

Ems Valley U3A Wine Tasting trip to North East Italy - June 2015

Our flight to Verona by British Airways was on time and as we descended the aircraft steps at 10.30 in the evening, the warm balmy air reminded us that we hadn't started summer back home yet! The coach was there and we were in La Pergola hotel at Grezzana by 11.00. I knew that a meal would be waiting but expected most of our group to go straight to bed. Not a bit of it! The party started - and a surprise presentation of beautifully crafted Tee shirts was made to Ian and myself clearly stating that we had been designated "Tour leaders"! The house wine with that meal was to be the first of over fifty wines we were to taste in the next eight days. (and generally acknowledged as being good for house wine). June Morse was not allowed to forget that it was her birthday - well it was just before midnight!

Thursday: We were away in the morning by 9.20 to see Verona with our guides "Valeria and Erika" who boarded the bus and gave us a running commentary as we drove around the river Adige, which forms a half circle around the city. We then split into two groups and toured the inner city on foot. It was hot, probably over 80 degrees but the guides always walked us on the shady side of the street and stopped for the update in shade! We were told that the historic city of Verona was founded in the 1st century B.C. but mainly flourished under the rule of the Scaligeri family in the 13th and 14th centuries and as part of the Republic of Venice from the 15th to 18th centuries. Of course, the Roman Arena is the most famous of all the buildings there, and the opera season was to start the next week. Already massive props were being unloaded in the square, the central Piazza Bra for the aerial route into the arena! We left our guides at 12.00 and went our own ways for a welcome sit down and refreshment. Some departed to see the AMO museum which was devoted to the opera in the Arena. The remainder reassembled at 2.00 at the entrance to the Arena for a tour of the inside. As the tour leader was "me" they didn't get a lot of information, except that I had been to a couple of Operas there. It was a worthwhile experience to see the 30,000 seat Roman stadium, sit on the steps or the 220 euro seats or visit the "royal box" which I did, to deliver the thumbs down sign, as a callous Roman Emperor might have done 2000 years earlier. The arena was being prepared for the pop group "Kiss" that evening, not sure what they did... Then we found our way back to the coach for the short journey to the lovely walled town of Soave for our first tasting.

The Borgo Rocca Sveva was the stylish new winery by the town walls, the main winery being in the industrial part of the town. Perla Soriano conducted us around the winery and then to the tasting room where we tasted their really delightful Soave Classico. It was the first of many, but, today, I remember it as the best! This was followed by a Valpolicella Ripasso and a white dessert wine made from late harvest Garganega - stunning!

Back to the hotel for my 7.00 evening tasting outside under a magnificent awning: a Valdobbladene Prosecco, the local white Nosiola Simboli and another Ripasso to compare with the one we had tasted earlier. Dinner at 7.45 with the dining room all to ourselves and the tables arranged in a big "U" shape.



Left: our first in-hotel tasting, Thursday evening.

Right: Juliet's Balcony in Verona, or so we are told....



Friday, we were away at 8.50 for our trip to Mantova. We drove straight to the Palazzo Te, one of the most beautiful villas in Italy built by **Giulio Romano** between 1525 and 1535, as a suburban residence for Federico II Gonzaga, the ruler of Mantova. Actually it was for his mistress, with amazing frescos of the Gods in all their glory that would have been censored in the 21st century....

We split into two groups each with a guide. There were many talking points...

We then took the coach to the main part of the historic town where our guides continued with the tour around the *centro storico* (old town) which has been declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. Mantua's power and influence under the Gonzaga family was very evident, but the heat of the day did cause some of our party to "peel off"! A leisurely lunch was taken there and then we journeyed back to Cantina Valpantena where the tour and tasting by Samantha proved to be the highlight of the holiday for many. Not only was she knowledgeable, she was so keen and bubbly. She took us where no taster had ever been before and the tour of the bottling line was such, that it is amazing a few Emsworth fingers were not also bottled up! Then to the tasting room where she explained about all of the varied wines their growers produced and the true value of a co-operative. We were then **invited to** taste seven wines including their prize Amarone! She told us that she was a historian and had written a book on the long history of Cantina Valpantena. A signed copy was presented to us - a treasured gift which makes wonderful reading! Samantha will remain in our memories for years to come!

