

## Roberto Anselmi's Manifesto

Dear Soave,

March 1st, 2000

I've loved you for many years. I tried to get you to mature, I've given you style, a reputation, international standing in the world's top white wine scenario. For years I worked and struggled within the viticulture of my terroir, in my winery, in the market, I struggled to make you better and better, more and more "Suave". It was all useless. In fact, you are not "suave" as your name implies, you are uncontrollable, untameable, unfaithful.

So that's it, I'm going, I've had enough. I'm leaving you, and this letter tells you why... Once and for all!

Viticulture in Soave is quantity-oriented, not quality-oriented.

The Veronese pergola training in its "marquee" version, when taken to a density of 1,800-2,000 plants per hectare, yields an incredible quantity of grapes per individual rootstock. The bunches grow under cover, beneath a "marquee" of leaves like in the Amazonian forest, never exposed to the sunlight or to fresh air. Green harvest (manual) is almost never carried out; and when it is, costs are simply over and beyond any economical logic.

Quantity control of the grapes by qualified inspectors cannot be carried out on sight, as vegetation covers every row of the vineyards, so that inspection can only take place by walking beneath the covering of leaves, in order to check the number of bunches produced. An army of inspectors would not be enough to walk down every row in every vineyard of the over 5,000 hectares of Soave soil under vine.

The Garganega clones have never truly been selected; or rather, some clones have been selected by the research institutes in charge of such matters, but these are all productive strains, yielding huge, enormous bunches that weigh several kilos each; elongated grape bunches, as obese as the philosophy behind them. (During

the 1999 harvest, in some Soave vineyards, I personally measured bunches longer than 40 cm., i.e. 1 foot 4 inches.) If a grower is looking for the true, ancient strain of Garganega, with a small bunch of berries spread wide apart, he won't find any availability in the nurseries.

Trebbiano di Soave, with a small bunch and slightly aromatic fruit, similar to Sauvignon, has practically disappeared from our territory. It ripens much earlier than Garganega, therefore its vegetative cycle is different, which is a bother and causes problems, forcing growers to carry out certain agricultural practices at different times, to harvest at different times, and to implement grape selection during harvest. Too many complications, it's way easier to let the variety become extinct! Who cares if Trebbiano di Soave completes Soave and gives it more quality and balance, the important thing is producing as much as possible, filling up enormous carts with grapes. We'll worry about quality later, in the winery.

Chardonnay, the new variety in Soave's DOC regulations, introduced a few years ago, is available in the form of select clones which are very, very good. It could have become the smart way to quality wine-making and viticultural education in our terroir. If only the new regulations had indicated how it was to be trained, which instead they don't - so Chardonnay is pergola-trained and "marquee"-trained with a density below 2,000 plants per hectare, and the same old problems have cropped up as they always do. The result? The quality levels of grapes grown in this manner is little above the mediocre, "marquee"-trained Garganega.

These unfortunate varieties are then planted on two types of soil:

- High-rising hillside terrain, conducive to excellent quality;
- Flat, low-altitude terrain from the plains, conducive to poor quality.

The latter would be better suited to wheat or corn, which were grown here many years ago. It is easy to understand that hillside viticulture is potentially very different indeed from the

viniculture of the plains. Unfortunately, the market mistakes one for the other: the bad vine chases the good vine away!

What are the concrete chances of a consumer actually knowing whether the Soave he's about to purchase is from the hills or the plains?

Practically nil, as the "Classico" denomination is not enough to indicate hillside terrain.

The classic area is the historical territory, not the hillside territory. And then for that matter, who on earth explains to the international consumer that "Classico" is better? No-one! I tried, but all the consumer remembers is "Soave" and that's it! The rest is just bureaucratic frills for insiders. The consumer forgets the details, we're lucky if he remembers the main name of the denomination (Soave).

The truth of the matter is, consumers associate the name Soave with mediocre wine, because the Soave they find large quantities of in the market is mediocre. All the finery and frills we can add to the denomination are useless, they're accessories with an extremely limited effect.

#### Cooperatives:

The production of Soave grapes is 95% controlled by a group of cooperatives determining a true monopoly in vineyard management and wine-making philosophy every step of the way, from harvest to distribution. Until a few years ago, these cooperatives made wine from the grapes provided by their suppliers, and sold it almost entirely in bulk to dealers, producers and bottlers who in turn, would sell the wine world-wide under a variety of adjectives and brand names.

The reputation of Soave thus began, based on the market and image dealers had created for it. In my opinion, there's been plenty of confusion, lots of sales but little substance qualitywise.

Of course, handing the market over to the trade is a mistake, but there's at least one positive element: if the cooperative produces good wine in limited quantities, the dealer, too, benefits from this. He can increase retail price and pay more for the grapes. If the contrary takes place, it all reflects negatively on the price the dealer

pays the supplier, which teaches the growers a lesson in quality:

The better grapes I produce, in reasonable quantities, the more profit I'll make.

When the market gets difficult or there's a negative trend, either due to poor quality or an excess in production, it is easy to see the grower will question the whys and wherefores of his lack of profit.

This is a strong incentive to improvement and renewal.

