

MAY 2018 • \$6.95

THE tastingpanel MAGAZINE

GRUPPO *Mezzacorona*

HIGH ALTITUDE
LIMESTONE
VITICULTURE

The Dolomites mountain range in Italy's Trentino region—where Mezzacorona grows its Pinot Grigio grapes—is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

ALPINE EXCELLENCE

GRUPPO MEZZACORONA
PIONEERS THE TASTE OF
HIGH-ALTITUDE VITICULTURE

BY RANDY CAPAROSO



The Mezzacorona Pinot Grigio's pure, steel-fermented style displays floral, mineral, and stone fruit qualities: Crisp and elegant, it shows a touch of saltiness and a round finish.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MEZZACORONA

G rizzled wine professionals may be familiar with Mezzacorona Pinot Grigio, but even they can often overlook the pedigree of this crisp and bright white wine abundant in minerality. Grown in Italy's Dolomites mountain range, the label's grapes hail from a high-elevation alpine region recognized by UNESCO as World Heritage Site precisely for its phenomenal geology. The spectacular peaks replete with limestone have raised up from coral reefs over a period of 250 million years.

Beyond harnessing the distinctive terroir it calls home into its diverse portfolio of wines, Gruppo Mezzacorona also owes its achievements to an element that's decidedly human. Originally established in Italy's Trentino region in 1904 by just 20 growers, the cooperative has since expanded to more than 1,500 members, and the company's authenticity lies in the notion that it has always been owned and run by farmers.

"These 1,600 growers cultivate their own vineyards, which average about three acres in size—some less than an acre, others as much as 15 acres," says Lucio Matricardi, Ph.D., Mezzacorona's widely-respected winemaker. "Many of them may have second jobs, but farming is their first calling, and in many cases, these are vineyards that have been in families for hundreds of years."

Mezzacorona's Pinot Grigio is also still grown on traditional pergola trellises—not because of stubborn adherence, but because this method is scientifically proven to be among the most effective system for high-elevation viticulture. When wineries grow grapes in cool-climate alpine terroir, they need a canopy management system that spreads out the leaves in order to soak up every bit of sunlight while keeping clusters sufficiently apart to minimize rot.

"In Trentino, what we consider 'mountain' vineyards are sites with up to 50 percent slopes and 400-meter [1,300-feet] altitude or more," says Matricardi. "The higher you go, the more difficult it is for the vine, which lowers the yield but heightens the quality. At higher altitudes you also get higher UV [ultraviolet light] radiation, which increases flavor, color, and anthocyanin."

Matricardi describes Trentino's terroir as typical of continental climate regions. "In July and August, we average 27–28 degrees Celsius [80–82 degrees Fahrenheit] during the day and 14–16 degrees Celsius [57–60 degrees Fahrenheit] at night." Within this moderate diurnal range, grape ripening is optimized through a longer growing season. This means Mezzacorona's Pinot Grigio "is harvested at least 20 days later than Pinot Grigio grown at sea levels," Matricardi says.



Lucio Matricardi, Ph.D, serves as Mezzacorona's Winemaker.

"These are the most motivated, passionate farmers in the world—you have to be to work in these mountains, so when you taste their wines, you also find an unmistakable complexity of aroma and flavor. You taste the natural high acidity and also the unique minerality we get in the Dolomites."

Tasting Notes



Mezzacorona 2017 Pinot Grigio, Trentino DOC Like all Mezzacorona wines, the Pinot Grigio is 100% estate-grown and -bottled, as well as sustainably farmed in accordance with Italian winemaking regulations. The pure, steel-fermented style evinces floral, mineral, lemon, and Pippin apple qualities; crisp and airy, it shows a sliver of fruitiness in its finish.



Mezzacorona 2016 Vigneti Cliffhanger Vineyards Pinot Grigio, Trentino DOC This partially-barrel-fermented wine is slightly fuller yet still sleek and medium-bodied; long and fluid on the palate, it exhibits an apple skin aroma and stony tactile sensations.



Mezzacorona 2016 Chardonnay, Dolomiti IGT The positively-restrained clarity of fruit is marked by fresh apple and peach fuzz notes in a moderately-full (13% ABV) body, with a palate-scrubbing complexity in the finish.



Mezzacorona 2016 Rosé, Dolomiti IGT If you're looking for mountain-grown rosé that stands out from the crowd, this is it. This 100% Lagrein pushes watermelon, raspberry, and rose petal-nuanced fruit tinged with mineral and baking spice. Structurally, the wine offers the slightest grip of skin tannin through its firmly dry, meaty flavors.



Mezza di Mezzacorona Italian Glacial Bubbly, Dolomiti IGT A very "alpine" blend of Chardonnay, Pinot Bianco, and Müller-Thurgau, this wine has a lemon cream pie/pineapple perfume. A smidgen of yeastiness creeps into its lightly-sweet, foamy, and prickly flavors.