Back to the hotel for my tasting which seemed rather tame in the footsteps of Sam! (a local white Custoza, a Valpolicella Classico Superiore and a wine called Brentino, a very reasonable attempt at a Bordeaux blend. Dinner at 7.45, which was as always served and supervised by Guido who explained the intricacies of each course.



Left: *The Ducal Palace in Mantova*



Right:
Samantha explains the Barrel room at Cantina Valpantena

Saturday: We left at 9.00 for Lake Garda - another hot day in prospect. The coach dropped us at Sirmione a beautiful old pedestrianised town with a castle where we boarded the lake ferry.

We sailed first to Lazise for lunch, then to Bardolino, an attractive town famous for its red wine. Here the party split, one half taking the next ferry to Garda, the rest walking along the lakeside road to our destination. We had an hour to look around Garda before boarding the coach back to our hotel.

The in-house tasting was a Friuli White with Friulano and Ribolla Gialla, very expensive and not generally appreciated(!), a white Custoza, the white grape variety from around Bardolino and a beautiful Amarone, 2010, from Monte del Fra, a winery that describes itself as *avantgarde* in the production of high quality grapes.

Dinner was a spectacular "Gala Night" del Guido and we tasted special pasta, a fish that Picasso could have painted and that tasted gorgeous, vodka and lemon sorbet before the meat course and a triple dessert!



Left: *Alan with brother Ian who kindly did the recce. with him.*



Right: *Anne and John Gains enjoying Lake Garda*

Sunday: The coach from the second area we were to visit travelled down to collect us, and we now had Hans as our driver, who spoke no English at all. Never mind, we promoted Val Perry to number one Translator and she did extremely well with her German, learned from a pen friend of many years standing. We said our goodbyes to Guido and Monica at La Pergola, they really won over the whole group with their friendliness, their attention to detail and their generous hospitality. The weather had been very warm at Grezzana and the swimming pool and hot tub had been well used!

Now the weather was breaking as we drove along the shores of Lake Garda to Malcesine. Here we were to look around this attractive little lakeside town and have an arranged lunch. But the heavens opened as we disembarked and the group took up emergency stations around the shops and restaurants as the waters, pouring down the main street, rose and rose! But it was all over in half an hour and we were able to tour the cobbled streets and assemble at "La Pace" for a lasagne lunch by the water's edge.

At one fifteen we started off for Trento for a visit to Buonconsiglio Castle, right in the town centre.

The castle is the largest and most important monumental complex of the Trentino Alto Adige region. It was the residence of the prince-bishops of Trento from the 13th century to the end of the 18th century. At the extreme south of the complex is the Torre Aquila, within which is conserved the famous Cycle of the Months, one of the most fascinating secular pictorial frescos of the late Middle Ages. Our guides brought the whole building to life and those art lovers amongst us were truly fascinated. At 4.30 we were on our way to the next hotel, the Alpino in Varena, just north of Cavalese, and before long we were enjoying the first of the in house tastings here. The wines of the Alto Adige include very fine Whites and several native Reds. The Reds are grown on the valley floor and the Whites at altitude. This particular night we tasted, in a room set aside for us, a Muller Thurgau by Frans Hass, a fine Gewurztraminer from Hofstatter and a native Lagrein from Muri Gries. Lagrein is really a winter red, chewey and with good body, but mid summer seemed a good time to try it - the weather had changed! Dinner here was more elaborate, help yourself Antipasta of bewildering variety, then choice of three Pasta dishes, 3 mains, and desserts of course! And it was delicious, as it had been at La Pergola



Left: *A group Lasagne lunch at Malcesine*



Right: *Buonconsiglio Castle in Trento*

Monday: The weather did not look good so we cancelled the proposed trip up the mountain at Latemar via the cable car - we would not have seen a lot! Instead we stopped at Moena a lovely village of 2000 inhabitants located where the Val di Fiemme joins the Val de Fassa. Some had coffee, others just strolled around admiring the carved wooden characters and objects that adorn this fairy tale place. Ladin is the native language for 75% of the inhabitants - no wonder they wouldn't reply "Good Morning".

