

Schioppettino *Uncorked*

Back from the brink, guns blazing

The north-east of Italy is home to the region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia, beloved by many Italian wine lovers for its native winegrape varieties. Wines from Friuli have sometimes been described as the gateway to French wines. There are estimated to be around 355 different native Italian wine varieties today – Nebbiolo and Sangiovese would be a couple of the most renowned. One Italian winegrape varietal not commonly thought of for a dinner pairing would be Schioppettino, a savoury and layered red wine which was almost wiped from the face of the earth in the mid-1800s. Journalist **Samuel Squire** caught up with the Italian winery responsible for the variety’s modern-day rebirth.



Schioppettino bunch in Chalmers Wines’ vineyard in Heathcote, Victoria – Image credit: Adam Hobbs

The Schioppettino variety (often pronounced “skee-op-eh-tee-no”) dates back to at least the 13th century, according to local historical documents from that time. The steep terraces, carved into the contours of the Friulan hills that provide optimal exposure for the cultivation of the Schioppettino vine, date back to the time of the Patriarchate of Aquileia and to the Venetian Republic and, according to rooted popular tradition, were built by Turkish prisoners.

The first written historical mention of Schioppettino dates back to 1282, when it was served during a wedding celebration in the town of Albana, according to those medieval documents. The cultivation of Schioppettino in the Cialla Valley remained deeply rooted in the historical memory of the locals until 1960.

And, since the Middle Ages, there have been reports on the cultivation of Schioppettino, which has also been called Sciopp or Ribolla Nera. The wine was often made only in limited quantities and was sought after by Italian wine lovers for its rarity and quality.

Timeline for the ‘gunshot’

1282
First documented Schioppettino wine

Mid-1800s
Phylloxera and powdery mildew epidemics nearly wipe it out

1914-45
Revival stalls as growers leave their vineyards to fight in both World Wars

1960s
Winegrower Paolo Rapuzzi sets out to find remaining vines

Mid-1970s
Rapuzzi plants a single Schioppettino vine

It was common knowledge at the time that Schioppettino, often called the “gunshot” after its signature punchy black peppercorn character, had historically been cultivated over an area of land roughly covering only a few square kilometres, and if cultivated outside of that area, was considered to have lost part of its finesse and unique identity.

Extinction

In the mid-1800s, Schioppettino was thought to have been wiped from existence by twin epidemics of phylloxera and powdery mildew. Because of this, many winegrowers in the Friuli region believed that the vine species had been made extinct. The truth is, it almost was.

As Friulan growers believed the gunshot grape to be eliminated, and with no real means to preserve what little remained, they moved on to grow more resilient and easier to grow and sell varieties like Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon.

Whatever hopes the variety had of being revived at this time were soon dashed by two ensuing World Wars, during which those responsible for tending the vines were drafted away from their vineyards to fight.

By the 1960s there were thought to be less than 100 Schioppettino vines left in existence, scattered all over eastern Friuli. Then one Italian winemaker – the late Paolo Rapuzzi, founder of Ronchi di Cialla – set out on a quest to find any remaining Schioppettino vines, which he hoped had not been lost altogether, and revitalise the variety.

In 1976, Schioppettino was actually outlawed and growers were prohibited from planting it at all, which meant it

Uncorked

Ribolla Nera used to be the name for the variety, Schioppettino referred to the wine that was made, but nowadays, it is called Schioppettino alone.



Ronchi di Cialla's Schioppettino di Cialla. Photo: Ronchi di Cialla

suffered the same fate as Pignolo and Tazzelenghe grapes when they were both outlawed as well. However, authorities begrudgingly revoked its outlaw status upon learning of Paolo Rapuzzi's success.

Rebirth

Rapuzzi was determined to create a winery that specialised in Friuli's native winegrape species and, in the late '70s, he was successful in doing so.