If, on the other hand, the cooperatives sell the dealers less and less wine in bulk, marketing a portion of production as grape juice, and flanking their purely vinicultural activities with other enterprises (unconnected to the local wine world), whose profits get poured into Soave's price point... In this case, the natural laws of the market are altered and neutralized, and the prices of grapes are protected even where their quality is poor.

Had Soave grapes been paid proportionately to their generally low-grade quality, many growers would have been forced to change tactics by pure economical logic.

The bottom line is, since cooperatives now bottle most of production, and since the pricing - both retail and wholesale - is solely established by the cooperatives themselves, there is no healthy Keynesian competition, mainspring of all productive improvement.

The small growers and bottlers that have entered the Soave scenario in recent years are potentially a powerful alternative to cooperatives, a strong opposition to their feudal domination and monopoly.

So what do they do?

Most of them, very little: they all belong to the Soave Consortium, they don't take up a definite position, they don't seriously fight for quality to prevail in present and future DOC laws and regulations; they live from day to day, never

take sides, copy right and left, then once in a blue moon one of them comes out with some new, oddball idea: Garganega is highly productive, let's leave a few longer vine shoots! When it's mouldy, it's better than when it's healthy! Welcome, new technologies to "Californialize" Soave!

Let's raise the prices sky-high to declare it's good!

These, too, are all micro-attacks that undermine the quality issue.

How can the consumer recognize what's good when he finds Soave from small growers that is so obviously antithetic to any serious quality criterion?

Soave is an elegant wine of great finesse, slightly feminine in style; so much the better if it's subtly aromatic, fresh, structured and long on the palate - actually, that's the way it should be. This strategy of exasperating production in the winery and not in the vineyard, however, completely distorts its nature.

Just as the individual strategies of some certainly don't help: competing to sell one bottle to the usual consumer rather than selling two higher-quality bottles to two new consumers. This is no way to enlarge the market for good Soave!

All things considered, I believe these small growers don't have much personality or grit, they're not up to establishing a common foundation, a joint philosophy that could support the entire area's quality development. I just don't feel I want to work side by side with them towards a better future, there are many, too many factors telling me not to.

### **The Consortium:**

It's the concentration and convergence of the philosophy, way of thinking and interests of its associates.

### It proposes the following:

Increasing the crop yields per hectare of non-"Classico" Soave;

Maintaining the yields per hectare of Soave "Classico";

Diminishing the yields per hectare for a future Soave DOCG ("Superiore") that will be grown both on the plains and in the hills.

However, it daren't propose a new, modern viticulture for the DOCG. It wants the DOCG to start straight away, in the old viticultural context of pergola-trained, "marquee"-trained vines. Vineyard management will change, sure, maybe tomorrow, maybe next year, maybe in the next century. In the meantime, let's give the market a DOCG Soave from the old pergolas.

Who's supposed to check the double pergolas, by the way? Who's supposed to get air and sunlight under the "marquees", even if green harvest were implemented?

Who on earth could get crop yields down to 10 tons per hectare given the present-day stock, forced for years by senseless manuring and already trained and prepared for yields 3 times as high?

I believe cutting back on the quantity of fruit won't be enough, the actual vines will have to be eradicated; and eventually the DOCG, unable to wait for new implantations, will be a question of bureaucracy, of mere paperwork and tidy, well written documents, of tasting panels where the standard of excellence consists in the "least bad" of the samples.

What about the market?

### Here's the future pyramid:

Soave DOC

Soave DOC Classico

Soave Superiore DOCG (from "marquee"-trained vines)

Soave Superiore DOCG Classico (from "marquee"-trained vines)

Poor consumer: once he's finished an intensive course on all these commercial frills, supposing he remembers them well enough, he'll be astonished to find an ordinary Soave DOC sold

at a higher price than a Soave Superiore DOCG Classico.

Because this will happen, I can assure you it will!

Then if the same Soave DOC, under another brand name, can be found in the next-door shop as "wine-box", our unfortunate consumer may understandably feel like sending Soave and its producers to the devil.

So that's how things are in Soave.

For years, I told myself: my vineyards are on high-altitude hillside soil, my vines are very densely planted (5,000-6,000 per hectare), my training system is not pergola but Guyot (small crops, fruit grown close to old wood), my harvest is severely selective, my winery is hi-tech, every detail is fine-tuned from grape bunch to bottle.

The market considers my wine good to very good, my price points are reasonable, I target the high-quality restaurant, the best wine shops, and my consumers know me and appreciate me. This is all true, but it's not enough.

I can't go on defending Soave on my own, by my sole physical and economical efforts. I've played Don Quixote for too long, and bumped against too many windmills. The latest and definitive windmill, the one that knocked me off my horse, is a DOCG from "marquee"-trained vines.

I want out, I'm walking out of Soave, this Soave, and leaving it to its fate. Let it wear out its vital cycle, good luck to it, I want my freedom.

Freedom to improve, to make a great wine without inhibitions, to fly onto outstanding varieties, with better training systems, to relate to world viticulture with no boundaries, rules, bureaucracy, to create an honest market for a great white wine from my terroir, from a terroir after my own heart, where passion and imagination will no longer be obstructed.

Roberto Anselmi