

12.07.2008

2002 Bressan "Special Bottling" Pinot Nero, Friuli, Italy

I'm not entirely sure why some of the best wines in the world are made by people who are more than a little crazy, but there are enough wacko winemakers out there to make it clear that the connection between great wine and reclusive eccentrics is more than mere coincidence.

Even more telling are the number of these "eno savants" (to perhaps coin a phrase) that live in Friuli, in northeast Italy.

Once upon a time, there was no Italy, there was only the river Isonzo, winding its way down out of the Alps towards the Adriatic sea. From the high peaks it looped and loped, laying down beds of granitic gravel to make a sloping country which sprouted many things. Protected from the harsh continental weather by the Alps, and warmed by the humid breezes off the Adriatic, this mild region naturally attracted the various nomadic people that passed through the region, some of whom knew a good thing when they saw it, and settled down.

Some of the earliest settlers of the region were likely Celtic peoples who brought with them not only the skills of cultivating grape vines, but the inventive skills of aging their wines in wooden casks, a technology which surprised and delighted the Greeks and the various other Mediterranean cultures who came to trade in the 4th century B.C.

The region that would eventually become known as Farra d'Isonzo to those who live there, passed through the hands of many an empire before it settled down into the little nook of Italy that it represents today. But throughout the centuries Friuli has always been known for two things: grapes, and people who do things their own way.

Fulvio Bressan represents the 9th generation of winemakers carrying the Bressan name and working a small plot of land in the Farra d'Isonzo since 1726. And given the way he runs his winery, you would think that he might just be channeling all 9 generations of prior expertise, with little care for how the rest of the world might make their wines.

OK, so he does make one concession to modernity, which entails fermenting his wine in stainless steel tanks which he cools with water from his well. But apart from that, Bressan is as old school as you can get, down to the fact that he seems to run the family estate nearly single-handedly.

The [Bressan](#) recipe for wine is as simple as it is maddeningly extreme. Take lots of old vines growing various indigenous varieties, as well as Pinot Noir. Dry farm them with the most extreme pruning methods possible, to the point that each vine bears only one or two clusters of fruit. Pick after personally tasting every single cluster to make sure it is ripe, then cut off only the *shoulders* and the most perfect clumps of berries on those clusters and throw them into the tank, leaving the rest to be made into jam or grappa.

Ferment the wine for months with only ambient yeasts after a month-long maceration period, letting the wine do its thing as long as necessary in the tanks, including malolactic fermentation after the juice has been pressed off the skins. After this secondary fermentation, the wine is transferred to 2000 liter, ancient oak casks, where it receives regular *battonage* (a process where the particles of yeast that settle to the bottom of the cask, known as lees, are agitated and stirred around in the wine). Fining and filtration are also eschewed.

After that, it's anyone's guess. The cellar dissolves into alchemy. Bressan regularly mixes vintages, forgets casks of wine, makes special blends never to be repeated, and generally disregards all the modern traditions of winemaking and bottling (no doubt breaking some laws in the process, but hey, this is Friuli, not Brunello). Some of the labels are handmade, some don't bear any vintage date whatsoever, and those that do are never guaranteed to be correct. The wines are released and sold when Bressan damn well pleases, and in such minute quantities (as small as 20 to 40 cases for some wines) that most people have never even heard of them.

Which doesn't bother Bressan one bit.

Tasting Notes:

Light to medium garnet in the glass, this wine has a nose of dried herbs, raspberries, woodsmoke, and dried meat. In the mouth it is gorgeously textured, smooth to the point of being otherworldly, with a mysterious concoction of cranberry, raspberry, cedar, incense, wet leaves, and leather flavors that linger for a long time. With more time and air, this wine's fruit becomes more crystalline even as the sharp acids mellow to a tangy note amidst the earthy qualities. Quite distinctive, this wine is not for everyone, but those who are looking for personality will find it here in spades.

Food Pairing:

Of the things that I drank this with tonight, I thought it did best with the prosciutto and fresh burrata on warm focaccia.

Overall Score: around 9

How Much?: \$37



This wine is sometimes [available for purchase on the Internet](#).

Posted by: [Alder](#) on December 7, 2008 10:04 PM

Filed under: [Boutique Wines](#) , [Red Wine](#) , [Wine Reviews](#)

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Comments (15)

[Doug Cook](#) wrote:

12.07.08 at 10:23 PM

I'm 100% with you: it's fanatics that often make the best or most interesting wines. And I think that's part of why, for example, biodynamic wines are often interesting. I'm not sure I believe in biodynamics itself, although there are some aspects of it that make good sense, but I think that one of the biggest reasons biodynamics "works" is simply a correlation: it takes a fanatic, or at least a passionate, grower to want to deal with biodynamy. And passion makes good juice.