It was in the '60s that Paolo Rapuzzi had managed to find about 60 surviving Schioppettino vines, which were being kept for traditional purposes in the Colli Orientali del Friuli region near the town

of Prepetto, and he planted just one vine.

As the 1970s drew to its decade-end, the production of the Schioppettino was authorised again by Italian wine authorities and its cultivation started spreading, initially, within the Cialla area as a source of fruit for a table wine. It was later introduced into the DOC Colli Orientali del Friuli area in 1989 and, finally, into the Cialla sub-area in 1995.

In the short space of a few years from when the first Schioppettino vine was planted following the revocation of its outlaw status, Paolo and Dina Rapuzzi created new cuttings from the surviving

1976
Outlaw status revoked by Italian authorities



1990
One bottle of Schioppettino sells at auction for c.AU\$635 in today's money

1995
The variety regains full integration in its homeland of Friuli

1998
Kim Chalmers imports Schioppettino into Australia



2012
Bike & Barrel Wines in the Alpine Valleys plants half an acre of vines as a trial



vines to create the first modern wine estate of 3,500 varietal vines. This marked the rebirth of Schioppettino.

Now, almost 50 years later, Schioppettino – the gunshot – lives and breathes in Friuli. Italian winery Ronchi di Cialla, sitting in the village of Cialla in north-east Italy, is a winery founded on the core values of biodiversity and regional representation.

Winemaker and son of Paolo Rapuzzi, Ivan Rapuzzi, says Schioppettino, like many wines dating back to the Middle Ages, was once also used for the payment of duties and rents.

Since its rebirth, Ronchi di Cialla wines have gained prestigious national and international recognition and awards. In 1990, a Schioppettino di Cialla sold at a Sotheby's auction for ITL750,000 - which equates to roughly AUD\$635 in today's money.

Ivan Rapuzzi says the varietal wine is really finding its feet in this new world it has been reborn into.

"Abroad, it has found an increasing recognition and has become known as Schioppettino di Cialla, a reference and model for young Californian producers who, with the Schioppettino variety, are creating elegant, new and spicy wines," he said.



The Cialla region is a mountainous landscape, making the ideal terroir for Schioppettino to thrive in its Italian home. Photo: Ronchi di Cialla

Bike & Barrel Wines makes a single varietal Schioppettino wine.

Rapuzzi says the iconic spicy pepper signature of Schioppettino comes from the terroir of the vineyard.

"Studies carried out by Professor Fulvio Mattivi (Iasma Research and Innovation Centre, Edmund Mach Foundation, S. Michele all'Adige (TN)) have highlighted the Rotundone (sesquiterpene) as the molecule responsible for the spicy and peppery aromatic characteristic of the Schioppettino produced in cool areas and with low yields per plant," he said.

"That same molecule is particularly concentrated in the Schioppettino produced in the Cialla area, which is characterised by a cool climate and, consequently, by a vinification process made from grapes that have yet to wither and have not over-ripened."

Australian homage

Bike & Barrel Wines in Victoria's Alpine Valleys wine region are one of only a handful of Australian wine producers growing Schioppettino in the country. One of the others is Chalmers Wines in Heathcote – which is reported to have been involved with the initial importation of the variety into Australia. The other is Billy Button Wines, also in the Alpine Valleys.

Brian Lewis, owner and operator at Bike & Barrel Wines says half an acre of Schioppettino vines were planted in their vineyard in 2012 as a trial block.

He says the idea to plant the vine in his vineyard came from a bottle of Bressan that sparked his interest in the Italian variety.

"From memory, a bottle of Bressan first ignited my interest in growing Schioppettino. So, I decided to plant a trial block next to its Friulan neighbour Refosco dal Peduncolo Rosso, which we planted in 2011," he said.

"We aren't sure exactly when Schioppettino came to Australia but I believe Chalmers was involved in its import. But we currently produce about 1,200 kilograms of the fruit."

