so synonymous with quality, that it is now required under the Friuli DOC laws. Fulvio's

solution is simply to bottle his wines under the broader, supposedly less prestigious Friuli-Venezia-Gorizia IGT category.

Fulvio staunchly believes that grapes should not be grown in locations where irrigation is required – he never irrigates, instead ensuring that his vines send down deep roots to search for water themselves. He does not grow grass between the rows, as this would provide too much competition for the vines, and potentially require weedkiller – instead the stony soil is left bare.

Local varieties

Dark skinned [Schioppettino](#), also known as Ribolla Nera, is one of three treasured indigenous varieties (Pignol and [Verduzzo Friulano](#) are the others) which are pretty much the Bressan *raison d'être*. Although the family has historical plots of Cabernets Sauvignon and Franc, Merlot and Pinot Grigio, it is likely that these varieties will be grubbed up as they reach the end of their useful lives.

Most revered of all is [Pignol](#) or “Pignolo” in the local dialect. “Look at the power of these vines”, Fulvio commented as we strode down the rows of these rather angular, commanding plants. This is not an easy variety to cultivate – yields are notoriously unreliable, and inconsistent, even from one bunch of grapes to another on the same vine. It’s worth the effort though, as the Pignol wine is extraordinary in its power, longevity and complexity.

Winemaking

Fulvio’s strongly held views on the use of cultured yeast to ferment wine are famous – “It is the same thing as getting your wife to sleep with another man, to have your son. Then that is *not* your son”. The subject cropped up several times in our conversation, and Fulvio reminded me “If you bring cultured yeasts to my winery, you (will) not arrive back at the home – except in a wheelbarrow.”

During my visit, the winery was being totally overhauled with a new floor and wooden roof. We talked about the traditional lime mortar, and the mixture of 25 different herbs used to seal the wood, to ensure that viable wild yeast cultures could develop easily in the winery.

A combination of stainless steel and concrete vats are used, together with 2000 litre Slovenian “botti”, and old barriques for the Pignol. No new oak or anything else which might unduly flavour the wines is used. A limited amount of temperature control is practised. The aim is to let the grape varieties, and the “terroir” speak for themselves. For Fulvio though, it is also important that the wine communicates something about him, his family, his philosophy – he talks of emotion in wine.

The wines



Jelena opening the Cabernet

Fulvio's wines are not for the faint of heart. They are bold and uncompromising, like the man himself. They grab hold of you, and shake you up and down, before you get the measure of their considerable panache. The reds in particular can be incredibly concentrated – that makes sense when you consider the very low yields, and dry-farming in a sub-Mediterranean climate. The Bressan vines have to work hard to produce their precious crop.

Concentration is not a synonym for overripe, jammy or overbearing. Interestingly, alcohol levels chez Bressan are much more restrained than many of their Friulian neighbours. It's depressingly easy to find Malvasias from Friuli Collio with 14.5% alcohol and above. Yet Fulvio's wines are typically around 13 – 13.5%. This is due to a combination of the restraint exercised in the vineyards, and the natural yeast strains, which do not maximise alcohol levels as readily as cultured yeasts. It is an important factor in ensuring balance and freshness.

The Bressan wines buck the current trend for easy-drinking young wine. Typically released when they are 5-6 years old, these wines need time to show their best. This point was really hammered home to me, when I tasted some older vintages at a nearby Osteria (see below).

Seek these wines out wherever you can find them – they are rare treasures (the estate makes only around 50,000 bottles a year), created by a winemaking family that care deeply about the integrity of their output, and the long term future of their estate. This passion is very ably transmitted in their wines.

Tasted over lunch



Pinot Nero vines near the house

Carat 2006

Just bottled, and very much an orange wine – a traditional blend of Ribolla Gialla, Malvasia and Friulano, with creamy fruit, and aromas of red onion marmalade. Quite seriously tannic (not surprising as the wine stayed on the skins for four weeks), and I have to admit I would want to leave this for a year before cracking open another bottle. Terrific length, driving acidity and a bright future.