On the coach again through the mountains, across a tricky high pass to Lake Carezza. A stop here gave us the opportunity to stretch our legs and walk around a beautiful azure blue lake that had magnificent reflections. We then descended into the valley and joined the "wine route" to Caldero where the lunch stop was scheduled. Again a delightful little town just a kilometre from its well known Lake Caldero, where most lunched in the atmospheric town square.

Then to the Tramin winery, a co-operative with a very high reputation, and probably the most amazing architectural building in the whole area. Jurgen, our host, was most interesting and informative and desperately wanted to

improve his English! This village was the very home of Gewurztraminer and so this wine was the first tasting! The view from the atmospheric tasting room was absolutely stunning! Jurgen told us that the owners of the winery are the 300 growers who farm small vineyards in the Termeno, Ora, Montagna and Egna area.

There was an easy drive back to our Hotel in a half hour.

Tonight, we tasted a lovely Sylvaner from the working monastery "Abbazia di Novacella", then a Schiava from Muri Gries - Schiava is a light red, half way between a pinot noir and a rosé. We finished with a 21 euro bottle of high class Cabernet from the San Valentino range of San Michele Appiano, a village we had driven through that afternoon. Dinner was the usual high standard, David Hughes was reminded with candles that he was 70 this day, and we retired - exhausted!



Left: *Lake Carezza - no sun
- but we did get some
reflections!*

Right: *Looking out at the
surrounding vineyards
from Cantina Tramin, and
our coach returning to pick
us up!*

Tuesday: We left the hotel at 8.45 for - potentially - the highlight of the whole trip, the Ice Man museum. The Ice Man is the oldest "wet" mummy in the world, dated between 3239 and 3105 B.C., and discovered in 1991 on the borders of Austria and Italy. The two countries fought over the actual position of the national boundary before Italy managed to obtain this amazing man and all of his clothes, weapons and equipment seven years after Innsbruck had grabbed him and were doing their research on him. It was a well attended Museum which we found so interesting and we additionally benefited from the commentary of our two guides, and the questions that we could put to them.

Next was a trip to Merano where we visited the Trauttmansdorff Castel and world famous gardens made famous by the Empress Sissi of Austria. It was raining on and off, but the big attraction here was the included luncheon in the Castle building, enjoyed with due style.

At 3.00pm we were off, down the road to the last winery on the itinerary, the Cantina Terlano, yet another celebrated co-operative where the lovely Renate and her boss Klaus, the winery director, showed us round. The final tasting on the roof was very atmospheric and the sun did shine - I think. The winery had just celebrated its most successful year ever with 38 scores of 90 points and above in International leading wine guides.

The tasting that night in the hotel included a white wine new to us all, Kerner, a speciality of the area, an excellent Sauvignon, which does well here at altitude, and a Pinot Nero Riserva from Muri Gries from the 2011 vintage.

The gala night dinner that night included a mighty roast pig, served Trentino style with all the trimmings.

Caroline Manners was taken by surprise with the candles on her "bun", and Adel joined her in a shared birthday, but not such a famous one!



Left: Sue and Val taste the wine at Trauttmansdorff Castle.



Right: The Chef on the gala night at the hotel Alpino

Wednesday: We said goodbye to Paolo and Lucia at the Alpino Hotel at 9.00 - in brilliant sunshine. To Trento, the new MUSE science museum. The initial attraction here was the fact that Renzo Piano, designer of the Shard in London, was the architect, with the design very much in his style, lots of glass and different angles! Our two excellent guides made sure that a Science museum, mainly related to the mountainous area we were in, was brought to life!

We left at 12.30 and drove into the country for a farewell lunch at a atmospheric little inn in a tiny old world village. The Osteria Ca dei Gioso will long be remembered for its four and a half hour lunch! And Germano, his wife, brother and cousin will also be remembered! The proposed stop at Riva del Garda was necessarily shortened to a comfort stop and we were then whisked down to the Airport for our late flight home.

Difficulty in finding our coach at Gatwick meant that we arrived in Emsworth at 2.30am! Tired, but full of good memories, our eyes (and palates) had been well and truly opened to the wines of North East Italy.



Left: The village centre Hotel Alpino



Right: The start of four hour lunch at Osteria Ca dei Giosi