

WWC20 – Perlage, Veneto

Evan White from Manhattan, New York, writes in to introduce his (unedited) entry to the writing competition, 'Hi there! Up till COVID-19's recent decimation of the hospitality industry, I was the Head Sommelier at Babbo Ristorante in NYC's West Village, where I had spent three amazing years learning about, and of course tasting, many of Italy's greatest wines. I've recently assumed the position of Wine Manager for CoolVines in Hoboken, New Jersey, the newest addition to a group of fantastic and fabulously unpretentious boutique wine stores focused on smaller, quality-driven producers. Last year, after winning an essay competition held by the Somm Journal, I had the extremely good fortune to be invited to visit the region of Conegliano Valdobbiadene by the Consortium of Conegliano Valdobbiadene Prosecco Superiore DOCG. Having never travelled to Italy before, I was beyond excited to enrich my knowledge of Italian wine with some real in-the-vineyard experience. I'm a Certified Sommelier through the Court of Master Sommeliers and currently in pursuit of the WSET Diploma.' The sustainability wine heroes of our 2020 writing competition can be found in our [guide](#) to the entries published so far.

During a trip to Veneto last year I was able to visit wineries of all shapes and sizes, from the humblest of family-run operations, to palatial estates with Lamborghinis parked out front. But one producer stood out to me for its commitment to sustainability and ethical winemaking practices: Perlage.

On a sunny September morning, Giulia Pussini, my gracious and extremely accommodating host from the Consorzio Tutela di Conegliano Valdobbiadene Prosecco Superiore DOCG, pulled up to Perlage's headquarters in Farra di Soglio, right between Conegliano and Valdobbiadene. I was greeted by Elena Muraro, Perlage's Export Manager (and my de factor interpreter for the day), who introduced me to Ivo Nardi, the winery's founder and CEO. Speaking to Ivo, I was deeply struck by how passionate and steadfast he was concerning the winery's environmentally, socially and economically sustainable practices. But I also sensed an innate frustration. As Ivo explained it, Perlage's philosophy towards winemaking, and business operations in general, is an anomaly within the larger picture of the region's wine industry. Like other producers of Conegliano Valdobbiadene Prosecco Superiore DOCG wines, Perlage faces monumental competition from the imposingly large and more powerful Prosecco DOC, an appellation that covers nine provinces and two regions, with an average annual production rate of 466 million bottles. With such gargantuan production goals to fulfill, few of Prosecco DOC's producers are

able to operate in a manner consistent with sustainable, let alone certified Organic or Biodynamic, practices.

Perlage presses on, however, striving to produce wines that are both delicious and thoughtfully made, despite what might be transpiring just a vineyard away. In fact, to maintain the absolute integrity of their grapes, Ivo and the Perlage team have planted so-called ‘buffering rows’ of vines that line the perimeter between their plants and their neighbor’s. These rows were cultivated solely to absorb any stray pesticide or herbicides used on abutting vineyards that could creep into Perlage’s soil, and the fruit produced from them is not used for wine production. The company has employed organic viticulture from the beginning, and is certified Biodynamic by Demeter as well. Besides typical organic practices, Perlage’s work in the vineyard includes a drastic reduction of copper-based sprays, which, while technically organic, can cause a build-up of heavy metals that can equal the damage of using synthetic fungicides. This reduction, coupled with an increase of organic matter and humus, has allowed Perlage to boost the health and vitality of their (and any winery’s) greatest resource, its soil.

This sustainability doesn’t stop in the field, and the company has also recognized the environmental toll that a winery’s production facilities can take as well. They’ve constructed ‘low-impact’ offices that minimize energy use, and a good portion of energy that *is* used comes from solar panels installed on the winery’s rooftop. The company has also focused on limiting the energy consumed by temperature-controlled vessels (autoclaves) and managing water usage, using 37% less water than in 2017. Switching to lighter bottles has allowed them to eliminate 97 tons of carbon dioxide emissions, and the backing paper for their wine labels, which would otherwise be thrown in the garbage, is reused to further produce more labels. They are also certified by Codex, an organization that aims to harmonize business practices by ensuring consumer health and fair trade practices. And while all these measures delighted the environmentalist in me, I was equally, if not more impressed by the company’s stance on the social welfare of its employees and the surrounding community.

Perlage has committed to becoming a ‘Società Benefit’, a more rigorously controlled version of B Corporation certification (which it has held since 2016). B Corp is a non-profit organization that issues voluntary certifications that essentially verify a company’s ability to look beyond profits and focus on processes that positively impact the wider sphere of workers, suppliers and community—*not* just its shareholders. For example, Perlage encourages employees to make environmentally sound choices by offering them financial bonuses for switching to a hybrid car. Local children and high school students are often invited to the vineyards to participate in harvest, learning about the benefits of sustainable farming along the way. Numerous internships and opportunities have been established for

aspiring agronomists, with an aim at inspiring millennials and Generation Z, the emerging winemakers who will lead this industry into the future. The company also has a partnership with the CEOD (Centro Educativo Occupazionale Diurno) in Soligo, a community resource for people with motor or intellectual disabilities. The cooperative effort works harmoniously; participants from the CEOD are involved in winery activities such as grape-crushing in the cellar, affording them the opportunity to socialize, reducing the risk of isolation and integrating them into the local community. Meanwhile, Perlage employees are able to increase social sensitivity and create a holistic value system that encompasses so much more than just making money. It truly is a beautiful and ambitious effort.

And though the winery produces a host of gorgeous wines, from entry-level bottles, to ‘Rive’ (or single-site) expressions, to grappa made from rare minor grapes such as Verdiso, few of them are available here in the United States. The lack of label and quality comprehension here can make the success of such wines difficult: Why buy a \$20 bottle labelled ‘Conegliano Valdobbiadene Prosecco Superiore DOCG Riva Moretta’ when there is an \$8 bottle of simple ‘Prosecco DOC’ right next to it? I truly believe, however, that through education via passionate sommeliers and retailers, we can broaden the influence of wines like these, just as Perlage has done with their own social outreach programs. Only then will consumers truly understand that there is so much more to a wine than just what’s in the bottle.

Jancis Robinson

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