Ego 2003

A 50/50 blend of Cabernet Franc and Schioppettino, with the latter contributing that utterly distinctive green pepper nose, and the former providing freshness. Elegant and poised.

Pinot Nero 2006

A super-concentrated, spicy Pinot which is starting to calm down and show its more elegant side as it matures (Now noticeably more well-mannered than it was in October 2011). This should be quite special given another few years on the clock – and will effortlessly survive for a further decade.

Schioppettino 2006

I have a love-hate relationship with the 2006 Schioppettino. Sometimes it seems to have an almost green (unripe) note, however there is plenty of brambley, leathery fruit, and a lemon-fresh finish.



Schioppettino to the left, Pignol to the right

Tasted in the winery

Verduzzo Friulano 2007

Late harvested, dry but with a wonderful honeyed character, complex palate and beautiful amber colour. Very long, this also has to be one of Fulvio's most accessible wines.

Pinot Grigio 2006 (Tank sample)

Fulvio describes this as "a silly wine". He has every intention of grubbing up his Pinot Grigio, once the vines reach an age where he can justify it. I think he's being harsh – it may lack a little acidity, but there's an attractive bitter orange note, and full, fat texture.

Cabernet Crown Domains 2003

A blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc, I found the exaggerated herbaceous nose got in the way with this wine. There is terrific structure and staying power, but less individual character than many of the other Bressan wines.

No. 3 2003

Definitely more than the sum of its parts – those parts being Schioppettino, Cabernet Franc and Pinot Nero. A distinctive peppery nose gives way to a silky pinot texture, with red fruits and an attractive saline quality. Elegant, complex and exciting (Or as Fulvio would say – just like him!)

Pignol 1997 (Barrel sample)



Taking a barrel sample of the Pignol '97

Surely this is Fulvio's personal favourite. He excitedly told me several times "Now *this* is wine, Simon". And I would have to agree. Further proof that the Bressan wines need serious amounts of time to show their best. Aromas of leather and mushrooms give way to sweet blackberry, prune and dried apricot fruit, and a lively lemon candy freshness. Although there's only 3gr of residual sugar, you'd be forgiven for thinking there was more. Fulvio told me it's actually the tannins providing all the sweetness. And what structured, refined tannins they are.

This wine could surely live for decades – I guessed it was rather unapproachable in its youth. "If you taste this at one year old, you wouldn't be able to sit down for a week" was Fulvio's response. After 15 years mellowing in old barriques, it still has vitality and freshness, yet so much more besides. Asked when they might finally bottle this giant of a wine, Fulvio shrugged "Maybe next year".

Tasted at Osteria L'alchimista, Gorizia.

Schioppettino 2005

The only wine the Bressans made in a terrible vintage. And luckily Stefano, the proprietor at the Bressan's favourite local Enoteca, had a bottle he was willing to open. I really liked the freshness of this wine, the "high definition" raspberry fruit and the slightly lighter texture. It developed wonderfully after nearly two hours of being open, with the nose becoming more integrated and less overtly peppery.

Carat 2003

Compared to the slightly unapproachable 2006, what a treat to try this more mature sibling. Still structured, dry and complex with flavours spanning green tea, herbs, butterscotch, plum and dried apricot. And all underpinned by a supple “come hither” texture.



Nereo Bressan – winemaker, butcher, prosciutto maker



Fulvio and Jelena, standing in front of Schioppettino vines



Romance in the vineyards – Bressan style



Fulvio and artist Pablo Figar, with new work for the winery

I cannot thank Fulvio, Jelena, Nereo and Paolina enough for their boundless hospitality and generosity during my visit. A debt of gratitude also to Stefano Mestroni at [Osteria L'alchimista](#), for sharing some older vintages with us. And for ensuring that I did not get to bed at an even remotely sensible hour.

