

A visit with Fulvio Bressan, 9th generation Friulian winemaker

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It's a passion of mine to blog on the importance of a natural approach to winemaking. The wonders of natural taste and the purity of letting the land and the vine find expression in a great wine are endlessly worthy of attention.

But it's truly inspiring and humbling to spend time with a winemaker who lives this belief with uncompromised abandon, with unbridled exuberance, with brutal honesty and with a growing legacy of wondrous wines that speak to his approach.

Fulvio Bressan, 9th generation Italian winemaker in Friuli, Italy is such an individual.



Fulvio's winery is in the Friuli-Venezia Giulia appellation in northeastern Italy on the border of Slovenia. Way out-of-the-way and in a unique corner of the world defined by the sloping vineyards of the Isonzo River Valley, with the Alps to the north and the Adriatic Sea to the south.

Fulvio, along with his father Nereo, his beautiful wife Jelena and their families live on the same plot of land that his family has occupied since the early 1500s and made wine on since 1726.

To the Bressans, terroir is not an abstraction.

It's life's connection to the land. And a responsibility to let the place and the vine express themselves naturally. This is their passion and their mission as winemakers.

My first encounter with Bressan was a remarkable bottle of ['04 Venezia Giulia IGT Schioppettino](#) a few years ago that my friends at [Chambers Street Wines](#) encouraged me to try. The bottle blew me away and opened my eyes to Friuli, to the bold taste of the Schioppettino grape and to this outspoken iconoclast of natural winemaking.

Thanks to the [EWBC 2011 blogger's conference](#) and [Pierpaolo Penco](#), I was able to spend some time with Fulvio at a number of tastings and at his vineyards in Friuli last week

What an experience!

Fulvio is a personality supercharged by his passion for 'real' wine. His exuberance and focus are unstoppable. His excitement is palpable and infectious. He is wildly likeable and believable.

He disdains all labels, certifications, philosophies of organic and Biodynamic. He would dislike the term 'natural' as well.

Fulvio and Nereo just make great wine in a natural way. Nothing is added. No pesticides or herbicides. No irrigation to 'dilute the aromatic wealth' of the wine. No yeasts or sulfur or any additive in the winery. No filtration. Nothing at all.

Most but not all of the work is done by hand. (See the discussion with the winemaker in the comments.) Everything is dictated by the fruit itself and its process of self discovering its own taste.

Some call him wacky and extreme. Many are threatened by his unapologetic point of view, his mastery of the craft and his remarkable wine.

To me, Fulvio is living proof that idealism in winemaking has a champion and that while difficult, great non-interventionist winemaking is indeed possible. He is the uncompromising artisan living the belief that wine is made of the intersection of the vine, the land and the winemaker.

Fulvio, on two plots of land (5 acres in Collio; 44 acres in Isonzo) has stepped beyond market forces and economic driven decisions.

He produces from 0 to 40,000 bottles a year. That is zero when the grapes aren't right. When you strip out all external controls, nature is the determinant, plot-by-plot, vine-by-vine.

This is a living idea of what wine was and can be, stripped of commercial intent, stripped of market tastes, stripped of everything except a passion for wine that is an expression of the place at a particular time.

Fulvio is wine passion incarnate. He is the spokesperson for his terroir. And he has the personality to make you feel it deep in your soul.



To him...most wine we drink...is simply not wine at all. Garbage really.

He is vehement and his utterances are untranslatable into polite (or even acceptable) English. And he is not the least bit shy in stating that there are only 15-20 real winemakers out of the some 250 wineries in Friuli. With great bravado, he explained that winemakers who inoculate their wines with industrial yeast are not winemakers at all. Adding yeast, he exclaimed! (and I paraphrase greatly), is as unnatural as asking your neighbor to sleep with your wife to sire your child!

I love this guy, really. His unbending vigilance and uncompromising dedication to his belief rubs many the wrong way. Not I. To me he inspires...and challenges my preconceptions.

Fulvio's success—and his wines are at times as wonderful as they are pure—stems from a generational connection to his terroir, learning to make wines at the hands of his father Nereo and an education and apprenticeship with Yves Glorie, a professor in oenology in Bordeaux and oenologist at Chateau Margaux.

