

# Friuli Venezia Giulia

## REGIONS OF ITALY

By JIM SANO



Udine

*Friuli Venezia Giulia is Italy's north-easternmost region. It covers an area of 3,030 square miles comprising the provinces of Udine, Pordenone, Gorizia, and Trieste and is the fifth smallest region of the country. It borders Austria to the north and Slovenia to the east, the Adriatic Sea to the south, and the Veneto region to the west. One of Italy's newest regions, Friuli Venezia Giulia has only been part of Italy since 1954 and, as a result, many Italians still don't view the region as being truly Italian. The Friuli Venezia Giulia region is one of the smallest yet most culturally diverse areas in all of Italy. Its climate is equally diverse. The climate of the Friulian plain is humid sub-Mediterranean which makes this area suitable for growing white wine grapes. 2.5% of wine produced in Italy comes from this part of the region. The hills, however, have a continental climate and the mountainous regions have an alpine climate.*

**A Quick History Lesson:** This region's vulnerability to invasion is evidenced by the fortifications built here from the Bronze Age to the Cold War. The region was easily accessible from outside of Italy and traditionally acted as a gateway for Germanic and Slavic invaders over the centuries. Known in Roman times as the Julian region, the area was divided after the barbarian invasions into a coastal part dominated by the Byzantines through the city and port of Grado and an inland zone ruled by the dukes of Friuli and the counts of Gorizia. The rise of the Roman

Catholic patriarchate of Aquileia to prominence in the 11th century brought Friuli and the Istrian peninsula, as well as the seacoast, under the control of this ecclesiastical sovereignty. The period of Aquileian rule ended when Venice became the great power in north-eastern Italy in 1420 and shared its dominion over the region with Austria (at Gorizia and Trieste). After 1815 all of Venezia Giulia and Friuli fell under Habsburg rule. Udine province (including Pordenone) became part of Italy in 1866, and the rest of the region (including much of what is now Slovenia and Croatia) was added in 1918. After World War II the Istrian peninsula, the hinterland of Trieste, and the Carso plateau became part of Yugoslavia, while Trieste and the area surrounding it became a free territory divided into northern and southern (A and B) zones under U.S., British and Yugoslavian administration, respectively. Udine province was detached from the Veneto and united with Gorizia province to form Friuli-Venezia Giulia. The London agreement of 1954 restored the city of Trieste and part of zone A to Italy and the semi-autonomous region of Friuli Venezia Giulia came into being with Trieste becoming the capital. A statute of autonomy for the region was passed on January 31, 1963. The

province of Pordenone was formed in 1968.

While the region today is a picture of quiet prosperity, much of the 20th century was another story. War, poverty, political uncertainty and the ongoing threat of devastating earthquakes saw Friulians become the north's largest migrant population with most bound for Australia and Argentina.

**Did You Know:** The region sits in the geographic center of Europe. As a result of having switched hands between countless empires and republics, the region is a multicultural melting pot of Slavs, Austrians and Italians. The people speak multiple languages, ranging from Venetian dialects in the south, Slovene and Bavarian in the north and the native Friulan dialect as well as the official language of Italian.

The region ranges in terrain from the rocky Alps and foothills in the north, to arid or marshy lowlands in the south. The rainfall in the north (the highest in Italy) favors the development of natural meadows for livestock and the ham and dairy products of Friuli are famous. Corn and some other cereals are grown in the valley of the Tagliamento. The southern part of the region is a low coastal plain, some of it occupied by the shallow lagoons of Grado and Caorle. To the southeast, territory along the coast is mostly



Trieste



*Vineyards in the Northeast Italian wine region of the Friuli-Venezia Giulia.*

plains. Between Trieste and the Alps, there is a wide, limestone plateau, the Carso, which was an important battlefield in WWI where innumerable Italian and Austrian soldiers lost their lives. The region is one of Italy's most seismically active. A May 1976 earthquake centered north of Udine killed more than 1,000 people.

**Economy:** Although small, Friuli Venezia Giulia has played an important role in connecting Italy and the Mediterranean to Central and Eastern Europe. The economy of Friuli Venezia Giulia is one of the most developed in the country. Its core is largely based on agriculture with the main crops being maize, sugar-beet, wheat, soybeans, and the production of renowned wines. There are also many medium and small-sized industries in the chemical, textile, silk, paper, and furniture sectors. These are centered around the towns of Manzano, Maniago (knives) and Brugnera (furniture). Several large enterprises are also present in the region in both the industry and services sector. Some of these companies are world-leaders in their relevant sectors such as Fincantieri (world's largest cruise ship builder) who has offices in Trieste with shipyards in Monfalcone, Zanussi-Electrolux (makers of electrical appliances) in Pordenone and Assicurazioni Generali (a leading insurance company in the world) who has their world headquarters in Trieste.

**Wine:** Friuli Venezia Giulia produces more than half of Italy's white wines and its white wines are typically refreshing with a delicate

fragrance and floral flavor. The region's position between the Alps and the Adriatic produces a breezy, sunny microclimate that benefits its vineyards and gives the territory its unique characteristics. Wines made using traditional grapes from this region, such as Pinot Grigio, take on unique flavors. Sauvignon, Chardonnay and Pinot Bianco using indigenous grapes tend to be fresh and fruity. The pricey Ramandolo and Picolit white wines are difficult to find and are special treats for the white wine connoisseur. Friuli Venezia Giulia is the home of Prosecco. The sparkling wine takes its name from the town Prosecco-Contovello outside Trieste. Italy produces 150 million bottles of Prosecco from here per year with global sales exceeding Champagne. Friulian Grappa made from stems and skins after making wine is considered the best in Italy. This native liquor, the only true Italian spirit, once had a nasty reputation as "Italian moonshine" and was not usually found outside Italy. However, it is finally becoming popular outside of Italy thanks to standardization in the distilling process and some savvy marketing.