Finally many thanks to Pierpaolo Penco, director of the Friuli Isonzo Consorzio, for the lift – and healthy discourse along the way!

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Bressan wines are distributed in the UK and Italy by [Les Caves de Pyrene](#). Terroirs is a good place to sample them in London.

Tags: [1997](#), [2003](#), [2005](#), [2006](#), [2007](#), [biodynamic](#), [bressan](#), [Friuli](#), [isonzo](#), [natural wine](#), [organic](#), [pignol](#), [pignolo](#), [Pinot Grigio](#), [pinot gris](#), [pinot nero](#), [pinot noir](#), [schioppetino](#), [verduzzo](#)., [8 Comments and 0 Reactions](#)

[Friday night at Green and Blue – Bressan Schioppetino 2004 and Pintia 2006](#)

By [Simon Woolf](#), 05/03/2011 in [wine](#)

Someone said to me recently that Friday night was all the excuse they needed to celebrate with a fine wine. I decided to put this excellent philosophy into practice last night and recruited a few friends to repair to [Green and Blue](#), an exceptional wine bar in East Dulwich. For those not familiar, Green and Blue is a brilliantly conceived combination of wine merchant and bar, somewhat in the style of an Italian enoteca. The wine list is all about small production wines, of the sort almost never found on high-street or supermarket shelves. There's a strong bias towards "natural" wine-making, with organic and biodynamic production encouraged but not insisted upon. The bar is lively, unpretentious and welcoming, the staff both helpful and knowledgeable. Even better, it's possible to browse the shelves in the shop, find an interesting wine, and then have it served to your table in the bar for a mere £7 corkage – or for no extra charge, between Monday and Wednesday.

So, what did we drink in this Aladdin's cave? Well, I'd done some research beforehand and was keen to try the [2004 Bressan Schioppetino](#). We were recommended to let this decant and breathe for a bit, so tucked into a light and beautifully fragrant Marcillac to start. We then moved on to the Schioppetino which was a stunner. This is a relatively obscure indigenous grape variety from Italy's most North Easterly wine region, Friuli. The Bressan example had masses and masses of sweet raspberry fruit, both on the nose and the palate. Some very subtle oak plus the wine's naturally powerful tannins gave it serious structure – I can well understand that this may have been a bit tough straight out of the bottle. Trademark Italian freshness and very good length rounded off a highly enjoyable experience.

By this point in the night we felt like pushing the boat out a little more, having spied some tempting bottles of [Vega Sicilia Pintia 2006](#) in the shop. Pintia is a premium wine estate in Toro, a hot inland region some way west from Vega Sicilia's original home in Ribera del Duero. Made from 100% Tempranillo and aged in a combination of new French and American oak, this is a seriously epic yet exquisitely balanced expression of the grape.

The nose seemed quite compacted and reticent, but in the mouth this was massive, with a gorgeous velvet cushion of tannins underpinning roasted plum and berry fruit, smoke and a herbaceous finish. What really strikes me about this wine, just like its Unico labelmate, is its purity and focus. There isn't a single nuance or a splinter of wood that is not beautifully integrated and crafted into the whole. That's some feat when you have such a big wine with 15% alcohol. However, this seems

almost too monolithic at the moment – I can't help feeling that another 5 years might be needed before the '06 is really delivering its full potential. Still, there's no reason not to keep checking progress along the way!

On another occasion, I hope to meet the as yet elusive owner and creator of Green and Blue, Kate Thal. My friends include a number of her [former students, who have high praise for her passion, knowledge and approach.](#) This is reason enough to consider attending one of the [upcoming tastings.](#)

Tags: [2004](#), [2006](#), [bressan](#), [east dulwich](#), [friuli](#), [green and blue](#), [pintia](#), [review](#), [schioppettino](#), [tasting note](#), [tempranillo](#), [vega sicilia.](#), [2 Comments and 0 Reactions](#)