Bressan's wines are honest and pure and really quite remarkable.

They are neither inexpensive nor that easy to find but he has fans worldwide (including me). The stringent nature of the hands off approach, his obsession with a natural process and his ceaseless education of what he believes wine should have created its own market for his product.

“Natural” means many things to different wine makers. Some are practical and spray when the weather threatens the crop. Most add sulfur. Most make wine with a market in mind.

Fulvio just makes the wine that his land creates and when great, to the winemaker's view, he sells it.

It's been a week since my flight from Trieste to Milan to NYC. Two thoughts keep recurring:

Inspiration and passion and humility are the great connectors. They cross time and space and language and beliefs.

With Fulvio, this is his relationship to the wine and also to people and the marketplace. He is an educator but more importantly, a doer. And his actions and his wine speak more crisply and with even more power than his words.

Many of my traveling companions are not natural wine enthusiasts in any way. All of them however, to a person, came away inspired (and entertained) and thoughtful about the possibilities of what Fulvio was accomplishing. There is bombast and hyperbole aplenty, but it is sincerity with successful results that drive belief in his approach.

And Fulvio, by the brute force of his belief, has built a global market for his wine. People care, people understand, people love a taste that is genuine and with personality...and we support what we believe in and appreciate.

Truly understanding your terroir, mastery of winemaking skills and deep knowledge of viticulture are the keys to great natural winemaking.

To make wine without any unnatural intervention requires not less skill but much, much more. Understanding the land and the vines and an appreciation at a deep technical perspective how wine is made is essential. Fulvio is zealous and boisterous, yet also deeply knowledgeable and strategic. And above all very, very patient.

I'm blown away by this experience. By Bressan and his family. By this place. And by the remarkable wines.

Check out [Bressan Winery](#). I urge you to try Fulvio's wines. You may love them, maybe not. But they will feel pure and with personality and replete with a sense of place. This is a quest worth pursuing.

Great years for Bressan wines

According to Fulvio and Nereo, 1997, 2003, 2007 and 2011 were the historically great vintages for Bressan wines. 2002 and 2005 were very difficult and very little wine was made.

The vineyard with Momo the dog and Fulvio



Exuberance and graciousness and honest enthusiasm is a Bressan trait



This is Nereo serving 'snacks' during my visit.

The Vaslin press in the background separates the skins after fermentation is complete.

For the barrel geeks



The small barriques are 225 liters of very old French oak, used mostly for Pinot Grigio.

Big wooden barrels are Slovenian oak (2000 liters). They are prepped with well water and sea salt to extract wood tannins before use.

The big green barrels are concrete lined with glass. Fulvio believes concrete is better than stainless, as steel disturbs the wine as it ages.

Note the glass stoppers



Cool widgets. They let the barrel stay full regardless of season and control oxidation.

There's a second glass plate inside the stopper, which seals the vat. Simple science.

Barrel tasting. 1997 Pignol



Fulvio has six very old "exhausted" French Oak barriques full of this wine, aged 13 years.

These barrels are liquid gold! It is worth a trip to Friuli just to taste them.

I tasted his 2000 Pignol as well. Very impressive. Rich. Powerful but finished.

Pignolo (Friulian for Pignol) is a wine to watch. The '00 will only get better with age.

Fulvio harvests his Pignol grapes very late and picks only 3-4 bunches of grapes per vine.

Barrel tasting. 2006 Pinot Grigio



Cold maceration on the skins for 3 days but no extended skin fermentation.

Very elegant, full bodied and floral. Quite lovely.

Heading out to Trieste Airport from Bressan Winery



Pierpaolo Penco, Fulvio Bressan and myself.

Shipment to my apartment in NYC. I wish!



I want to thank Fulvio and his family, including his really helpful wife, Jelena for their hospitality. And of course my friends [Gabriella](#) and [Ryan Opaz](#) and [Robert McIntosh](#) at EWBC for making this trip possible. And [Pierpaolo Penco](#) again for being an incredible host and a passionate supporter of the Friuli region.

And a big thank you to [Chambers Street Wines](#) in NYC for introducing me to Fulvio's wines and in general, opening my mind to a world of wonderful natural wines. A great wine shop.

This was truly a great experience.