**Regional Food:** The food of Friuli Venezia Giulia is indicative of the region's history. The Friuli portion is more rustic and resembles the cuisine of other Italian regions. The cuisine in the Trieste area reflects the German/Slavic traditions of Venezia Giulia. Many Italians regard Prosciutto di San Daniele (the king of the hams) to be the best prosciutto in Italy. Surely the Parma prosciutto lovers would disagree but that debate is indicative of Italian

regional pride. For over 200 years, olives have been grown around Trieste and all along the Friulian coast. The premier olive oil is Tergeste DOP extra virgin olive oil. This oil has an intense fruity fragrance, but the flavor is spicy and bitter, which makes it a great finishing oil for simple dishes.



Montasio (DOP licensed) is an ancient alpine cheese revered all over Italy as a particularly versatile cooking cheese. Montasio was first made by monks at Moggio Udinese Abbey in the thirteenth century as a fresh cheese, but these days it is made all over the Julian Alps. Montasio can be matured to varying degrees. A minimum maturation period of sixty days gives you smooth, creamy Montasio Fresco and the cheese gets crumblier and more intense the longer it ages up to a maximum of eighteen months.

Brovada DOP is a sharp, fermented turnip that you might mistake for sauerkraut, although the two are different. It's fairly clear that brovada has its roots over the border in Austria. Whereas sauerkraut uses cabbage, brovada takes thin slices of turnip and marinates them in red wine vinegar and grapes before cooking it all down with oil, bay leaves and a nice chunk of fatty pork.

# Friuli Venezia Giulia



Salamini Italiani alla Cacciatora (DOP licensed) are little salumis (cured meats) which supposedly appeared around the sixteenth century to provide soldiers and hunters, with long-lasting rations, hence the name 'alla cacciatora'. The salamini are made from pork shoulder, neck and bacon. The cuts are trimmed of excess fat, seasoned with salt, pepper and garlic and then stuffed into a sausage casing. After just ten days of maturing, they're ready to eat.

Since the 1800s, white asparagus has been grown in the flat lands around Udine. Originally planted in the vineyards to reduce the excessive moisture of the soil, these vegetables are today considered a true delicacy.

Cherry gnocchi are part of the region's Austrian heritage. These dumplings are common in the summer months in the northern part of the region and in autumn there is a version made with plums or prunes.

**Dessert:** Regional desserts again reflect the diverse cultural history with such offerings as apple strudel, cuguluf (a ring cake that originated in Vienna) and gubana, a spiral-shaped yeast cake with a rich filling of nuts, raisin, pine nuts, sugar, and lemon zest. Yet this region, to the upset of many Venetians, lays claim over the birth of tiramisu and has named it a traditional regional dish. For years the Veneto region's claim was given most credence. The region, which encompasses Venice, asserts that the dessert was originally invented at Le Beccherie restaurant in Treviso in the 1960s.

Recently, food writers Clara and Gigi Padovani reignited the controversy by finding recipes for tiramisu in the Friuli Venezia Giulia region that dated from the 1950s. Again, it's very Italian to disagree. Whatever its origins, one thing can be agreed upon, Tiramisu is delicious!

**Sites to See:** This region is one of the least visited by tourists but certainly not from lacking interesting things to see. The region has many fine art cities and cultural centers, medieval castles and Venetian villas, museums of the Great War and fine seaside resorts as Tarvisio, Grado and Lignano Sabbiadoro. Scuola Mosaicisti del Friuli, the mosaic school in Spilimbergo is one of Friuli's most fascinating places. It was established in 1922 in a post-war effort to provide vocational skills for the poverty-stricken area.

The Basilica di Santa Maria Assunta in Aquileia, a Latin cross-shaped basilica rebuilt after an earthquake in 134, features an entire floor covered with one of the largest and most spectacular Roman-era mosaics in the world. Risiera di San Sabba was a former rice-husking plant in Trieste that became a concentration camp in 1943 and has been a national monument and museum since the 1960s. The site commemorates the 5000 people who perished here.

Piazza dell'Unità d'Italia in Trieste is Italy's largest sea-facing piazza and is an elegant triumph of Austro-Hungarian town planning and contemporary civil pride. The Roman Empire stretched far and wide in its time, so it's not surprising that Roman ruins can be found even in Friuli Venezia Giulia. Aquileia is merely more than a village these days but the site of Aquileia is believed to be the largest

Roman city yet to be excavated. Declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site, it is rich in vestiges from the forum to the ruins of the river port and the basilica. It is also one of the most important examples of early Christian art. The Friuli Venezia Giulia region is home to the Guinness Book of World Records holder for the largest tourist cave on Earth, the Grotta Gigante. It is a single cavern that is estimated to be around 10 million years old and stretches an astounding 280 meters long, 65 meters wide and 107 meters high. The Dolomites, another addition to the UNESCO World Heritage List, are a highly valuable natural monument and offer extremely charming sceneries and colors such as crystal clear water stretches and lush valleys in summer and snow-covered peaks in winter.

*On a personal note, my father in law's family (surname Cardinale) is from the Friuli Venezia Giulia region and the town of Aviano. Much of the town was destroyed in both World Wars and by earthquakes so instead of rebuilding after World War II, much of the town was incorporated into the air base. Aviano Air Base is a NATO base at the foot of the Carnic Pre-Alps, 15 kilometers from Pordenone. The Italian Air Force has ownership and administrative control of the base and hosts the U.S. Air Force's 31st Fighter Wing.*



AVIANO AIR FORCE BASE, Italy (March 20, 2011) U.S. Air Force F-16 Fighting Falcons return to Aviano Air Base after supporting Operation Odyssey Dawn.