Lewis says Schioppettino has solid tolerance to the triages of the Australian climate, however he believes that Australia's major lesson about the variety is that it requires cool growing conditions.

"I think Schioppettino has good growing potential on these shores, and our experience so far suggests a cool growing region is preferred, like its native origins," he said.

"Over recent vintages, we have noticed some stress can occur during prolonged heat, which makes irrigating a fine balance after verison.

"Viticulturally, it has good tolerance to all the major growing problems of Australia. We started off with spur pruning and noticed very poor fruit-



Schioppettino grapes are dark and full of intense flavour. Photo: Ronchi di Cialla

“As with all emerging varietal wines, I think Schioppettino wines made in Australia will gain a nice following, and will be better-suited to more on-premise sales and made in smaller lots.”

Chalmers Wines, in Heathcote, Victoria, first imported their Schioppettino vines in 1998, but they spent two years in quarantine before arriving in 2000.

Kim Chalmers says the Italian variety fits in well in Australian vineyards, adding that in her view, the warmer climate helps the grape grow interesting and more unique characteristics.

Experimentation and interpretation

She adds that Australia’s warmer conditions allow growers and winemakers to experiment more with the variety and to make unique interpretations of the style.

“Australia’s warmer growing conditions, compared to typical Friulan conditions, help encourage more juicy, spicy and vibrant flavours in the wine,” she said. ▶

set regardless of weather conditions at flowering. With this in mind we have changed 50% to the arch cane method and are seeing better results. It has very poor tolerance to cold/light frost and a long/late ripening cycle.”

Despite the challenges of local growing conditions, Lewis says the iconic and unique characteristics displayed in traditional Friulan Schioppettino wines have not been lost in their Australian counterparts.

“Schioppettino has a unique style,” Lewis said, “I have sampled a few cool climate Shiraz wines that have similar characteristics as well”.

“Typical characteristics for the variety are its strong pepper traits, lovely smooth tannins and raspberry flavours.

“In truth, I think both its best and worst attributes as an enjoyable wine are its strong peppery profile.

Uncorked

Schioppettino is often colloquially referred to as “the gunshot” for its signature black cracked peppercorn aromatics.

Ivan and Dina Rapuzzi are continuing Paolo Rapuzzi’s work with Schioppettino in Friuli, Italy. Photo: Ronchi di Cialla





Chalmers Wines makes a 500ml bottle of Schioppettino called Dott. Image credit: Roberto Pettinau

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KIM CHALMERS

“Schioppettino comes from a cooler climate in Friuli, but when I was there travelling and talking to local producers and tasting their wines, it’s a different variety in a colder climate.

“Schioppettino has the potential to translate into warmer climates to make a style that’s not so green and edgy.

“I hate comparing Australia’s Schioppettino wines to Italy’s,” Chalmers

continued, “We are not Italy here. We’re using Italian varieties here because of Australia’s viticultural conditions and what we can achieve with them here”.

“I don’t believe Australia’s Schioppettino wines are being made to replicate Friuli’s, but rather are being made to show our own style of Schioppettino.

“We can experiment more with it here and do more diverse things with it. For

example, I know there are some growers who sell some of their Schioppettino grapes to use in rosé wines.”

Although Chalmers says the inherent “rusticity” of the grape variety can be a bit challenging for some wine consumers, she has noticed quite a solid, positive response to Chalmers Wines’ Dott. Schioppettino.

She adds that Chalmers’ Schioppettino is designed to be consumed as a young wine, but says it could very well have ageing potential.

“People love the wine, but sometimes it can be challenging as it has a real rustic and spiced clove profile to it,” she said.

“People generally like it and ours is designed to be drunk a bit younger. It can age, though, we think. However, we have only been making Schioppettino wine since 2016, so time will tell how well it would age here.” **CW**

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BRIAN LEWIS



Bike & Barrel Wines owners and operators Brian and Linda Lewis grow Schioppettino vines in the Alpine Valleys region of Victoria.