Mezzacorona 2015 Pinot Noir, Dolomiti IGT There's tons of bang for your buck in this fruit-focused varietal rendering, which carries strawberry notes with twists of pepper and shavings of cinnamon stick. The soft tannic structure is filled out by mildly *digestivi*-like cherry pit sensations.



Mezzacorona 2015 Vigneti Cliffhanger Vineyards Proprietary Red Blend, Dolomiti IGT This blend of Teroldego (70%) and Lagrein (30%) is an amazing value at this price, with an inky color and nose saturated in plump black-berry/black cherry fruit with suggestions of pomegranate syrup. Tannins are mildly gripping in the meaty, medium body (a moderate 13% ABV), while coffee spice and earthen notes mix with dark fruit sensations.



Mezzacorona 2009 NOS Teroldego Riserva, Rotaliano DOC The purplish-red color all the way to the rim belies this bottling's age. The concentrated black cherry aroma is filled out by peppery, loamy/earthy mineral notes; fairly full at 13.5% ABV, this wine is thick and muscled with tannins yet also svelte and pliant. The earthy fruit flavors push through the fibrous texturing.

Elevating Trentino's Indigenous Varieties

Trentino—or more specifically, the Piana Rotaliana alluvial plain—is also home to the red Teroldego grape, another member of Mezzacorona's portfolio. Because it cannot be found in any other region of Italy, "Teroldego is 100-percent Trentino," Matricardi says. "We call our Teroldego 'NOS,' which in the local dialect is the name for the Noce river. It created the area where our Teroldego plantings are concentrated—a plateau at about a 250-meter [820-foot] elevation, primarily alluvial with river rock soils at least ten meters deep," he adds. "Teroldego loves this kind of soil."

The indigenous Lagrein grape also has a long history in Trentino: a history that overlaps that of Teroldego. Matricardi says Lagrein is ideal for rosé due to its "beautiful color,



Mezzacorona's Lagrein grapes are grown in Trentino sites more than 1,300 feet above sea level.





Mezzacorona's Pinot Grigio grapes are still grown on traditional pergola trellises, proven to be one of the most effective methods for high-elevation viticulture.

red fruit aroma and natural acidity," prompting Mezzacorona to expand cultivation of the grape to make its own mark on the burgeoning category. "Our newest plantings are in even higher elevation sites at more than 400 meters [1,300 feet]," he adds.

According to Matricardi, Teroldego draws part of its lineage from Lagrein and "probably emerged as a separate selection sometime in the 14th or 15th

century." The family tree only expands from there, as "Lagrein itself is a cousin of Syrah, and is even more difficult to grow than Teroldego, since it prefers hillsides with rockier soils," Matricardi explains. "It has been cultivated here

since the days of the monks and Romans. As a red wine, Lagrein has less color but more flesh and most of the tannin level found in Teroldego."

And because the grape thrives in "cool mountain climates," Matricardi says Pinot Noir has proved another valuable addition to the Gruppo Mezzacorona portfolio. "We began to produce Pinot Noir shortly after I arrived in 2004, although every year we have been improving our site selection: removing about 50 acres, and replanting another 50 in more ideal, cooler-climate areas," Matricardi explains. Pinot Noir is also combined with Chardonnay to produce Mezzacorona's *méthode champenoise*-style Rotari Brut.

Matricardi admits that few wineries can channel terroir quite like Mezzacorona can, considering the "250 million years of geology that lives on in [its] rocks." But he reiterates that what truly drives Matricardi's winemaking is the company's relationship with the surrogates who help translate this terroir into its portfolio. "These are the most motivated, passionate farmers in the world—you have to be to work in these mountains," Matricardi adds. "So when you taste their wines, you also find an unmistakable complexity of aroma and flavor. You taste the natural high acidity and also the unique minerality we get in the Dolomites." ■

New Label, Higher Standards



Mezzacorona continues to shine a spotlight on its heritage with a new label that rolled out early this year for the 2017 Pinot Grigio Trentino DOC. Each bottle depicts one of the brand's 1,600 wine growers hand-harvesting its estate grapes. "Our new label is designed to communicate who we are, where we come from, and what our wines offer," explains CEO Fabio Macari.

In addition to honoring the growers themselves, the new label features the SQNPI Qualità Sostenibile certification. This seal of sustainability—from Italy's national system for integrated production quality—is earned by following strict protocols that include a guarantee of perfect traceability of each batch and bottle, as well as an assurance that the wine comes from the grapes that have been

controlled and certified by the SQNPI.

"The SQNPI certification is a clear indicator of our commitment to sustainability, and in highlighting the families of growers on our new labels, we are telling our story of authenticity, beauty, and value," says Macari.