Looking forward to trying the Bressan. Have had plenty of Pinot from the Alto Adige, but very little from Friuli.

[Jack Everitt](#) wrote:

12.07.08 at 10:28 PM

I've had this recently and scored it a tad higher than you did.

But my wife and I also drank a bottle of the Pignol that was much better than this (but, of course at a higher price).

Anyway, I now rank them as another top notch Friuli producer.

[Ted Murphy](#) wrote:

12.08.08 at 5:36 AM

Another great article. I was unable to resist buying a couple of bottles. Thank you!

[Brett](#) wrote:

12.08.08 at 6:29 AM

Did anyone find the wine available in the SF Bay Area?

[Dylan](#) wrote:

12.08.08 at 6:57 AM

That's incredible! A 9th generation, family winemaker. Passed from father to son over all that time. Good luck to the son that tries to become something else in that family. Thanks for the story, Alder. It's interesting characters like that which brighten up my day.

[Mr Wino](#) wrote:

12.08.08 at 7:13 AM

I have drank 3 bottles of this wine it's very nice.

[vin de la table](#) wrote:

12.08.08 at 8:19 AM

If he didn't use well water to chill his steel tanks, I wasn't sure if I would try this wine- It sounded too modern for a moment there. Thanks for sharing this wine. I'm keeping my eye out. Have you tried other wines from him?

[Alder](#) wrote:

12.08.08 at 9:13 AM

:~)

I've got two of his other wines in my cellar waiting for the right opportunity.

[Jeffrey Wolfe](#) wrote:

12.08.08 at 1:07 PM

Why isn't there something on this blog to tell us where we can buy the wine?

[Alder](#) wrote:

12.08.08 at 8:29 PM

This wine has actually gotten better on day two. I may have under-rated it.

[Cory Cartwright](#) wrote:

12.08.08 at 9:10 PM

Thanks for the suggestion. This sounds right up my alley.

 C Coston wrote:

12.09.08 at 8:15 AM

Who distributes Bressan wines in the US?

 [Wolfy](#) wrote:

12.09.08 at 4:57 PM

"the connection between great wine and reclusive eccentrics is more than mere coincidence."

Well, I went to University in Pisa in the early 90s and it happened to me to be "welcomed" with a rifle in hand by more than one winemaker in Tuscany: they were completely puzzled by the fact that I wanted to visit them and their wineries.

 [Kenny Galloway](#) wrote:

12.15.08 at 2:38 AM

this is one of those wine stories that can only make you fall more deeply in love with this ancient and majestic juice. this really depicts what is meant when "people" are included in the definition of terroir. the combination of person and place is perfectly married. well i hope to check out Bressan some time in the near future

thanks for the wonderful blog

 Paolo Bernardi wrote:

01.31.09 at 1:39 PM

In my opinion is indeed one of the greatest Friuli producers. Bressan likes keeping a low profile and he is allergic to journalists and particularly the a-- kissers . If he and his family they were different than that the prices would have been much higher too. For clarity your article reflects a little bit of the writing of a online store newsletter with several "legends", which as a friend of Fulvio Bressan from several years I need to correct. While Fulvio has a indeed a strong personality (something in between Didier Dagueneau and Shrek – translated big hart but do not piss him off) there is no such thing as special bottling: either they make the wines or not (you will never see the 2005 for example). They don't mix vintages either despite, what has been hinted by some bright individual when he saw that the vintage is stamped on the label (no comment); as they do everything by hand they put also the labels by hand and is cheaper for them to do it that way. All the wines have acidities thru the roof, they spend long time in no fire toasted casks (whereas the malo is carried over) and very long time on fine lees. No artificial yeasts no microboulage and other mumbo jumbo crap is used - and I write this after I tasted a full room of grand crus "plastic surgeon boob job" wines from a very important wine world region where after the first sip the teeth were already dark from artificial anthocyan pigments and the taste was so standardized (everyone there uses reverse osmosis and so on over there) that wasn't even funny. The wines are released not when Bressan pleases because he is moody; wines are released at the "earliest minimal stage of readiness" (from that moment you can pull the cork and enjoy them) and being no vintage or cask is alike the time aging is different. BTW they would qualify as organic as well but they don't give a dam about being certified.